
ArcaneCadence
NEW LIFE AS A
MAX LEVEL
ARCHMAGE

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BOOK ONE

ARCANECADENCE

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1

VIVISARI

Vivi opened her eyes to the Burial Room of the Ashen Hierophant.

Having run the final boss fight of Seven Cataclysms at least a thousand times, she instantly recognized the scenery surrounding her. She groggily pushed herself up against the armrest of the massive obsidian throne while she blinked and looked around at the yawning spires enclosing the arena. Lava bubbled a dozen feet away, heat licking at her face, the sensation strangely vivid.

“Wh-what?” she mumbled, head foggy. “Where… how…?”

Hazily, she looked down at herself. She was dressed in a hooded black robe covering her from neck to ankles, a thick, luxurious garment decorated with swirling purple designs. It was a familiar piece of gear. As the best-in-slot robes for mages, she wore them around constantly. But they'd never felt so real. Uncomprehending, she tugged at the fabric, and it shifted across her skin.

The natural conclusion was that she’d fallen asleep still logged into the immensely popular VRMMO Seven Cataclysms. But there was one problem with that. Technology was improving fast, but even the most advanced games couldn’t imitate real life. Not to this degree.

The sound of bubbling lava, the sweltering heat, the feel of the robes brushing against her skin—those subtleties couldn’t be imitated.

What in the world?

Unsteadily rising to her feet, Vivi swept her gaze around the Ashen Hierophant’s arena, her brain working into overdrive.

“[Status],” she said.

A screen appeared in front of her.

Vivisari Vexaria

<Usurper of the Ashen Throne>

(Vanguard)

Level 2109 Demon [Archmage]

STR: 162,196
AGI: 102,342
CON: 1,188,232
MAG: 24,923,239
WIS: 7,693,326

For a long while, she stared at the status screen, numbly trying to comprehend what had happened.

“Might have gone crazy, I suppose,” she said. Her voice sounded weird to her own ears—like it wasn’t her own.

Because it *wasn't* her own.

She looked down at her pale white hands. The creases were in the wrong spots. That might seem like something a person wouldn't notice easily, but she did so instantly. She traced one of the lines, then closed that hand into a fist. A shiver went through her. Her hand quested up to touch her cheeks next, and she marveled at how realistic the sensation was.

She was definitely here, in the flesh. There was no denying that. And it was no dream. The shock of this experience alone would have woken her.

On top of that, she wasn't even in her own body, but that of her character, Vivisari Vexaria.

As for the name… look, she’d made the character when she was fifteen. Sure, she could have changed it, but she’d grown attached to the slightly edgy imaginations of her younger self. And honestly, she’d only sort of

outgrown that love for flair. Fine, the name *was* dramatic, but she secretly liked it anyway.

“But how?” Vivi asked, head spinning.

Yesterday had been a repeat of her not-very-admirable lifestyle: grind all day, go to bed with bags under her eyes. Nothing explained her current transmigration. She certainly hadn’t thrown herself in front of a bus to save a clueless child then—after being splattered across the road—been granted an audience with a sympathetic goddess with an offer to reincarnate into a world of her choice.

She giggled at the idea, the noise tinted with panic more than amusement, then cut herself off and took a calming breath.

Well, anyway.

She needed to focus on reality. No amount of pinching herself was helping—it only reminded her how real the tactile feedback was.

There was no denying it. She *was* here, in the Burial Room of the Ashen Hierophant.

Almost because of how strange it was, she focused on the practical. On what she could actually do, as a way to distract herself.

“[Inventory],” she commanded.

She scanned the grid-like display, then began flipping through pages. The scant few items inside—a set of potions and some miscellaneous consumables—jogged her memory as to what she’d been doing when she had last logged off.

Seven Cataclysms was a skill-based game, with almost all attacks being dodgeable or counterable, so technically it was possible to clear even late-game raids solo—even the final raid. And she’d done just that: cleared the Burial Room of the Ashen Hierophant on mythical difficulty. She had earned the unique title Usurper of the Ashen Throne for it.

Point being, in Seven Cataclysms, unsecured items and gold were dropped on death, so she’d been doing those challenge runs with a set of minimal supplies. She had barely anything on her.

Her best gear was equipped, at least, since that wasn’t dropped on death.

“[Guild],” she voiced next.

Unlike when she’d tried to open her inventory, the voice command didn’t yield a status screen. Brow furrowing, she tried again.

“[Guild]. [Guild Status]. [Guild Management].”

None worked.

So, the game functions weren’t one-to-one. Whatever had happened, she couldn’t rely on this world to act identically to the game she knew.

“[Skills]?”

A screen jam-packed with abilities appeared. Nothing looked out of place, but it would take a while to confirm.

“[Quests].”

No response.

“[Map].”

Nothing.

“[Crafting].”

A screen appeared, and her eyes flicked across the information found within. Interesting… but not immediately relevant. She would deal with that later.

“[Friends].”

Again, no result.

“[Settings].”

To be fair, she hadn’t expected that one to work.

“[Log Out]. [Quit]. [Force Quit]. [Request Moderator]. [Report]?”

Nor any of those.

She rattled off a few more commands, to little avail. It seemed there were a few screens she could use, but most of the meta-functionality of the game had been removed.

She mulled over what to do.

There was one immediate factor that would determine her next steps.

Could she die?

Well, of course she could. But could she *respawn?* There were no resurrection spells in Seven Cataclysms. When a player died, they were reborn in the nearest temple, all unsecured items and gold dropping at their death point. Did real life work that way?

“Not that this is real life,” she muttered.

Though it was. Her head hurt thinking about it.

If she could die, she needed to be cautious. A visit to a temple would give an answer, so that was her first goal.

Off to the nearest city, then?

Scanning her ability list, she found the skill she was looking for: [Greater Warp]. Yet before she teleported out, she hesitated.

There was one more thing she needed to check.

Looking around, her eyes landed on the obsidian throne. She walked behind to gain access to a large, smooth section of glassy black material, then rubbed her sleeve around to polish herself a mirror.

Her in-game avatar stared back.

“Oh, no,” Vivi said with dawning horror.

Her flair for the dramatic didn’t only extend to how she *named* her characters.

“Why?” she groaned.

She had long curling demon horns, which she tugged on with amazement. A pale face with a neutral expression and bored red eyes. Long white hair that cascaded down to her mid-back.

All of that was fine. It was in the realm of normalcy for a fantasy-world character.

But one particular aesthetic choice made her wince. She traced a finger down her cheek, mortification growing at the two blood-red tattoos that started at her eyes and descended, imitating tear stains.

She sighed.

Maybe she had enjoyed the aesthetic when it was an avatar in a game, but now that she was living in this body, she looked at her reflection and decided, no, definitely not. She would not walk around in public with red tear trails going down her cheeks.

Though there wasn’t much evidence supporting the claim, she did have some sense of shame.

Unfortunately, scrubbing furiously at the marks didn’t help. At least she had magic. An [Illusion] could fix it. As a band-aid solution, anyway.

Getting rid of the distinguishing trait was probably smart from a tactical perspective regardless. She wanted to gather information about the world and remain incognito. She suspected there weren't many demons walking around with blood-trail eye tattoos. As the game's highest-ranked player who'd somehow been transported into the game’s world, such a distinctive feature would make her far too recognizable.

So, some quick magic to clean up the mistakes of her former self, then off to civilization.

“Magic,” she murmured, musing over the word.

Magic was cool. She had always thought that. She’d picked some variant of a mage class in every game she played. If a game didn’t have a mage class, that usually meant she wouldn’t play it.

One of the reasons she'd fallen in love with Seven Cataclysms was the excellent ability design. There were a seemingly endless number of spells, and each had been so fun to use. The visual design of the game was unparalleled, and the tactile and other sensory feedback, while primitive, was good enough that certain spells and fights could get her heart racing even after tens of thousands of hours of gameplay.

Magic in real life—despite the twisted meaning of that phrase, 'real life'—was even cooler. And it didn't work at all like how it did in Seven Cataclysms.

Her brain knew what to do despite having definitely never cast a spell before. After mentally reaching inward to a glowing ball of energy sitting somewhere high in her stomach, she funneled mana through the many channels running through her body and extruded that white-hot resource into the air.

And then things *really* got weird. Through instincts she shouldn't have, she molded the mana with her mind, shaped it, twisted it into proper form, folding long strands of molten energy into swirling patterns that began to take on their own meaning. Until eventually, she finished.

"[Illusion]," she incanted.

The air in front of her shimmered, and she was done. She peeked into the glassy mirror of the obsidian throne and confirmed that she no longer had red trails running down her eyes—and also, that the recognizable design of the Vestments of the Voidwalker had lost their purple highlights to appear instead as plain black robes. Those too, after all, might draw attention, and it wasn't like she had a change of clothing on hand.

But more importantly.

"What was *that?*"

Nothing had felt unusual about the process of channeling and shaping mana. It had come as naturally as breathing, something she'd done a million times before. Yet she had definitely never cast magic before.

Where had that familiarity come from? It wasn't like a VRMMO like Seven Cataclysms could hook so thoroughly into a person's brain. While she loved how diverse the spells were, spellcasting in game had been as simple as invoking the appropriate vocal commands or using an assigned series of gestures.

So she hadn't just been given a new body. But also a new mind? Or rather, extra stuff had been packed in. Stuff appropriate to the character,

Vivisari Vexaria.

That was… weird. But kinda cool? She had extremely mixed feelings. A person's mind was what made them *them*.

That said, she felt like the same person and was certain nothing else about her had changed. She'd just picked up a few tricks. Still, it was bizarre enough to unnerve her.

As strange and slightly terrifying as it was to suddenly have the instincts of an experienced spellcaster lurking in her brain, she'd just used magic. In a far-realer way than any game could ever imitate. That made up for almost anything.

Forcing herself to move past the experience—in the same way she was ignoring the whole somehow-in-a-different-world thing—she began to layer protective spells into herself.

"[Adamantine Aegis]."

"[Shell of the Fallen]."

"[Mind Fortress]."

"[Vortex of Negation]."

And so on and so on. It was the same process she went through whenever she prepared for a serious fight. Each spell was *fascinating* to cast, requiring a different shaping of mana to create the desired effect. Yet just like the first, she knew exactly how to do it.

She added two more to the list, just in case.

"[Invisibility]."

"[Conceal Presence]."

By the time she was done with the buffs, she'd gotten a good taste for what casting real magic was like, and there was a satisfied buzzing in her skull. Yes, she was very much going to enjoy messing around with what she could do. But later. She had more important goals at the moment.

Ready for whatever she might find in the capital, she began casting her final spell. [Greater Warp]. But halfway through shaping the mana, she crashed into a brick wall with a sudden realization.

She couldn't complete the spell because she had no target. There were no [Warp Anchors]. Her items and levels had carried over, but her warp points had been wiped clean.

She pulled the mana back into herself, grimacing. Unlike casting the earlier spells, it wasn't a pleasant experience. But she somehow understood that releasing that much half-shaped mana into the air would result in

something catastrophic, with the mana taking a life of its own and choosing what it wanted to be. Which never ended well. Magic, given a choice, preferred chaos. Another aspect of spellcasting she just knew for some reason.

"Huh."

So [Greater Warp] was out. The next best option was Fast Traveling, but she still wasn't able to access the map.

"Am I going to have to walk?" she asked incredulously.

Well, no. She had spells to speed up travel—flight and acceleration to name the obviously useful ones—but the world of Seven Cataclysms was huge. Even with those, it would take a while to get anywhere useful.

"There's still [Gate to Nearest City]," she mumbled. "That'll get me to Prismarche, but Meridian is thousands of miles south."

Not that she had any idea how space would translate. Clearly, she couldn't trust everything in this world being one-to-one. But the final Cataclysm's domain had been as far north on the continent as possible, and Meridian, the capital city of the human kingdoms, was roughly two-thirds of the way down.

"Can I really not warp?"

Meridian was where both the guildhall and her personal house were located, and thus a majority of her items… assuming those hadn't been wiped clean, which she hoped wasn't the case. When she looked at her status, she was still in Vanguard, so her guild, at a minimum, hadn't disappeared. Even if she couldn't access the appropriate tab.

Unfortunately, she couldn't think of a way to instantly transport herself there if [Greater Warp] had no [Warp Anchors] to link to. Like when she'd played the game, she would have to get there manually and set one. That meant many hours on a greateagle, or flying herself.

That didn't actually sound so bad. Flying through the sky and watching the world of Seven Cataclysms pass underneath her? She was marveling at simply existing right now. The arena of the Burial Chamber was breathtaking, the huge black-stone spires engulfing her like the open maw of a beast, lava on all sides.

There was a whole world like this to explore. What would the Sky-Pillar Range look like? The Ossuary Isles? The Gloamwoods? And a thousand other places that had been stunning even in the digital world, much less this higher-fidelity one. What would the people be like?

So, while inconvenienced, she didn’t find herself too upset.

Logically speaking, it was better to visit a smaller city first, anyway.

“Off to Prismarche, then.” She dropped a [Warp Anchor], took a breath, then activated a skill. “[Gate to Nearest City].”

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2

RESURRECTION

It wasn't a spell this time, but a skill, usable by even non-magic classes. She didn't need to draw on her mana; the skill worked by intent. Glowing white runes appeared on the ground, encircling her in a clockwise formation.

When the ten-second cast time completed, the skill flashed and activated.

The fabric of space swallowed her up, chewed her around for a bit, then spat her out. It was an experience very unlike warping in Seven Cataclysms, and she expected she would need to get used to that. *This world might be similar to the game I played, but it's clearly not identical.*

She stumbled a step as she reemerged into existence. Prismarche's town square appeared in front of her.

Many stimuli overwhelmed her at once. The bright morning sun filled a cloudless blue sky, forcing Vivi to squint and let her eyes adjust. It seemed her immense stats didn't change basic human behaviors.

Golden light washed across the stone square, illuminating a large town hall. Its bell tower rose high above the surrounding buildings, a huge clock face visible to everyone in the plaza. As if by divine timing, the massive hand ticked to the right, and the eleven-o'clock bell chimed across the city.

The space bustled with townspeople: officials hurrying into the town hall with scrolls, citizens gathered around the notice boards, travelers consulting maps on benches. While humans dominated the crowd, she also

spotted the pointed ears of elves in conversation, and the horns of demons, too.

The world of Seven Cataclysms was full of all sorts of races, though Prismarche was decidedly human territory, so they were by far the most common.

Colorful banners and decorative lanterns hung between buildings, and workers on ladders were stringing up even more. Several stalls were being constructed around the edges of the square as well, and there were other hints of presumably festival preparations underway. She'd arrived near a holiday.

Vivi turned to check behind her—then froze. A set of statues stood there, the centerpiece of the town square on an elevated platform. The display featured five figures.

Five figures she recognized. Because, eyes widening, she realized they were all people she *knew*. Her regular party members, the group she'd cleared most of the game with. Her friends.

Or, to this world, as the bronze plaque announced: The Party of Heroes.

She gaped at the statue of herself in particular. *I don't have much to worry about, do I?* They'd gotten Vivisari *horribly* wrong.

The figure was clearly a female demon mage with curved horns… and that was all they'd gotten right. The proportions were way off: the statue was only slightly shorter than the rest of the group, presenting her as nearly six feet rather than the reality of four-foot-something, and her figure was all wrong. The statue was much more… womanly.

That soured her mood. Was it not heroic enough if she was short and flat? She'd designed her avatar that way for a reason, and her real-life self felt more than a bit annoyed.

She guessed it was inevitable that a group of 'legendary adventurers' would be stylized into 'perfect form.' Her friends hadn't gotten the same treatment, but maybe that was because their avatars had already been impressive.

A pint-sized woman who might be mistaken for a girl—despite the demon horns and blood-tear tattoos—didn't fit the image of 'savior of the world,' so the designers had taken creative liberties. Ugh. At least it worked to her advantage. Since she'd hidden her facial tattoos as well, she ought to be able to walk around town without much trouble.

She still internally grumbled, though.

Somebody slammed into her from behind.

The impact didn’t shift her so much as an inch, but she did jump in surprise. Spinning and backpedaling, she found a man on the ground, looking left and right with a baffled expression as he tried to identify what he’d run into.

Right. She was invisible, standing in the middle of a populated town square.

Instincts urged her to apologize and help him up, but that would ruin her stealth mission.

She internally vocalized the incantation, but felt the command word echo in her head.

[Fly].

As she rose into the air, the city of Prismarche spread out around her. Considering the sheer number of hours she’d put into Seven Cataclysms, she had noticed there was something off about the town square, and not just because of the statue in the center. As she gained enough height to take the city’s full breadth in, she came to a realization.

This wasn’t the Prismarche she knew.

Not only was it much larger than it should be—something she could excuse as a consequence of translating a game world into a realistic one—but fundamentally, the city’s design was different. *It’s… more modern,* she realized with a jolt. Still several hundred years behind Earth’s technology obviously, but the city was cleaner and newer than she remembered, more glass windows and better roads.

Off in the distance was the key offender: a train station with tracks snaking into the horizon, southward. There definitely hadn’t been trains in Seven Cataclysms.

The conclusion was obvious. Time had passed.

But how much?

Enough to massively develop the city, introduce new inventions, and make rail travel common even to frontier cities like Prismarche. So not a few years… or even a few decades.

This was a world she was familiar with, and one that had left her behind.

She had already known she couldn’t rely on her memories of the game, but that had just become doubly true.

For a while, she hovered a thousand feet in the air and took the city in. What should she do now? Her eyes landed on the outline of the city's temple, a grandiose structure eclipsing even the town hall and bank, two of the other prominent buildings.

The temple. That was her first stop. She needed to know if death was permanent, or if she would revive like in the game. She ought to be close to invulnerable, considering her character's stats, but knowing whether this was her only life would definitely change how she approached things.

Not just for herself, but everyone else too. She didn't plan to become a mass murderer if murdering was permanent. Er… not that she would have wanted to go around slaughtering populaces even if they *could* respawn.

After setting down in a nearby alleyway and dropping her invisibility spell, she strode into the street. She tensed as she emerged in public for the first time, but most people paid her no mind, and the few who did glance her way didn't seem to make much of her and quickly focused on something else.

So she was inconspicuous. As she'd hoped. She was a demon in a human city, which probably meant she would draw some small amount of attention, but she didn't stand out to the point it would cause issues. More importantly, she wasn't being recognized as the woman this city had built a statue for in their town square.

As she walked toward the temple's entrance, a wave of vertigo hit her from the sheer surreality of her situation. When she'd been invisible and peering around, she'd felt like a spectator. As if she was still in a game, despite the tactile realism. But having people all around her, hearing snippets of their conversations as she passed by, finally broke the illusion.

This is my life now?

The enormity of that wasn't remotely digestible, so she did what most people would: she blocked it out and focused on the here and now. *I'll have a mental breakdown later, I guess*.

Not that she was too upset. She hadn't been especially satisfied with her last life, and she hadn't left anyone behind besides her online friends. And, well, she would miss them. A lot. But she had been pretty antisocial, and her parents were… not around.

Nevertheless, it was a lot to take in.

Prismarche's Temple was a massive structure of polished white stone, with tall, arched windows of stained glass that depicted mostly unfamiliar

images of saints and heroes. To her dismay, one of the prominently displayed ones was of her and her party. The doors were open to all visitors, and inside, sunlight streamed through the windows, illuminating rows of wooden pews and a long aisle leading to a grand altar.

Her eyes locked onto the nearest priest dressed in coarse gray robes.

She urged her feet forward, yet they didn't move.

Being reborn into the body of her character hadn't fundamentally changed her personality. What kind of person spent tens of thousands of hours grinding a popular video game to stand at the top of the leaderboards? Not a social butterfly, certainly. Not someone who could gregariously elbow their way into any conversation and charm their audience.

Yet the anxiety that hit her wasn't as strong as normal. Was it because she felt comfortable in the world of Seven Cataclysms? Was it because she was wearing a different body? She wasn't Vivienne, shut-in and disaster. She was Vivisari.

So, with that in mind, she willed herself forward, and her legs obeyed.

The priest was arranging prayer candles on a side altar. He was an older man with a weathered face and kind eyes that crinkled as he glanced up at Vivi's approach. If he thought anything about her being a demon, his expression didn't suggest it. His smile seemed surprisingly warm and earnest.

"How can I help you, little one?"

Little one?

She grimaced. That was why he had plastered on such a friendly expression. He thought she was a child and had reacted with the appropriate gentleness. She internally sighed. It was hardly a new plight. As a young woman who was neither very tall nor particularly curvy—and she was being nice to herself with that description—it was inevitable that strangers mistook her age. Constantly.

It was awful. Even as a twenty-five-year-old back on Earth, there had been plenty of instances where she had been pulled aside by people asking where her parents were. The death glare usually caught them up. Fortunately, her voice wasn't especially childlike.

The man's reaction was one injection of normalcy to steady her thoughts. *But seriously—little one?* She wasn't *that* short. At least in real life. Vivisari, her avatar, had been created even smaller.

Oh no, she thought. *Are people going to assume I'm twelve in this body?*

Suppressing another sigh, she got to the point.

"I have questions I need answered, and I was hoping you could help."

The steadiness of her voice made the priest pause and visibly readjust his expectations. She wasn't sure whether he recalibrated her age in his head, but his response didn't take the same overly gentle tone.

"Of course. What ails you?"

"Is resurrection in any form possible?"

Blunt and to the point. Open-ended in the case it was a phenomenon reserved to 'players.' Though currently she had no idea if other players existed. At a minimum, her regular party was part of the world's lore, as was her guild.

Confusion again passed across the priest's face, a second before he took on a sympathetic look. She realized belatedly that he thought she was asking for someone else's sake, not her own.

"Even in the age of chaos, such magic was beyond mortals," he said kindly. "Would the Sorceress, the supreme talent of magekind, not have revived her fallen comrades if it were?"

She blinked. "The Sorceress?"

He tilted his head. He clearly found it unusual she didn't recognize the title. "Vivisari Vexaria. The sorceress who adventured with the Party of Heroes and conquered the Seven Cataclysms."

Hearing her own name was disorienting, and felt like a rather large coincidence. But on immediate reconsideration, she realized that it really wasn't. As he'd said, Vivisari was the highest-tier spellcaster in the world, a figure of legend, so a question about high-tier magic like resurrection would automatically tie back to her.

She opened her mouth and closed it.

So, dead was dead. There was no coming back.

Also, her entire team had passed away. They were part of the world's lore, but not in an alive-and-wandering-about way. She was likely the only 'player,' at least as current evidence suggested.

"I see."

She was quiet for a few moments as she organized her thoughts. She had a million questions, but she also didn't want to come off as too strange to this priest. Then again, did it matter? She didn't want the whole world

knowing who she was, not until she had her feet under her, but secrecy wasn't *crucial*.

"Age of chaos?" she eventually asked.

"Pardon?"

"What is the age of chaos?"

His lips closed into a frown as he appraised her. "The age preceding the age of peace, of course. When the Cataclysms still tore through the world."

She could have made assumptions, but it was better to have confirmation. The whole point of the game had been to defeat the Seven Cataclysms, and throughout the story's campaigns she had done just that.

"What happened to the Party of Heroes?"

"Have you been skipping school, little one?"

That diminutive again. She gave him a flat look. "I'm a grown adult, sir."

The priest tried to reply but floundered for a moment, which satisfied her. But he seemed like a decent person, so she didn't make a big deal out of it. She was unfortunately used to this interaction.

"My circumstances are… unusual," she continued. "I don't know certain things I probably should. I would appreciate it if you humored me."

"Indeed. Of course." He smoothed his robes out, though they were perfectly straight. He was obviously gathering his thoughts. "You were asking about the Party of Heroes?"

"Yes, please."

"Though at great cost, with all but the Sorceress perishing in the fight, they triumphed over the seventh and final Cataclysm a hundred years ago nearly to this day. I'm sure you've seen the preparations?"

A century had passed. That explained the changed city and the advancements in technology.

"For the festival, you mean?" Vivi asked.

"Peace Day. Remembrance of our fortune, the end of the age of chaos, and the advent of a kinder age. The celebration will last all week."

This next question was riskier, but she asked it anyway. "But the Sorceress lived?"

Calling herself 'the Sorceress' made her internally wince, but apparently it was the title people used to refer to Vivisari.

He nodded, and she followed up with, "What happened to her?"

"Only the heavens know."

“So she’s missing, but not dead?”

“Her death was never confirmed.”

His tone implied heavily that he thought she was gone for good. She supposed that was fair. ‘Missing for a century’ was usually synonymous with ‘dead.’

“I see. Thank you for the help.”

The priest seemed surprised that she was ending the conversation so abruptly, but she turned and headed for the entrance.

Out under the bright morning sky again, she came to a stop and organized her thoughts. Death was permanent. She was famous to the populace, but it had been a hundred years, and there didn’t seem to be a sign of ‘other players.’ Her old party was dead and gone.

Interesting… but not extremely relevant.

Because she hadn’t brought money into the raid with her, she didn’t have a single coin to her name. Her next stop was the bank. What she would do from there, she had no idea. Head for the capital city and see what had happened to her guild and item stash, maybe? But that would take time. It was a medium-term goal.

On second thought, did she even have a bank account? How had that game mechanic translated between worlds?

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3

BANK ACCOUNT

With an empty metaphorical wallet, a visit to the bank was the clear logical first task when lost in a foreign land. Money solved all sorts of problems—namely food, water, and shelter.

Though did she even need to eat, drink, and sleep anymore? She was in the body of a mythical figure, one pulled from a video game. It wasn't like Seven Cataclysms had a sleep resource. Even food and drink were only for receiving beneficial statuses.

In any case, she needed to know if she had access to her personal vault. In the game, she had been able to access both her money and several pages of item stashes through the bank system. But as she'd seen, this world wasn't one-to-one. And a *hundred years* had passed. She wouldn't be surprised if her bank account had been closed by sheer dint of time.

Only one way to find out.

"Next," Cyrus called, sparing a glance at the timekeeper on the wall.

Two more hours to lunch. He'd had to skip breakfast, and he was feeling rather ornery because of it—not that he'd let it show in his interactions with the customers today. This job was by far the most comfortable one he'd had in a decade, and he had no intention of jeopardizing it. He could never know who exactly was stepping up to make

a withdrawal, and all it took was annoying the wrong person to find himself in a world of trouble. He'd heard all sorts of horror stories over the years.

A young woman was the next to approach his counter.

Er, maybe not a woman? A girl? He wasn't certain. She was a demon, and he knew they aged differently from humans, like elves did. They often seemed youthful when they were anything but. Centuries-old crones could be indistinguishable from adolescents. That said, this one did seem rather young, if just because of her height.

She was dressed like a scholar or adventurer, in a thick black robe that went to the floor. The girl was paler than most demons, with curling black horns and straight white hair. She seemed to carry herself like an adult, at least. Her red eyes were calm and assured, her expression relaxed—but not in a way that put him at ease. In fact, there was a general aura about her that gave him pause the longer he looked.

He still wasn't certain whether or not she was a child, but he'd spent enough time working service jobs that he'd learned not to make assumptions. A certain incident with a mother and what he had been *positive* was her son still haunted him.

"How can I help you, miss?" he asked with the same level of professionalism he offered any customer.

"I'd like to make a withdrawal." Her voice was flat and bored, and the tone erased most of his doubts. If this was a child, it was a strange one. He felt his spine straighten.

"Of course." He'd gone through this process a million times, so he reached under his desk and set the identifier in front of her before he consciously ordered his hands. "Please place your finger on the account identifier."

The woman eyed the device.

"You do have an account with us, yes?" Cyrus asked.

"…maybe?" she replied.

"Maybe?"

"I do most of my business in Meridian," she said slowly. "Are the accounts linked?"

Meridian? She was a long way from home. He had to bite his tongue and suppress his dubious tone as he replied, "Yes, miss. The unified banking system is over three hundred years old and spans the entirety of the continent. Unless you've been banking with an unusual"—*illegal*, he didn't

say—“third party, if you have an account anywhere in the Kingdoms, you’ll be able to access it here.”

“I see.” She almost seemed like she was going to ask another question, but decided against it. She hovered her pointer finger above the small slate carved with runes, hesitated a second longer as if debating whether she should, and finally pressed the digit against the stone.

He’d honestly assumed the projection screen that appeared would indicate she didn’t have an account. Her lack of familiarity with the system had once again changed his mind about whether he was dealing with an adult.

But a valid account popped up, to his surprise, and it was filled with the usual sparse details: name, balance available for withdrawal, and a ‘notes’ section for any highly relevant details a teller might need.

Usually he read the customer’s name first to know who he was dealing with. But in ninety-nine percent of cases the ‘notes’ section was blank. So when there was text, his eyes fell there first.

Presumed deceased. Account locked, but preserved for historical purposes.

He blinked.

That was strange. Very strange. He supposed he would have to submit a status update. Whoever this was, she clearly wasn’t dead.

He’d never filed an account-update form; he would need to ask for help.

His eyes drifted upward, curious about her name, but they froze on the account balance.

He blinked a second time. Then a third and a fourth for good measure. He took off his glasses, cleaned them, put them back on, and leaned forward with a scrunched brow to squint at the numbers on the projection to make *absolutely certain* he wasn’t imagining what he saw.

Available Balance
Bronze: 62,242
Silver: 258,550
Gold: 33,239
Mithril: 8,812
Orichalcum: 2,168
Starmetal: 128
(Unified mynt: 49,263,642)

He briefly lost all capability of reasoning. A full ten seconds passed as he stared.

Was it broken somehow? The banking system couldn’t be broken; that was impossible.

But one hundred and twenty-eight starmetal? Kings struggled to find starmetal in smaller quantities. He had never seen the starmetal field on a customer’s account display anything but zero. The wealthiest clients he’d interacted with might have a scant amount of orichalcum registered, but not a huge sum.

Definitely not *two thousand* of it.

A meal might be a few bronze. A night at a nice inn with a private room, a silver. A well-bred war horse, the sort upper-tier adventurers or nobility would ride into battle, fifty to a hundred gold.

Coinage went up in one-to-ten ratios. That meant a mithril was ten gold. Orichalcum a hundred. Starmetal a thousand.

A small stack of starmetal could buy a damn fortress somewhere. It was equivalent to *thousands of gold*.

Almost dizzily, he let his eyes drift to the top of the projection.

Vivisari Vexaria.

Then they slid back to the woman in front of his counter. Her red gaze was watching him warily, clearly reading his reaction.

“Is there an issue?”

He opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Okay. This wasn’t Vivisari Vexaria. The idea brushed his mind for the briefest moment, but it was too absurd.

Nevertheless, she’d fooled the identifier. That was almost more concerning than if the Sorceress had actually reemerged into the world. The banking system was supposed to be impregnable. There had never been an instance of abuse or exploitation. It was part of the Grand System itself. Not created by mortal hands, but the gods. It couldn’t be tricked.

Yet it had. Because this wasn’t Vivisari Vexaria.

Most blatant piece of evidence: she was far too short.

If this young woman had indeed found a way to trick the banking system, why in the world would she expose herself this way? She could have pretended to be anyone, barring a handful of individuals, and he wouldn’t have thought twice about it.

Sure, the account she'd gone after had a truly absurd sum in it, but he couldn't pay it out even if he wanted to. There weren't coin reserves in the city to withdraw that balance. Certainly not enough starmetal. The High King's vault itself surely didn't have more than a few hundred coins of that precious material. And if she wanted to scam a smaller sum, why use *this* account?

Was she not very intelligent? Ambitious to the point of foolhardiness? He supposed stories were full of that sort of thing; idiocy was hardly rare, from highest station to low.

She must have lucked into the exploit.

She really was a child.

But what did he do now?

This was big. Outrageously so. The sort of thing he would be dealing with for weeks, in meetings with very important people he would need to tiptoe around. His day had suddenly gotten complicated. He felt a headache coming on.

He'd already been in a poor mood from missing breakfast.

His thoughts racing, he came to a decision.

"I'm sorry, miss," he said. "I'm afraid you don't have an account with us. Could you step aside, and we'll get you set up?"

He was taking a risk, but management would have his head if he didn't try to detain her until he could call the guards.

"It said my name, didn't it?" she asked flatly. She sighed. "Just… I don't need much. Give me a hundred of each, up to orichalcum. It didn't use to go through people, why are there tellers now? When did that change?"

She was doubling down. An interesting gambit. "I'm not sure what you mean, miss." He put on his best blank face. He'd like to think his acting wasn't horrible, seeing how he spent all day dealing with unpleasant folk.

He didn't comment on the absurdity of 'one hundred of each, up to orichalcum.' As if that alone wasn't a sum to make a king choke.

The demon pinched the bridge of her nose, seeming irritated. "This was a mistake."

He agreed. Really, what had she expected?

"Don't report me to the guards," she said. "Or anyone else. That would be… annoying."

He paused. It was an audacious approach, asking that of him. But since he had no idea whether this woman was a high-level adventurer or similar, he wasn't going to antagonize her.

"Of course, miss. I won't say a thing." Obviously, he no longer had hope of detaining her. She knew what was going on. He wasn't going to insist she stay at risk to himself. He enjoyed his job, but he enjoyed his life more. So he would just report her after she left.

She stared at him. He supposed he hadn't been convincing.

"It *is* me, you know," she said slowly. "You think I'm lying, don't you?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," he said, lacking a more graceful option.

She stared for another several seconds, and Cyrus shifted uncomfortably.

"I need to prove it, don't I?" she said. "Will you let me go if I do? With some coin?"

"The account is locked regardless," he said, since there wasn't a point in feigning cluelessness anymore. "I don't want any trouble, miss, truly. I'll forget this ever happened."

He was lying, of course. An exploit like this threatened the fabric of society. What could he trust, if not the banking system? He would report this event as soon as it was safe and feasible to do so.

"Fine," she sighed. "I have to prove it."

He grew worried all at once, but he didn't have time to react before he felt that strange warble in the air that came with spellcasting.

Of the various classes, mage types were the least common. Like most people, he'd given adventuring a try in his youth. Hadn't been for him, as it wasn't for most. But he'd been around enough magic to recognize that metallic tang in his mouth.

"[Illusion]."

"[Farsight]."

"[Fly]."

"[Blink]."

The spells happened so fast he barely processed what was happening. One after another, quicker than any mage should be capable of. Not that he'd been around high-rank adventurers often. Golds, on rare occasions.

But spells should have cast times. It was a mage's fundamental weakness—what made them useful but specialized additions to a party. She

activated them as fast as she could speak. Faster. It didn’t make sense.

And then he was floating two thousand feet in the air.

“Look,” she said, gesturing down at the city of Prismarche with a gnarled staff of gray wood. Her appearance had changed. The demon now had red tear-trails running down her cheeks: the iconic mark of the Sorceress. Her robes were no longer black; swirling purple designs covered them. “Is this enough proof?”

Cyrus considered himself a well-composed person. But this was too much. His mouth opened and closed like a fish’s.

She sighed. “Not high-enough-tier magic? Fine. [Blink]. [Blink]. [Blink]. [Blink]. [Detect Presence].”

And then they were hovering hundreds of feet over the wilderness, the urban expanse of Prismarche no longer visible, only endless pine forest, the snow-capped mountains many miles away.

The demon pointed her staff down toward the forest. He felt magic gather. *Real* magic, though what he’d already experienced had eclipsed anything he’d ever seen or felt. Teleportation was the domain of mithril-rank adventurers *at least.* Possibly much higher. The spell was so high rank he simply didn’t know.

Whatever spell she was forming, it didn’t just put a metallic taste in his mouth. It wobbled the jelly in his eyes; his throat closed; a dull pressure ached in his skull, growing by the second.

He felt very, very small all of a sudden. A glowing magical circle inscribed with the densest, brightest runes he’d ever seen manifested in front of him. He nearly choked on the mana in the air.

What would happen when that monstrosity of a spell finished?

What in heaven’s name was she casting?

The spell named itself more than she named it. It fell from her lips with enough power to make a dragon tuck its tail and flee.

“[Kaelum’s Thousand-Year Pyre].”

The heavens split. A column of white fire descended to impact the ground and disintegrate everything in a quarter-mile radius. The heat washed across him despite the great distance, and he covered his eyes with one hand, else he might have been blinded.

When the spell had finished running its course, nothing remained besides earth turned to glass.

He stared dumbly.

What… what tier spell was *that?*

He couldn’t comprehend what he’d seen. Floating in the air was surreal enough. Flight was a rare-enough spell that he would have been cowed by it alone.

That… whatever it had been… was too much. His brain simply stopped working.

“See? It’s me,” the demon said, still sounding mildly annoyed, as if she was dealing with an irritating haggling process and hadn’t just evaporated a swath of wilderness on a whim. “But I’m here on private business, so don’t report me to the guards. Now, how do I unlock my account?”

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4

ADVENTURER'S GUILD

Vivi returned the bank teller to his place behind the counter, dropped the [Illusion] she'd used to hide their disappearance from other customers, and immediately felt bad about what she'd done.

But what other choice had she had? She couldn't have him ratting her out to the guards. On top of that, she needed to know how to access her account—assuming it really was locked.

How else could she have proven, quickly and reliably, that she was who she said she was except through an explosive display of magic?

Admittedly, she'd been curious about her strength too. *Perhaps* she'd seized the first reasonable excuse to cast a high-tier spell.

It had been… impressive. To say the least. She was used to casting similar while in game, but the realism changed everything. She'd felt that explosion in her bones. It had rattled her entire skeleton and lit up the world around her. She'd purposefully blinked an enormous distance away, into the deep wilderness far out of range of Prismarche and nearby cities, yet even with that precaution, she might have alerted someone with how massive the impact had been.

Regardless, she felt bad. Because the teller was shaken, his face pale and his knees still wobbling.

Which was maybe a fitting reaction to being kidnapped and forced to watch a strange woman—a figure of myth—disintegrate a small section of wilderness with a wave of her staff.

Thankfully, she had a spell for this. She had a spell for most things.

“[Calm].”

Mental magics were a whole branch of the arcane, and naturally her character, Vivisari, was well versed in them. There were few branches she *wasn’t* comfortable with.

She could have erased his memories entirely and skipped all this nonsense, but that idea disturbed her—hence she’d taken an alternate path. It seemed like the sort of line she shouldn’t cross. Though this was the world of a video game she once played, it was clearly real life, and these were real people. Messing with someone’s memories or free will was wrong.

A spell to calm someone down didn’t feel like it counted. It might be a borderline case since *technically* it was mental magic, but it didn’t do anything more than sitting down and taking deep breaths would. The teller certainly wasn’t cured. He just didn’t seem hysterical and ready to flee anymore.

His knuckles were white as he gripped the countertop, leaning on it for support. “I apologize for any… slights… you feel I offered, Lady… Vivisari.”

His shaky words weren’t helping her feel better. If he was this rattled after a calming spell, she’d left an impression.

“It’s fine. Is my account really locked?”

He nodded rapidly. “But it was preserved. Your funds are still available. To remove the lock, you’d simply have to speak with someone who has higher-level access to the banking system.”

“Like who?”

He hesitated. “For a case as important as yours? The Chief Banker himself, in Meridian.” Even as the man replied, he seemed extremely worried that she would be upset by his answer.

She was annoyed, but more at herself for having terrified some random service worker. And, admittedly, irritated at the situation itself. *But really? I’m banned from my account?*

“I see. I intended to head that way regardless.” She waved a hand dismissively. “As I said, I’m here on private business. Please don’t spread the word.”

He practically fell over himself in his rush to assure her that he wouldn’t, and she left the bank feeling gross with herself. She’d definitely gotten too caught up in her ‘proof of identity.’

…the explosion had been really cool though.

Back out in the daylight, she reevaluated her plan of attack. It had been too much to hope for to simply withdraw the funds she needed. Nothing was ever easy. That said, it couldn't be difficult to make some basic coin, not as a level two-thousand-plus mage.

Heck, my inventory might be mostly empty, but I have healing and mana potions I can pawn off, right? She hardly needed a mountain of riches, just enough to buy food and a place to sleep. And also, a greateagle flight—or a train ticket? *Which would be faster?* The train would be the more comfortable of the two.

Pulling up her inventory, she tapped the square holding her health potion and withdrew one. The flask was wide and triangular with a fat base. She sloshed it back and forth, watching the liquid inside swirl and crash against the glass in a fascinating way. The fluid seemed much more magical when disturbed, changing hues into various shades of sparkling red and orange.

How much will this sell for? They were the highest-tier health potions she'd been able to buy, meant for her challenge runs soloing the Ashen Hierophant on mythic difficulty. They had to be valuable.

But even she had a limited supply. Maybe she shouldn't sell it. Again, she only needed enough coin for basic food, shelter, and miscellaneous needs.

Not really thinking, she tugged on the cork and popped the potion open, curious what it smelled like.

Honey, mint, and cinnamon. The scent was instant and pervasive, but even more noticeable was the way magic *gushed* from the vial. It was so dense it was palpable, even to her discerning magical senses.

Fumes drifted out of the thin neck of the flask and settled onto the cobblestone, and weeds began sprouting from the cracks, green foliage appearing from nowhere, growth spurred on by the immense regenerative properties held in even a whiff of the potion. She hastily capped and inventoried it, looking around to see if anyone had noticed. No one had.

So, uh… yeah. Probably too valuable to pawn. The same went for her mana potions and other challenge-run consumables.

Well, fine. There was always working for a living.

She meant the Adventurer's Guild, of course. She was looking forward to experimenting more with her abilities anyway. A hunting trip was in

order. Two birds with one stone.

She was still getting used to existing in a fantasy world. Being around everyday civilians was already surreal. Stepping foot into the Adventurer's Guild and seeing humans, elves, demons, and even a dwarf dressed in various sets of armor—platemail and flowing robes and leather cuirasses—was another matter altogether.

Everything was so *vivid* and *real*. She hovered at the doorway, taking it in, before someone cleared their throat to remind her that she was blocking the entrance. She hurried forward, blushing, which probably didn't fit the image of the legendary Sorceress, Vivisari Vexaria.

Fortunately, the blush didn't touch her cheeks; it happened only in her head. She'd never been an especially emotive girl, and Vivisari's body was even slower to show reactions than her previous. She had been calmer and more composed than ever, externally speaking, through today's encounters. That said, she felt awfully like a tourist the way she gawked around, even if any other person would simply see her coolly surveying the space with bored eyes.

Her gaze drifted from one adventurer to another. Most wore a small, metallic emblem pinned to their chest. She saw mostly bronze, a few glints of silver, and a rare flash of gold on the handsome blond knight standing by the board. It was clearly some sort of rank identifier.

She spotted the receptionist's desk, a sturdy wooden counter tucked to the side, and headed for it.

The receptionist was a human woman—Vivi felt weird that she needed to make the clarification of 'human' inside her own head—with twin brown braids. She was pretty, slightly plump, and seemed like the sort of person who would normally be wearing a friendly expression at all times, though at the moment she seemed ill, leaning against the counter heavily and obviously wanting to be in bed rather than at work. As Vivi approached, the woman forced herself to perk up and plaster on a customer-service smile.

Vivi couldn't help but ask, "Had an interesting night?"

It was just too obvious. She'd been there. Not that she overindulged often, but she recognized the signs.

The receptionist winced, then let out an apologetic chuckle. “That obvious? Yeah… festival started a little early for me. Once-in-a-century opportunity to celebrate. Why not, right?” She took a breath. “How can I help, miss?”

At least she wasn’t calling Vivi ‘little one’ or eyeing her dubiously as if wondering whether she belonged there at all. Of the three interactions she’d had, this was her favorite for that fact alone.

There was a recurring issue she was running into: being reborn into her character had given her a wealth of knowledge on sorcerous topics, but no concept for any of the other facets of this world because of how much time had passed. Meaning she was missing a lot of common knowledge.

She knew she wasn’t going to remain anonymous for long. Taking too much effort to do so was pointless. Twenty minutes earlier, she had teleported a man into the wilderness and exploded a quarter mile of forest with the wrath of the heavens themselves.

So, she asked with a total lack of grace, “You buy monster parts here?”

The receptionist paused. Likely, the Adventurer’s Guild was as much of a staple to society as banks were. Vivi’s question was the equivalent of walking into a grocery store and asking if they sold food.

Put like that, she winced. She could’ve asked something less suspicious even if she’d given up on flying under the radar.

“Er, yes?” said the receptionist, whose nametag read ‘Danny’. “Don’t think our evaluator is busy, if you need to appraise some parts. Should I go ask?”

She’d generously interpreted Vivi’s question as if she were seeking an appraisal rather than literally wondering if the Guild bought monster parts. That was… fortunate.

“Not right now,” Vivi said, her face not betraying her embarrassment. “But probably soon. It’s by appointment?”

“Don’t get enough traffic for that,” Danny snorted. “But we can set one up if you want, I guess. From a big city, I take it?”

She’d have thought Prismarche was large itself, but she supposed by the standards of Meridian it wasn’t. Prismarche was far, far to the north, set in a relatively dangerous part of the Northern Kingdom. It was by no means some tiny city, but even in the game it hadn’t been a twentieth the size of the capital of the Central Kingdom.

“Meridian,” Vivi said.

Danny’s eyebrows shot up. “From *the* big city. Heard good things. Been wanting to head down that way myself, but—” She waved a hand. “Bit of a ride, to say the least.”

Vivi nodded. The conversation slowed.

Oh, jeez. Was she supposed to comment on Meridian now? Small talk. Not her specialty. Better to launch into the next question.

“The badges everyone is wearing. On their chests.” She tapped the location on her own. “Those are… ranks?”

Danny’s reaction was even more doubtful this time. “Yes?”

“How do those go?”

Danny’s mouth opened and closed, but she replied nonetheless. “Same as coinage. Bronze, silver, gold, mithril, orichalcum, starmetal. Though most people call starmetal ranks ‘Titled,’ on account of being given official titles and all. Never seen one myself,” she added, in that same conversational tone, but Vivi could tell Danny was talking on autopilot as she studied Vivi with growing curiosity.

“And how does ranking up work?” Vivi asked, barreling forward without concern. What was the worst that would happen? The receptionist went around gossiping about a strange person who had shown up in the Adventurer’s Guild? That had to happen all the time.

Again, Danny clearly found the question odd, but she answered. “You start at bronze, and when you hit level two hundred, you automatically qualify for silver. Gold and up takes approval from a guildmaster. You need enough quest points, a review of your missions, and to pass the exam. It’s not just about being able to blast your way through everything. It doesn’t matter if you killed all the monsters if the town is destroyed in the process. The upper-rank badges are a mark of prestige for a reason—it’s about knowing how to act with discretion as much as knowing how to kill things efficiently.”

“I see.” Vivi kept a straight face, since that was her only defense. “As far as selling monster parts, are there rank restrictions?”

She’d been curious about how ranks worked, since those hadn’t been present in Seven Cataclysms, and thus was one of the changes she’d been taking special note of. But selling loot was her real end goal. She needed to make money, and killing monsters was the easiest way—at least, the easiest, least-suspicious way that also let her experiment with magic more.

“Um,” Danny repeated, clueing Vivi in on how strange this interaction was to the woman. “No. There are rank restrictions on quests, but if you have monster parts, or other loot, our appraiser will give you a fair deal. You might be able to squeak a little more coin out walking through town and selling stuff individually, but the Guild pays fair from what I’ve heard. Not the best, but fair.” She shrugged. “I ain’t going around and selling Briarhoar Spikes myself, so I can’t say so for sure, but I haven’t heard complaints.”

“That’s all I needed, then. Thank you.”

“My… pleasure?”

Vivi turned and strode confidently away. Incredibly, her cheeks still weren’t burning. Her embarrassment seemed confined within herself. This new body was good for a few things, even if it created more doubts about her age than her last one.

Her target was the quest board. She didn’t think she would be taking any of them, since she would have to register first, and killing monsters and selling whatever she got seemed easier anyway. But she was curious what they said, so she decided she may as well check while she was here.

Unfortunately, she was intercepted halfway to the board.

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5

OFFER

The woman who had walked up to Vivi had green hair, which wasn't all that unusual in the world of Seven Cataclysms. Brown and black *were* the most common, but there were brighter colors added to the mix beyond blonde and red. She was tall, skinny, and wore light leather armor suggesting a dexterity-based class.

She smiled in apology. "Sorry. Don't mean to bother, but I caught the tail end of your conversation. You're new in town? Didn't mean to eavesdrop, just couldn't help it—I was sitting right there." She gestured at a table where a broad-shouldered man with a scar across his eye leaned in a chair; they were only a dozen feet from the receptionist's desk. On Vivi's attention turning his way, the man raised a hand in acknowledgment. She nodded in return.

"Yes," Vivi said slowly. "I just arrived."

"And you're not registered with the Guild. That's not rare, you know. The Guild is where almost all of the edge cases turn up eventually."

Vivi wasn't sure how to reply to that, so she said nothing.

The green-haired girl laughed. "Sorry, I'll get to the point. We're trying to fill out a party. We're here for the festival—like you are, maybe?—but of our group, only me and Dom wanted to head this far north. Even though Prismarche's festival is supposed to be the best in the kingdoms, being the final destination of the Party of Heroes and all that. Rest of our team was too lazy. Can you believe it?"

Vivi had never done well with the social butterflies. “Right,” she said, not intending to sound cold and reserved, but the single word probably came off that way.

The woman cleared her throat. “So, just wondering if you wanted to join us for an expedition,” she said, her smile disappearing, but not in an unfriendly manner. “Just for today. You don’t have an official rank, but what level are you, if you don’t mind sharing? Roughly? Dom and I are both mid silver.”

Vivi mulled over her options, eventually deciding to lie. “The same. A little higher, perhaps, I’m not certain. Still new to this.”

“Of course,” the green-haired girl said smoothly. “Oh. Lailah, by the way. Good to meet you.”

“You as well.”

“So, silver-ish, but what role?” She ran her eyes up and down Vivi. “Caster for sure. Mage or healer?”

“Mage. But also, no thank you. I’m not looking for a party.”

She was somewhat interested in interacting with locals, but not right now. She wanted to make some coin and figure out what was going on, not to mention experiment with her magic. This was a complication she didn’t need.

Lailah visibly deflated. “You sure? We’re not planning anything crazy. An easy trip, something to pass the time till festivities get going.”

If it was that easy to make Vivi reject her antisocial ways, she wouldn’t have ended up in this situation in the first place. “I’m certain.” She wasn’t trying to be rude, so she added, “I have my own plans. Thank you for the offer.”

“Ah, well. Let me know if you change your mind. See you around?”

Vivi nodded, and that was the end of the unexpected development.

She approached the quest board and scanned the various listings, reading the tasks with interest. Each came with a title, description, rank requirement, and rewards of various types: primarily coin and ‘rank points.’

Was that really how the world’s rank system worked? Would someone like her, a level twenty-one-hundred-plus, be considered a genuine silver-ranker simply because she didn’t have enough ‘rank points’? *Is there really no way to skip forward just through sheer level?*

It did make sense to some degree. Like Danny had said, it didn’t matter if she killed the rampaging monster if the whole town died in the process. It

wasn’t fully nonsensical—she’d seen worse systems in her previous life. And for all she knew, there *were* exceptions for jumping through rank. The receptionist just might not have mentioned them.

Her musings were cut off by a *second* person walking up.

“Hey,” came a single, somewhat curt word to her side.

This time, Vivi turned to see a red-haired girl, dressed in adventuring gear and around thirteen years of age, clutching a stack of papers to her chest.

She had cat ears.

Beastkin were a common race in Seven Cataclysms. They had been her runner-up choice when making her character, losing only because at that point in her life, she had preferred *edgy,* stylistically speaking, over cute. But it had been a close competition.

Vivi tried not to stare. A pair of tall red cat ears twitched, as if sensing attention on them. Vivi tore her eyes down to meet the girl’s.

“You were talking with Lailah, right?” she demanded, her tone the exact opposite of the previous woman’s—not hostile, but not making any attempt at friendliness.

“Yes,” Vivi replied slowly. “Why do you ask?”

The other girl frowned. She glanced at the green-haired woman, who had taken her seat at the table near the receptionist’s desk. She looked back at Vivi and studied her. “What did you think of her?”

Vivi hesitated. “She was… friendly.”

The catgirl nodded vigorously. “Too much so, right?” It was an enthusiastic response, as if she had assumed Vivi had made the same deduction as her. But she hadn’t. Vivi didn’t even really understand the implication.

“Perhaps?”

The girl eyed her, enthusiasm fading. A frown tugged her lips downward. “Hm. You didn’t notice. For some reason, I thought…” She clutched the stack of papers against her chest tighter. “She offered you a place on her team, didn’t she?”

“She did.”

“Don’t accept it. Something’s off about her. That man too. She’s only been giving invitations to people who aren’t established in town.”

“She didn’t seem suspicious to me.”

The catgirl gave Vivi the most dubious look yet. “Dangerous people wouldn’t be dangerous if it was easy to tell. Predators hide, that’s what they do. Mask themselves in the environment. Notice how she’s at the closest table to the receptionist’s desk, so she can swoop in on anyone she marks as a target? And she’s *only* going for newcomers. How’s she even know who’s who? I haven’t seen her around before this week.”

Vivi couldn’t answer that second part, but the first had an easy explanation. “She might be assuming newcomers are more likely to accept. People established in town are probably already on a team, or otherwise busy.”

The girl grimaced; she knew it was a good point. “Yeah, fair. I shouldn’t make accusations without evidence, I just—she doesn’t seem right. It’s so obvious.” She squinted at Vivi. “How old are you?” she asked, the first person to cast doubt in the *opposite* direction, as if she’d initially thought Vivi was older and thus wiser than she appeared, but had now revised her opinion.

Was this girl just paranoid? Vivi had thought Lailah seemed friendly; she hadn’t sensed the slightest bit of deceit. It had seemed like a normal interaction, an adventurer offering to party up out of convenience. But now Vivi was doubting herself.

“Well, never mind,” the girl said. “Did you say yes?”

“I declined.”

“Good.” She seemed genuinely relieved. “Uh, anyway.” She looked down at the stack of papers she was clutching. She pulled one out and thrust it at Vivi. “Keep an eye out, okay?” It was less of a request and more a demand.

Vivi took the poster. A simple illustration of a dignified-looking cat with a black fur eye patch was printed—magically printed?—on the paper, along with some text. *This* was what the girl had been carrying around? Vivi looked at her in a new light, of course finding it amusing that the cat beastkin was passing out missing-cat posters.

She seemed to sense Vivi’s amusement. Her eyes narrowed and her ears flattened slightly. “Got something to say?”

Way, way too cute. It took everything Vivi had to keep a straight face. “I’ll tell you if I see him.”

The girl nodded. “Good.” She turned away, but then paused and looked over her shoulder. “Saffra, by the way. And thank you.”

“Vivi,” she replied, equal parts amused and bewildered by the interaction.

Vivi watched her walk away, mulling over the situation. A seed of doubt had been planted. She truly, genuinely didn’t know whether Saffra’s worry was well-founded. She glanced at Lailah, who was chatting happily away with her partner. Even appraising the woman in a new light, Vivi sensed nothing strange.

Hm.

Paranoia was infectious, because despite not having a good reason to do so, she pulled together a spell, muting the visual effects and incantation. She placed a tracking beacon on Lailah and her warrior partner.

Better safe than sorry.

That done, she scanned the quest board a minute longer, then turned away.

She’d gotten what she needed out of the Adventurer’s Guild. Now, she wanted to experiment and earn some coin while doing so.

She walked out of the Guild, turned into an alleyway, cast [Invisibility], [Fly], and [Blink], and was suddenly a thousand feet in the air.

The world of Seven Cataclysms might not have been exactly as she remembered it, but she’d spent tens of thousands of hours grinding. She knew the map better than almost anyone. Orienting herself as she floated high above the city, she faced in the direction of the Hoarfrost Plains. Likely her best choice for hunting grounds. Easy to get to.

“[Blink].”

“[Blink].”

“[Blink].”

The short-range teleportation skill was definitely one of her favorites. The experience of materializing thousands of feet in another direction, the world shifting around her, while using only a tiny amount of mana relative to her gigantic pool was amazing. The wonder that came with magic was going to take a while to wear off.

“[Blink].”

“[Blink].”

“[Blink].”

She could probably reach Meridian in short order with this method, relatively speaking, though it would still take hundreds or thousands of

spell casts. The map was huge, and based on how many [Blinks] it was taking to get to the Hoarfrost Plains, even larger than the digital version.

I'll probably take the train. There's no rush.

"[Blink]."

"[Blink]."

"[Blink]."

The city of Prismarche disappeared behind her. She passed the jagged teeth of the Granite Spines. The sprawling plains of one of her preferred mid-tier hunting grounds appeared after a few-dozen uses of [Blink]: The Hoarfrost Plains. She'd spent more than a hundred hours grinding resources and levels in this zone.

"[Detect Presence]."

The temperature had grown bitingly cold, enough that even she felt vaguely uncomfortable in the icy, howling wind. Her stats shielded her against most of the effect, but not all.

"[Aura of the Ember Giant]."

Much better, she thought.

Floating down, she let her bare feet touch the tight-packed snow of the Hoarfrost Plains, toes digging into snow. She pulled her robes in tighter by instinct, even if the glow of the spell meant she might as well be standing inside a warm inn. It was bizarre, having her hair flap around in a freezing gale but not feeling the slightest bite of cold.

She was learning to adapt to 'bizarre.' This was at least the twentieth case in the past few hours.

She had set down near a pack of gigantic Frostmaw Titans, polar-bear beasts twice the size of an elephant. In the early days of Seven Cataclysms, hunting them had been one of the best mid-game money-grinding methods, since the armor set made from their pelts was surprisingly overpowered. Essentially every rogue and even some tank classes around level seven hundred wanted it.

Seven hundred was low compared to her own level, but she wanted to stay vaguely under the radar, and she doubted the Adventurer's Guild would actually be able to compensate her for some of the highest-tier monster parts she could collect. This made for a good middle ground. Plus, hunting in the Hoarfrost Plains would be nostalgic.

Crunching her way through the snow, she approached the trundling mountains of fur. She mulled over how to kill them. Smiting a quarter mile

of terrain in every direction with that same level-1800 spell [Kaelum's Thousand-Year Pyre] was obviously a terrible idea, since she wanted to harvest parts to sell, not vaporize the entire species.

Something clean and efficient. The idea made her wrinkle her nose. The whole reason she liked picking mage classes was for the accompanying fireworks. Explosive, flashy abilities were the only *real* way to have fun. *I guess I'm not here to have fun, though*. Not exclusively, at least.

"[Skills]."

A screen appeared, packed with information. It was two columns wide, with an icon and name to represent each ability. There were options for filtering and searching—fortunately, the functionality was extremely similar to the game's. She tapped over to the 'spells' section, which was considerably longer than the previous, and began scrolling through.

Vivi had played a lot of Seven Cataclysms, but she hardly had an encyclopedic memory of every skill and spell. She was most familiar with the late-game ones. But at the moment, she needed less… conspicuous abilities.

Humming, she flicked through several pages, adjusting the search functions as she committed a few names to memory. Tapping on a given spell opened a diagram describing how to shape the mana and invoke the magic circle, which she somehow understood. *That's still weird,* she thought with a shiver. *I just,* know *magic now?*

Her lips curled upward as she compiled a list of mid-tier spells to play with, around the 800 to 1000 level range. That would be impressive, but not anything shocking, she figured. The guild NPCs and even her mansion's butler had been well over that.

Speaking of—she wondered if any of them were alive. It *had* been a hundred years, but most races were long-lived, and even several human characters from the game had been implied to be centuries old. So levels extended lifespans, she assumed.

In any case, she mentally closed out of the skill list. Her staff appeared in her right hand with a *pop* of air.

Time to hunt giant monster polar bears.

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6

HUNTING TRIP

The giant, slavering maw of a twenty-foot-tall mass of fur and teeth slipped and slid against her [Prismatic Barrier], and Vivi had to admit she was breathing heavier than she'd expected. Black claws the length of her forearm scraped against the invisible shield, sending rainbow sparks flying. She smelled rotting flesh, felt the hot air of the beast's roar on her face. Snow crunched as its enormous paws pushed into the ground, giving leverage to shove against her.

Maybe making video games too realistic would be a bad thing, actually. Because while she was definitely immersed in the moment, this was more terrifying than exciting. It was certainly cool, and interesting, and unique… but yeah, she had mixed feelings.

"[Earthen Anchor]."

Vines burst from the ground, whipping out to grab the rampaging Frostmaw Titan. The hulking beast slammed into the ground with a *thud* that threw up snow all around them, briefly obscuring her vision. Vivi took several steps back to create space. The monster struggled against the restraints, but the spell was far too powerful for it to break through.

She looked around. Two other Frostmaw Titans were secured to the ground in the same way—she was saving them for later.

Another had been killed in a grotesquely gory manner. She winced at the viscera staining the snow and jerked her head away. She wasn't squeamish, but neither was she inured to piles of exploded flesh and bone. It turned out, blowing a monster up with a super-charged fireball was rather

messy. Again, there were downsides to realism. *Especially the smells,* she thought.

She'd had her fun with a 'flashy' spell on the first of the Titans. These other three, she wanted to harvest. Hence minimal damage, which unfortunately meant no spectacle.

"[Sanguine Vitaphage]," she incanted, pointing her staff at the nearest monster.

Its thrashing stopped, and a low, whining noise involuntarily escaped the back of its throat. Red streams of energy siphoned out of the mountain of white fur, soon gushing in billowing clouds to gather and condense into a red ball hovering six feet above the beast. The Titan's vitality was sucked dry in seconds. She supposed her ridiculous stats were to thank. Even weak spells were strong when she cast them.

A fist-sized red ball—too shiny and metallic to resemble blood, though the same color—hovered above the dead beast. She flicked her wrist, idly discarding the orb; it sailed away into the distance. Pure vitality was a great catalyst for further blood magic, but she had no need for it, and it couldn't be stored for later. Her goal had been this: the bear had died without a scratch. Which meant all of its parts would be preserved.

"[Loot]."

To her satisfaction, that functionality was still present. She hadn't been looking forward to skinning and butchering a monster by hand. Or… by magic. Which would've been better, but not by a lot.

A screen appeared with a list of available loot.

Deceased [Frostmaw Titan]

Loot:
Frostmaw Fangs (x2)
Titan Bear Claws (x8)
Primal Ice Core
Pristine Frostmaw Titan Pelt {[Skinning]}
Meat (x38) {[Butchering]}
Arctic Essence Gland {[Alchemical Harvesting]}

Each of the items could be inspected in turn. She wasn't sure whether it was a good haul. She recognized most of the loot, but who knew how valuable each was, nowadays?

Half was only available for harvest thanks to her crafting skills. Since she had no-lifed Seven Cataclysms, she had maxed out most basic crafting-type skills, especially the ones relevant to her class and the ones best for making money.

While the world was shockingly realistic, many videogame-like features were still in full effect: she dragged the loot into her inventory and, just like that, was the owner of a new collection of items deposited into spatial storage.

The unexpected part was how the hulking mass of the Frostmaw Titan was suddenly lying there, de-skinned and missing several body parts.

Internally, Vivi made a horrified face; her body didn't though. There was a mismatch between her mind and the body she was in—one she appreciated. Heroes of legend wouldn't go around acting squeamish about skinning a monster. Those thoughts could remain in her head alone.

She killed and looted the other subdued beasts, then, nose wrinkling, hastily retreated. The smell truly was indescribable.

Hunting was an efficient process when she could teleport around, cast [Detect Presence], kill monsters in seconds, and return to town with another rapid series of [Blinks].

An hour later, she was back standing in front of the guild receptionist's desk. Danny looked up at her with a wince, clearly not faring much better with her hangover. She plastered on another smile.

"How can I help?"

"You mentioned having resources appraised?"

"Ready to have that done?" Danny nodded. "Let me go check with Nazriel."

She walked around the receptionist desk and disappeared through a door labeled 'Guild Appraising — Approval Required.' A minute later, she

returned.

“He’s free. First door on the left.” Danny smiled at her, and Vivi nodded her thanks.

After walking through and turning left, she knocked on the available door and was met with a “Come in.” The Guild Appraising Room featured walls packed with unlabeled cubbies, shelves, and other storage units, all covered or otherwise obscured to hide their contents. In the back left was another door, probably leading into an office.

The man standing behind the table in the center of the room wasn’t technically a man; he was a demon, but Vivi doubted she’d get used to using those terms correctly. Males were men, females were women. Going around calling people ‘demon males’ or ‘elven females’ would just feel weird.

His white hair was short and neatly styled, with two oni-style horns—straight and pointing up—jutting out from the front of his skull. In demon culture, because Vivi was nerdy enough to have read Seven Cataclysms’ lore, that marked him as being of low birth. Curling horns like hers were the mark of high-blooded demons. Not that every curled-horn demon was a noble, or vice versa; it was a historical indicator, and thus only trended that way.

Like all demons, his eyes were red and his skin was white as snow, paler than any human’s could reasonably be. He adjusted a pair of thin silver-framed spectacles as she walked in, his posture ramrod straight.

“Good afternoon, miss. My name is Nazriel. I was told you were seeking an appraisal?”

Vivi nodded, not sure how this process was supposed to go and happy to let him take the lead. “Vivi,” she replied.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance.” After a second in which Vivi didn’t respond, he continued smoothly, “Shall we begin?” He gestured at the empty table—even if she was in a half-foreign fantasy world, she knew what he was asking.

She hesitated before opening her loot page. She wasn’t sure whether locals had access to the same game mechanics she did. They certainly had classes and levels, but she hadn’t seen anyone scrolling through various screens… but at the same time, she hadn’t interacted with that many people, and certainly not in circumstances where they might need to use one.

It wasn’t like she could fetch the items some other way. So, mentally shrugging, she opened her loot tab and began extracting her haul. Nazriel didn’t seem to find that odd, so she tentatively assumed adventurers had access to an inventory in the same way she did.

She started with the small pieces that seemed more like proper loot: the bear claws and fangs.

The appraiser stopped her with a raised hand before she piled more onto the table. “One item type at a time, if you please.”

Her suspicion about inventories was confirmed a second later when a magnifying glass materialized in his hand. He picked up one of the massive obsidian-black claws to inspect it, turning the item this way and that.

“Hunting Frostmaw Titans, I take it? At the Hoarfrost Plains in particular?”

It probably wasn’t some impressive piece of knowledge, but it showed he had a level of familiarity with the local monsters. “Yes.”

“How significant of a haul should I anticipate?” He glanced at the items she’d piled onto the table. “I don’t believe I’ve seen this quantity of Frostmaw Fangs and Titan Bear Claws in one place in…” He paused as he considered. “…ever.”

Oh. Had she been too enthusiastic with her hunting trip? The expedition had only lasted an hour, but [Blink] and [Detect Presence], as mentioned, made for a devastating combo when she could one-shot and harvest whatever she ran into. She’d scoured a non-negligible portion of the Hoarfrost Plains.

“That’s all of them,” she said cautiously.

“But you have similar quantities of other Frostmaw Titan loot, and presumably other locals of the Hoarfrost Plains?”

She nodded.

“Would that be the totality of your appraisal today? Or do you have additional items beyond that?”

“Just from that hunting trip.”

“I see.” He nodded to himself and laid the claw back onto the table. “Miss,” he said carefully, “while our branch does deal with orichalcum-ranked adventurers on occasion, a purchase of this size would require approval from the Guildmaster directly, and I feel obligated to inform you that you might be better suited dealing with an external merchant consortium or trading house. In-guild exchanges are usually for… newer

adventurers. Or rather, mithril ranks and lower. Orichalcum-grade products are valuable enough they're handled with more care—the overhead required in finding proper buyers pales in comparison to the prices the items themselves fetch."

Yeah. She could definitely tell this experience had left the man bewildered, even if he sounded perfectly composed and had laid out his response without faltering. He just wasn't the kind of person to openly gawk—at anything.

Straight-faced, Vivi replied, "I don't care about getting the best deal. Will you buy it?"

"I cannot imagine the Guildmaster would refuse. We have standard pricing for common loot found on orichalcum-rank monsters, and even local Titled-rank. These would make easy, significant profit for the Guild. We simply don't see such products pass through often."

"Then please continue."

He nodded and did as she'd asked without further comment.

Part by part, he inspected each of the items and suggested a price, occasionally referencing a notebook and tallying the total in another. One-third of the way through, Vivi told him to choose whatever price he thought was fair and that she didn't want to haggle. She didn't care; seeing as how she was locked out of her bank account, all she needed was 'starter money.'

Even at low rates, she was pretty sure she was going to turn more of a profit than she'd intended. Enough to draw attention from the Guildmaster. She was clearly failing in her supposed goal of laying low.

The appraiser deposited some items into his inventory, and others he wrapped in various materials to place into drawers or cabinets. She wasn't sure what his exact logic was, but she guessed it had to do with spoilage. The claws and teeth, for example, were deposited physically rather than in his spatial storage.

"This meat is extraordinarily well preserved and portioned," he commented, inspecting one such slab laid out on paper. "Skill-extracted? A high-level one, would be my guess." After a few seconds passed in which Vivi didn't confirm or deny the man's observation, he continued, "Feel no obligation to respond, of course, I'm merely speaking to myself."

When everything had finished, Nazriel consulted his notebook. He went through and added the sums together, paused, squinted, and shook his head

in incredulity. It was the most reaction he'd given so far for what Vivi knew had been a highly unusual experience.

"The festival always brings interesting characters," he said mildly. "I'll go speak with the Guildmaster. It won't be more than ten minutes. He'll find you in the lobby, if that's acceptable?"

She nodded, and he showed her the way out.

Back in the lobby, she scanned the tables for familiar faces: Lailah or Saffra. Neither were present.

Closing her eyes, she mentally quested out for the magical beacon she'd placed on the green-haired woman. Lailah was on the eastern edge of the city, approaching the gates. That probably meant she was leaving for that hunting trip she'd invited Vivi to.

Saffra's warnings had taken root in her head. Vivi was probably being paranoid, but after she was done dealing with this loot debacle, she intended to ensure nothing strange was going on with Lailah. It wasn't like she was pressed for time. She didn't have any real goals, much less urgent ones, besides returning to Meridian and finding out what had happened to her house, the guild, and any relevant NPCs.

The Guildmaster himself tracked her down a few minutes later, with Vivi standing at the quest board, arms crossed and frowning down at the floor. She looked up at the heavy footsteps approaching her.

He was a middle-aged human, had dark hair balding on top, a bit of a beer gut, and muscled, hairy forearms. He reminded her of a retired blue-collar father, which frankly might be a solid equivalent for this world. Vivi assumed most guildmasters would be experienced adventurers settling down.

His face was a lot easier to read than the demon appraiser's: caution bordering on suspicion across his features. It wasn't blatant, though. It was hidden past an ostensibly neutral expression, and he nodded at her when their eyes met while sticking out a hand to shake. She took it.

His squeeze started firm and rapidly increased in strength—something she was weirdly *aware* of, while barely feeling the pressure.

It hadn't been a display of dominance, nor an attempt at one. His face had grown grim, and she could tell he'd confirmed something to himself.

Because, yeah. Vivi might be a mage, but she was level 2100, and all stats scaled with level. She was absurdly strong by regular standards, which

the Guildmaster had just verified. Sneaky. She couldn't find it in herself to disapprove of his methods. He was just scoping out a potential threat.

"Good to meet you, miss. Dougal Flint. Just thought I'd come and see you myself, considering the… situation. New in town?"

"I've been before."

"Have ya?"

"…a hundred years ago, or so."

She probably shouldn't have said that, but she was bad at small talk, and that had been all that had come to mind.

His eyebrows went up, but he didn't seem surprised. Thankfully, elves and demons were common in the city, and they were long-lived races. Plus, she suspected Nazriel had introduced her as 'the weird orichalcum- or higher-rank adventurer,' which would dispel any notions the Guildmaster might have about her age, regardless of her appearance. Not everyone was quick to assume short and petite meant child, anyway. It just happened more often than Vivi preferred.

"I see. Changed a lot in that time, I expect?"

She didn't mean to be rude, but she wanted to check on Lailah, and she'd never done well with casual conversation. Especially not with people she didn't know well. "Will you be approving the purchase?"

He frowned, but didn't seem to take offense at the abruptness. "Long as there won't be hard feelings. Never good business, getting on the wrong side of high rankers. You'd be better off selling elsewhere, but I'm sure ya know that already. Not lecturin' or anything."

"It doesn't matter." They were treating this like it was a big deal, but it had been an hour-long prance through the Hoarfrost Plains, which she could reach in minutes. "I have places to be. Can we finalize?"

Again, he didn't seem to mind her curtness. He was just studying her curiously. "Won't hold ya if you're busy." He pulled out a pouch stuffed with coins—he'd clearly prepared it before coming. "Thirty-six mithril and change. Fairest price we could muster. Hope to see you around, miss."

Even if he did sound like he appreciated the tidy profit his guild had no doubt made, he didn't seem like he actually wanted to see her again. Vivi could imagine why. She expected that, for guildmasters, high-rankers appearing out of nowhere were usually walking headaches.

She tucked the bag of coins into her inventory; they automatically sorted into the currency bar at the bottom, with the pouch itself being

labeled as ‘empty pouch.’ Convenient.

With that, it was time to see whether anything was happening with Lailah. Sooner rather than later. For some reason, she couldn’t shake the feeling of unease.

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7

SCOUTING

Vivi flew across the city, marveling at the wonder of the experience. Prismarche sprawled out beneath her. The city had grown, but compared to modern cities as she knew them, it was tiny. It had to be, when the entire city was enclosed in a wall. Cities in safer territories could get away without defensive barriers, but not this far north.

Lailah had worked her way into the wilderness. As Vivi left the walls of the city and caught up, she saw that the woman's party consisted of four people: Lailah, her teammate 'Dom,' a young man in white robes, and the surprise addition of Saffra. The red-haired catgirl seemed to be a mage, based on the slim length of white wood she was carrying—a wand.

After the warnings Saffra had given, Vivi was baffled as to why she would accept a party invitation from Lailah. Briefly, she wondered whether the girl had warned her away as some sort of ploy to ensure her own spot on the team. But that didn't make sense. Saffra was glaring daggers at the two older adventurers, only wiping the expression away when they looked her direction.

The party of four was trekking through the pine forest that started immediately outside Prismarche's walls. If logic between game and reality held, Prismarche was in the far north of the human continent, the area dangerous even by the standards of this monster-infested world.

Vivi hadn't needed to travel far to reach orichalcum-rank monsters—which seemed to be shorthand for levels 800 to 1000—and such beasts could rampage through the vast majority of adventurers. She didn't think

any number of gold ranks could kill even one of them, and gold ranks were already uncommon from what she'd seen at the Adventurer's Guild. Most were bronze and silver.

Exiting the safety of Prismarche immediately brought people into level-two-hundred-plus territory. Meaning silver-rank threats. It wouldn't take long for this party of four to find monsters worth their time, seeing how all of them were wearing silver badges themselves.

Vivi was almost certain she had let unfounded paranoia guide her decisions—she didn't have enough *real* evidence to go around stalking a woman—but Saffra's worry had been so genuine, and remained so palpable even now, that Vivi persisted, hovering above the group with [Invisibility] active.

Better safe than sorry, she supposed.

These creeps aren't fooling anyone, Saffra thought.

Trekking behind Lailah and Dominic, Saffra glared at their backs as Allen went on and on about some healing spell he'd recently mastered. The boy had to be half a decade older than her, but it sure didn't feel like it. Did he not realize the situation he was in? The danger these two represented?

Not that she could be certain of anything. Lailah and Dominic's reasons for arriving in town were perfectly natural. Prismarche, being the nearest border city to the seventh Cataclysm Monarch's domain and thus the Party of Heroes' final destination, had always thrown extravagant festivals on Peace Day. On this centennial celebration, travelers had come from all across the continent.

Prismarche already fielded more adventurers than average, but with the festival there were three times the normal amount in the city. Maybe even extra orichalcums, possibly a Titled too. An influx of new faces wasn't odd. Not in the slightest.

Lailah and Dominic's stories checked out in all aspects.

It didn't matter. Something was off about them. And Saffra had decided to trust her gut. After what had happened the last time she hadn't, she wouldn't ignore her instincts again.

She clutched the silver necklace hanging around her neck to calm her nerves.

The question was, why was she out here with them?

What do I care? Saffra thought with a huff. *If this blond idiot wants to get himself killed, that's his choice.* She should be looking out for herself.

She didn't even know Allen. Apparently he was a local, an acolyte at the temple, and often visited the Guild. So maybe she should care. She'd been in Prismarche for four months and had made the Guild her home; she slept there every night. *I guess his face is kinda familiar.*

But no, she hadn't accepted Lailah's invitation because she knew Allen. She just… couldn't let the cheerful idiot face this alone.

And she knew she was probably being paranoid. Something about Lailah and Dominic made her skin itch, but what was she expecting, really? That they would murder her and Allen to harvest their belongings?

Well… adventurers did tend to carry around most of their net worth on their person. Murdering such people could be a great, if risky, method for making money, if one didn't have morals. So it wasn't implausible.

Or worse, were the pair planning on capturing and selling them alive?

Whatever the case, that was where Saffra's mind had gone, generally speaking. Such activity wasn't *common*, but there was a dark underbelly of crime throughout the human kingdoms—any civilization, really—that even the most naïve of citizens were wary of.

And adventurers were some of the easiest people to make disappear. What would most people think, even Guild staff, if an adventuring mission 'went awry' and a team came back minus a person or two? The City Guard or Adventurer's Guild might investigate, but even with divination magic—should they find justification to employ someone who could cast it—there were few guarantees they would find anything. Not with so little to go on.

Logically speaking, ninety-nine out of a hundred times, two older adventurers offering a quick team-up would be friendly camaraderie. That Lailah had gone around framing the mission as routine and simple to so many people would double the suspicion brought onto her, should something go wrong. So that was extra proof Saffra was being paranoid.

Yet she had such rotten luck that ninety-nine in a hundred odds didn't comfort her in the slightest.

All of that aside, she really should be looking out for herself. But she hadn't been able to convince this tall blond boy to decline Lailah's

invitation, so Saffra had walked up and offered to join too, and after a moment's consideration, the woman had smiled and accepted.

Saffra had to do this. She wasn't going to let something horrible happen if she could help it. Even *if* Allen was a stranger.

I can only blame myself, she thought sourly. *I deserve what's coming.*

"Remember what we talked about," Lailah said, smiling over her shoulder. Saffra remembered to wipe her dour expression clean and nod earnestly. "You two are silver ranks, same as me, so I don't need to harp on you. But you never know when things'll go wrong, and someone getting hurt is more likely in an unfamiliar group. Keep sharp."

Allen turned a look toward Saffra as if to say, *'See? They're good people, they're looking out for us.'* Saffra seethed in silence, trying to keep her face from betraying her emotions. Her time at the Institute had made her good at that. But in her annoyance, she wasn't able to put up the usual mask, so she settled for an aggressively blank look. Allen faltered, cleared his throat, and kept walking.

This time of year, the Frostfern Glade was more green than white, and the worst monsters were in hibernation. But it was still more dangerous than almost anything found in southern, safer lands. It was one of the reasons she'd come here: it made great training grounds. The other, bigger reason was that she'd needed to get as far from Meridian, and thus the Institute, as possible.

She kept her attention sharp. It would be awfully awkward if she begrudgingly came on a hunting expedition she didn't want to be on, only to die to *actual* monsters instead of the metaphorical ones in front of her.

Even if, again, she had zero evidence these two couldn't be trusted.

The first few fights went without a problem. Saffra reluctantly admitted Lailah and Dominic knew what they were doing. Almost too much so. They seemed better than silver ranks ought to be.

Was it another level of paranoid to add that to her tiny stack of 'evidence'? That they might be faking rank to more easily lure in prey? If they *were* killers or similar, they wouldn't want to fight on equal footing. They would be solidly gold rank at least.

Saffra started to doubt herself as the hunting trip continued. An hour passed, then a second, which, with the expedition having intended to be short and casual, meant they would soon be wrapping up. Peace Day

celebrations would begin that evening. Time was running out for things to go wrong.

Sure enough, one fight later, Lailah announced, “That ought to do it. We should head back now. Wouldn’t want to miss any of the fun. Any objections?” She looked around at the other three, but received none. “You two did great, by the way,” she added, smiling at Allen and Saffra. “You especially, brat,” she teased Saffra. “I’d swear you’re Institute-trained, though I know the semester ought to still be in session, so apparently not.”

Saffra hadn’t expected the Institute to be brought up. She stiffened slightly, her mask faltering before she smoothed out her expression again. “I’m glad you think I did okay.”

“More than ‘okay,’” Lailah replied with a laugh. “You’re making me feel like I didn’t take my career seriously enough when I was young. I’m twice your age, yet we’re wearing the same badge.”

“Not all paths start and end the same,” Allen said sagely, with that faux-wise tone so many temple acolytes used.

Maybe Saffra was being uncharitable with that description. She didn’t dislike Allen—he was just a huge idiot who didn’t know what was good for him.

…though she was starting to think he’d been right. If something strange was going to happen, it would have by now.

By all accounts, Lailah seemed to be the friendly, older adventurer she was pretending to be. Her powerfully built partner was both less suspicious and more—because he’d stayed close to silent the whole time, only calling things out during combat. His broad-shouldered, scarred appearance was suspect… but not really. Scars and a serious demeanor weren’t anything to make someone blink twice in an adventuring career. She was grasping at straws.

She really had gotten this one wrong. While listening to gut instincts was important, that didn’t mean every impression would be correct.

That feeling solidified as they headed back to the city. If something nefarious was going on, it would have happened in the deepest part of the Glade, where a chance-based intervention was least likely. They were already getting close to the city walls, where another adventuring group might be nearby.

Saffra felt silly about the whole event. At least she’d made some coin and gained experience working with unfamiliar teammates. The day hadn’t

been a total waste, even if she'd had more pressing tasks to deal with. A folded-up missing pet paper in her left pocket burned in reminder. She needed to get back to handing out those posters. She'd promised Daisy.

Dominic came to an abrupt stop, holding up a fist in the universal sign of danger. Saffra was instantly alert, wand raised and a [Flame Bolt] design sketching in her head.

But it didn't seem to be an immediate threat. He dropped the gesture and pointed. Lailah stepped up alongside him, peering in the direction he had indicated.

"Constrictor Creeper," she announced. "Shit, good eye, Dom."

Saffra and Allen edged up to put eyes on the green vine lying in wait. Fauna infused with stray magic was the most common threat while out hunting, but flora was dangerous too. Plant-type monsters, while less common, were equally as deadly.

Dominic had once again proved himself the quiet but competent sort. Constrictor Creepers were hard to spot. Saffra didn't know if she herself would have noticed it. And while a group of silver ranks probably wouldn't have been taken out by one, it could have injured someone—maybe killed, in the worst case.

"Where there's one, there's usually others," Lailah said. "I'll take a look around. Deal with that one."

Constrictor Creepers could sprawl for hundreds of feet. Saffra glanced nervously around the forest floor, but saw no other discolored vines like what was curled in front of them.

Creepers did tend to clump together, spawned in batches from the same expulsions of natural magic, and clearing them out was common courtesy. Finding them was the hard part, not killing them.

Maybe the standard procedure was why Saffra dropped her guard. She'd been keeping an eye on Dominic and Lailah through the expedition, but she didn't think twice as the rogue stalked away to find other Creepers, gaze locked to the ground like all of theirs were now. Especially because Dominic had grunted out, "Weak to fire. Yours?" And as the team's mage, it was logical this task fell to her.

The Creeper clump was a few dozen feet away, pulsating against a withered-looking tree. Saffra raised her wand and started pulling together a spell.

Click.

She felt something cold and heavy clamp around her neck.

Her stomach dropped about a mile beneath the earth.

“I was starting to think we’d have to be brutes about it,” Lailah commented. “Took long enough for an opportunity to show up. Watching me like a hawk this afternoon, weren’t you?”

“Miss Lailah?” Allen’s confused voice came somewhere to Saffra’s side, but she barely heard it. The moment that cold metal had wrapped around her neck, it felt like she’d stopped existing in her own body.

She reflexively drew on her mana, even though she knew exactly what would happen. The vibrating energy disappeared into the rune-engraved metal, drunk down greedily.

Saffra closed her eyes and tried to wake up. It had to be a nightmare. But Lailah continued speaking at her side.

“I’ll deal with him. Take care of the girl.”

And then Saffra was being manhandled, Dominic pulling her arms back and securing manacles around her wrists. That jolted her out of the brief disassociation—she began fighting. He held her easily, forcing her arms back and clicking the restraints into place.

“You’re only hurting yourself,” he said gruffly. “Stop that.”

How had she been so stupid? She’d known. She’d *known.*

In short order, she’d been forced to the ground and her wrists bound, her magic cut off by whatever suppression artifact Lailah had secured around her neck. Dominic was strangely gentle about the process, and that was almost more terrifying.

Allen was tossed to her side, likewise bound and gagged. He seemed to be in shock, looking around frantically. His eyes met hers. She looked away, squeezing her own shut.

This was her fault.

They were capturing them alive. That was the horrifying part. Death was just death. Having their throats slit and being robbed of their belongings wasn’t so bad—it would have been the preferable of the two outcomes.

She was hyperventilating. Something like this had happened once before. A miracle had saved her. Nobody was given *two* miracles.

Lailah crouched down to Saffra’s side. “Suspicious little bitch, aren’t you?” the woman mused with exactly the same cheerfulness as every

interaction before. It sounded genuinely friendly. “You were glaring at me before we even met. Why?”

Saffra kept her eyes closed, yet a moment later found one of them pried open.

“It’s polite to look at someone when they’re talking to you.”

Saffra stared numbly at Lailah in response. It wasn’t like she could talk. She had a rag stuffed in her mouth. It tasted disgusting.

“I’ve been doing this for a while. I’m positive I didn’t give myself away, somehow. Kinda irks me that some brat saw through me right from the start.” Lailah’s grip tightened on Saffra’s chin, fingernails digging in, and she shook Saffra’s head back and forth, just because she could. She sighed and released, sitting back on her heels. “You’re a bad actor, for the record. I might’ve convinced myself all that glaring back at the guild was for some other reason, but I felt your eyes on me through the entire mission too. You didn’t want to come out here, plain as day. Let me give you some advice. If you’re putting on an act, *you can never drop it*.” She tapped Saffra on the nose. “Seems obvious, silly girl.”

Lailah considered her.

“But really, did something give it away? I want to know.” The woman’s jaw shifted back and forth. “I’d take out the gag to get an answer, but I know your type. You’d spit in my face. And then I’d have to hurt you. I don’t like hurting children, it makes me feel bad.” She laughed. “Hypocritical, I know.”

The woman stood and dusted her hands.

“What are we doing with the boy?” she asked Dominic.

“It’d be easiest to kill him. Best price will be his corpse, through the Cult.”

“An acolyte. Promising one too. He’ll fetch a good sum.” She rubbed her chin. At Saffra’s side, Allen had gone very still. She couldn’t look at him. “Can’t undo killing, though. Maybe best to hold off.”

“Opens us to divinations from the temple, if he’s still around. He’s one of theirs. Safer to kill.”

“True.” Lailah thought it over, then sighed. “You’re right, like usual.” She flicked her wrist to the side. “Deal with him.”

Dominic started walking to Allen, and Saffra began struggling again. Not that she could do anything.

“What I don’t understand,” Lailah said, crouching back down near Saffra, “is why you came out here anyway. I *really* don’t get it. To investigate?” She shook her head with amusement. “What you should have done was listen to your gut. Talk to the Guild, maybe. But you didn’t. I watched you from the start, since I knew you were onto something. You just skulked around.” She laughed. “When you’re in over your head, silly girl, ask for help. *Warn* someone.”

Saffra slumped into the ground, fighting the nausea in her stomach.

Lailah was right. Why had she been so stupid?

Then a voice that didn’t belong cut through the air, startling all four of them.

“For the record, she did warn someone.”

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8

HOPE

Saffra's gaze snapped in the direction of the voice, like everyone's did.

Lailah in particular had drawn her daggers and dropped into a combat position in the time it took Saffra to blink. She had suspected the woman had been faking her rank, and that speed confirmed it. The movement had been unnaturally fluid, showcasing the sort of grace she had only ever seen on high-rank adventurers.

There was a demon standing a half-dozen feet away. She wore plain black robes and held a gnarled staff of gray wood. Her hood was thrown back, revealing a seemingly young face wearing such a contemptuously bored expression—red eyes flat and uninterested, mouth downturned the slightest amount—that Saffra felt like the woman was demeaning them with her presence alone.

Despite the woman's apparent youth, Saffra had the instant impression she was in the presence of someone—*something*—old and dangerous. Her gut instincts were usually right.

Distinct as the woman's appearance was, Saffra recognized instantly that it was the same demon she'd spoken to briefly, to warn against teaming with Lailah. What was she doing here? It was such a confusing turn of events that Saffra couldn't even feel relief.

Lailah slowly straightened out, clearly on edge. So was Dominic, hand on the hilt of his axe as he watched the development carefully.

Allen started squirming and trying to call something through his gag. Dominic looked over and almost seemed like he was going to kick the boy,

but he refrained, turning to eye the newcomer instead.

What had her name been?

"Vivi, right?" Lailah asked. "Didn't expect to run into you out here."

"[Invisibility] is a tier-seven spell," Dominic said, his tone clipped.

Lailah shot a glare at her partner. "It wasn't [Invisibility]. [Glamour], or something like that."

The demon didn't react. Saffra found herself captured by the utter lack of worry in her eyes. And the slight disdain leaking through, which probably spoke of *complete and utter* disdain, considering how little her face seemed to emote.

Saffra remembered being unnerved in her conversation with the woman, even if she'd never felt *worried*. She'd known the demon was dangerous, but not dangerous in a bad way. Not like Lailah, despite being ten times as suspicious on the surface.

But [Invisibility]? It was indeed a tier-seven spell, something only mages averaging level seven hundred could cast. Saffra would know. She was Institute-educated, if only partially.

Level seven hundred. Solidly into mithril-rank. Which meant, if that were true, the demon could handle two lower-end golds… probably. Mages weren't great duelists. Especially not two-on-one. And that assumed her opponents were, in fact, low golds and not higher.

On top of that, it might not have been [Invisibility], but rather some other spell or skill. Lailah's suggestion of a [Glamour] or [Illusion] wasn't far-fetched.

The demon briefly ignored the two adults as her red eyes slid over to Saffra. "I apologize for the delay. I came and watched at the start, but nothing was happening, so I returned to town."

She… came and watched? How? Saffra hadn't sensed anyone following them, and obviously Lailah and Dominic hadn't either. That definitely implied an [Invisibility] or equally strong stealth spell.

And how had she known to return, if she'd gone back to town? [Farsight]? That was high-level magic too, though not as high as [Invisibility].

It probably ought to be disturbing, knowing someone had been spying on her, but Saffra was only now feeling the barest tinges of hope.

She stamped down on the feeling. She'd already had one miracle in her lifetime, which most people never experienced. Was she really about to get

a second? She didn’t dare let herself believe.

Still, at the demon’s words, the surge of repressed hope made her eyes start watering. She hunched forward, staring at the ground so she didn’t lose her composure entirely.

The demon grew agitated by the action, for some reason. Her red eyes locked on Lailah, and Saffra swore she could feel the air thicken, like it was responding to the woman’s anger.

“Why?” the demon demanded.

Lailah seemed to debate the pros and cons of trying to talk her way out of the situation. A few seconds passed, and she shrugged. Tossed her green hair back and spun her daggers.

“Pays well. Nothing more, nothing less. Have to make ends meet, don’t I?” She sighed, as if exhausted by her own argument. “Let’s get this over with. You clearly don’t know who you’re up against.”

And despite the impression that this demon mage was competent, possibly even mithril-rank, something cold gripped Saffra.

Because she wasn’t sure her savior would win. Had Saffra lured someone to her death? And worse, an apparently good person, willing to risk herself for a stranger? There had been no obligation to follow them into the forest. She had come out of a desire to help. Those sorts of people were rare.

Daggers drawn, Lailah dashed forward faster than Saffra could perceive, practically [Blinking] in front of the demon mage. Black metal blades scraped against a prismatic shield—and were repulsed, throwing Lailah back.

At the same instant, a lazy flick of Vivi’s wrist had a blast of air slamming into Dominic, who had charged at the same instant, axe raised. He went careening head over heels, throwing up clumps of dirt and grass, cracking a felled log as he tumbled. He staggered to his feet, seeming uninjured, but was clearly startled by the strength of the attack.

It made Vivi’s two opponents reevaluate her.

“Not a pushover, are you?” Lailah asked. “Damn. Was kind of hoping.” Her jaw worked left and right. Vivi didn’t seem eager to retaliate, but her expression looked cold enough to freeze over the Ashen Hierophant’s lair. “Sure we can’t work something out? Cut you in, maybe?”

The demon’s head tilted, and something stuck in Saffra’s throat despite all logic.

She wouldn't agree to that, would she?

But Saffra had faced more than one betrayal. Maybe the demon *was* considering the offer. While she had blocked their first coordinated attack, their speed had been incredible. *Are these two even golds? Or were they faking from an even higher rank than I thought? Are they mithril just like she is?*

With that sort of realization, Saffra wouldn't even blame the demon for accepting the offer. Better to come out with her own life. They were strangers; they owed each other nothing.

"I won't kill you two," the demon said flatly. "But I *will* enjoy this."

Another contemptuous wave of her staff resulted in a deafening *boom* that had Dominic crashing through trees and foliage, disappearing into the forest. One second the man was standing there, the next, a hole had been punched through the forest, Dominic a sudden projectile.

What?

What spell was *that? And how can she cast it so fast?*

The weakness of mages was the build-up required for their more powerful spells. Hence why they weren't effective duelists.

And yet…

Lailah looked at the destruction caused by her teammate pulverizing a trail through the forest, her face going pale. Facing Vivi, her eyes sharpened.

"Huh. Guess I have to take this seriously."

Saffra wasn't sure how much more her heart could take. Her appraisal of the situation had changed too many times back and forth. The resolve in Lailah's voice, despite seeing that ridiculous spell, once more created terror in Saffra. Lailah still thought she had a chance.

While the woman was wearing a silver badge, she obviously wasn't one… nor a gold, at this point. Mithril? The higher end of that power bracket, even? Beyond? Surely not. Orichalcums were adventurers known through the kingdom, second only to the extremely rare Titled.

Could Saffra really expect a random adventurer to win against two mithrils?

Saffra couldn't even perceive what happened a split-second later. One moment Lailah's figure flickered, the next she was lying in a freshly created crater a dozen feet forward, crushed down by some enormous force. There

had been… some sort of exchange, she intuited. She just hadn't been able to see it.

"You aren't the weakest," Vivi said, in what was maybe a compliment despite the condescension in her voice. "The spell resisted for a second. That makes me even more disgusted. You're strong enough to do what you want. Why this?"

Lailah laughed, but it wasn't pleasant. Her façade had dropped. "Don't look down on me, you bitch." She struggled onto her knees and forearms, resisting the force. "What… the hell are you?" She grimaced, buckling and flattening out once again. "Where did you even come from?" she groaned.

The demon's eyes were cold. Her staff dropped, dispelling the force. Lailah didn't waste the opportunity. She was on her feet and in front of the demon in an instant, and she—

A cracking like a whip, and an explosion of air.

Lailah was gone. She'd been sent tearing through the forest like her partner earlier. Slammed into by some enormous kinetic force.

The warrior of the party returned a moment later, bloodied and bruised, yet as grim-faced as always. Lightning crackled around his raised axe as he bore down on the demon with a skill, obviously one of his stronger ones. Each step seemed to cross twice the distance it should. The ground shook as he charged.

Worry flashed through Saffra. He wasn't as fast as Lailah, but he was far more durable. *Maybe he'll actually be able to—*

Once more, he was swatted away as if by the hand of a vengeful god.

This… isn't even a fight, Saffra realized.

These had to be mithril ranks. How were they being *toyed with?*

"Now you're running?" Vivi asked, red eyes snapping in a seemingly random direction as she watched something deep in the forest that Saffra couldn't see. "Have some shame."

Something happened. Saffra couldn't describe what. She didn't have the magical foundation to interpret what her senses told her. The demon was just gone. But not with the signature of an [Invisibility] spell, or with overwhelming physical speed.

…spatial warping? A guess based on contextual evidence, not an understanding of what had happened on a magical level.

More than anything she'd seen so far, that stunned her.

[Blink]?

Teleportation spells, even the weakest and shortest-range ones, were higher-tier than [Invisibility]. Ninth, she believed?

This woman. She was *at least* orichalcum-rank.

And she'd cast it without Saffra hearing an invocation or seeing a spellcircle summoned. Within a second.

Just what was this monster?

Could even Saffra's best instructors at the Institute cast super-high-tier magic this fluidly? Could the headmaster, or one of the archmages? The Institute featured some of the world's best mages, orichalcum and above, even if they weren't adventurers and had never passed the qualification exams.

The demon popped back into existence a moment later, staff pointed at a floating Lailah. With a jerk of her wrist and a slam downward, the woman impacted the forest floor and spawned another small crater.

Then another spell, cast without invocation or circle, and roots erupted from the ground and wrapped around the rogue, holding her in place.

Pop. The demon was gone yet again. She reappeared with a second prisoner in tow. Dominic received the same treatment.

Vivi gazed down at them for a moment. She nodded in apparent satisfaction. Then turned to Saffra.

Saffra felt herself stiffen. Even if this woman was her savior, what she had seen had invoked an instinctual terror. The sort an ant felt when a bear came stomping through the forest, his path of destruction headed straight for it. This creature could kill her by accident, a tertiary side-effect of her laziest movements.

She crouched down next to Saffra.

"My apologies," she said softly. "I should have trusted your instincts."

A vague gesture had the cloth stuffed in Saffra's mouth cut in half and thrown aside. The same with her other bindings, even the metal collar around her neck. She spat the taste of the rag out of her mouth while scooting instinctively away from the demon.

The demon raised her hands, signaling she wasn't a threat, and Saffra instantly felt like dirt.

She did the mature thing and burst into tears.

She really hated herself for that. But the events of the past ten minutes —had it even been that long?—were too overwhelming. The horror, the hope, the relief in rapid succession.

The concern on the demon’s face added another layer: hilarity. Why would she care that Saffra was crying? It was way too humanizing an expression for someone who had torn through a pair of mithril ranks like paper.

She wiped the tears away, trying to control herself, but ultimately failed. The demon reached out again, the movement unsure, but Saffra scooted away a second time, shaking her head.

The demon hesitated, then gave up and went to free Allen.

Saffra tucked her head between her knees and berated herself until she wasn’t bawling like a child anymore.

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9

SECURE

Taking care of the two pieces of scum had been easy enough, but the aftermath was harder.

Vivi wasn't good with people. She wasn't the *worst*, but it had never been her strong suit. Neither was dealing with the aftermath of a traumatizing situation.

Allen handled it better than Saffra. He was a grown adult, if a young one. And even he was more than a little rattled. After Vivi helped him to his feet, he smoothed his robes out ten or twelve more times than necessary.

He crouched down next to Saffra and tried to reassure her, with slightly more success than Vivi had managed. She tried not to let it affect her how the girl didn't flinch away from him like she had from Vivi herself.

In the meantime, she cast a restraining spell better suited for transportation. White bands of light wrapped around her two prisoners' arms, legs, and torsos—and their mouths. She wasn't sure what she would do if they said the wrong thing right now. Her temper was beyond frayed. She'd never been so disgusted in her life.

This was the first time that having so much power at her fingertips made her uneasy rather than filled her with awe. She'd been quick to start throwing the man and woman around. The difference between them was so great that she could have ended the conflict without violence, but she'd chosen to hurt them instead. What did that say about her?

Another application of [Greater Telekinesis] later, two bodies were floating in front of her staff.

“We should return to the city,” Vivi said. “Hand them in to the guard. You two weren’t hurt, right?”

Allen checked himself over, then looked at Saffra. Saffra didn’t look at him; she stared at the ground and silently shook her head. Another surge of anger and frustration filled Vivi, though it didn’t touch her face. The poor girl hadn’t deserved any of this.

This event had been a wake-up call. She might have found herself transported into a new world, but it was a ‘fantasy world’ only in the sense of the environment and a few fundamental rules of nature. People were still people. Some were good, some were bad, and some were… worse than bad.

“Let’s go, then,” Vivi said.

She could teleport their entire party back if she pleased, but she still wanted to lie low, regardless of how unlikely that was becoming. More importantly, the two victims needed a chance to gather their thoughts. They weren’t far from Prismarche’s walls; the walk would do them good.

She floated the two prisoners ahead, bound and gagged by magic. A number of monsters contested their progress, but she was in no mood to play around, so they died the instant they appeared.

Saffra rallied throughout the walk, to Vivi’s relief, the girl’s shoulders squaring and chin raising in that cutely arrogant way Vivi had first seen in the Adventurer’s Guild. But even she could tell it was feigned.

Being in a headspace to even fake composure was an improvement from the way she’d crumpled into herself earlier. Vivi’s grip tightened around her staff, remembering that sight.

The two hours after arriving back to Prismarche were a chore. The gate guards contested their entry, which was reasonable for Vivi having taken two prisoners; she explained the situation. They were brought to the guardhouse; she explained the situation. She escorted the growing party to the holding cells; she explained the situation yet again to yet more people.

Her irritation had likely started to show, because Allen took over. Though he was her junior, he understood the system better than she did. He was better suited to dealing with the details.

The higher-ups that were dragged in to deal with the criminals—the criminals who were still floating in the air, gagged and restrained by bindings of glowing white light—were extremely interested in Vivi’s involvement. Or rather, who she was, why she’d helped, and what rank she was. Not that she gave answers to the first or third question. They seemed

more interested in her than the matter at hand, which rapidly agitated her, and she hadn't been in a good mood to begin with.

Thankfully, the Guard Captain—since this was a significant-enough event to call the highest-ranked officer in the city to the scene—also sensed her growing annoyance and called off the scrutiny.

"You've done our city a great service, Lady Adventurer," the regal-looking man, who was probably a nobleman of some flavor, said, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Soren, she thought he'd been introduced as? A lot of different names had been thrown at her throughout this debacle. "I thank you personally for rescuing two of our own and securing such detestable criminals."

Vivi eyed him. The words seemed earnest despite the fanfare. "I've said what I need to. Make sure they're both taken care of." She waved at Allen and Saffra to indicate who she meant. "I'll be going now."

No one stopped her. Though the guards posted at the door shot sharp looks at the Guard Captain, who inclined his head in permission.

Out under the open sky, Vivi took a calming breath. She walked around the nearest corner, checked for anyone watching, then wrapped herself in [Invisibility], [Blinked] into the sky, and [Blinked] several more times.

She set down onto the roof of the Adventurer's Guild. Once she was seated, she tucked her chin onto her knees and finally had a chance to ruminate over the situation.

There was a lot she could have done better. And a lot she *wished* she had done better. Namely her slow response.

After an hour of nothing happening with Lailah and her team, she had shrugged and headed back to town. She hadn't abandoned the possibility that something might go wrong, because, despite initially dismissing Saffra's paranoia and returning to Prismarche, Vivi had nevertheless continued casting [Farsight] spells to check in. But when the situation had devolved and she realized with a shock that she *was* needed, she hadn't been able to teleport there instantly.

Her supreme magical might wasn't all that supreme, not in the sense she was omnipotent. She had limitations—plenty of them. She could repeatedly cast [Blink] to cover enormous distances, but first she needed to be aware of the problem, and second, rapid movement wasn't instant. It had taken time. Not much, but enough.

It was a strange mix of emotions she felt. The unexpected part was relief, and she didn't mean relief for having saved Allen and Saffra. Thus far, she had felt a sort of… surreal detachment experiencing this new life. How could she not? It was absurd what had happened. The generous way everyone had treated her so far had reinforced that feeling: that it was all a fantasy.

This event had grounded her in a way few things could have. No, she hadn't arrived in an idealized world where nothing went wrong. A teenager and a young man had likely been traumatized by her slow reaction. She had possessed enough information and reasonable suspicion that she could have prevented the events before they'd escalated, yet today had turned out as it had. And she was responsible.

Vivi wasn't used to responsibility. She was all but a shut-in. She played video games most of the day every day, eking out a living through the gaming videos she posted online—since a small contingent of people were interested in the musings, advice, and commentary of the highest-ranked player of one of the world's most popular games, no matter how uncharismatically delivered.

Even that level of attention had been uncomfortable for her. She'd released videos only often enough to make payments on her one-bedroom apartment.

It was no surprise that in the first important event of her new life, she'd messed up.

She sighed and collapsed backward, staring at the sky. The shroud of [Invisibility] was strangely comforting. It might be her favorite spell. There had been a lot of times she'd wished she could disappear, and now she could.

An hour passed as she festered. A cloud hung over her. She wasn't the sort to stew forever though. Eventually, she heaved out another huge sigh, sat up, and rubbed her sore neck. Apparently stats didn't save a person from what made them human.

…or demon?

She slid down the roof and landed in front of the Adventurer's Guild.

By divine timing, a teenage catgirl was stalking out the front door at that very moment. She didn't see Vivi, on account of [Invisibility].

Vivi watched her go, wondering if she should say something, but decided against it. Better if that poor girl forgot the whole ordeal.

Even if Vivi had mishandled everything, the worst-case scenario had been avoided. She tried not to think about what the ‘worst case’ would have been. She didn’t know who those two were, and honestly preferred not to.

She swerved into an alleyway, checked for spectators, and dispelled [Invisibility]. That done, she walked into the Adventurer’s Guild.

To her dismay, the Guildmaster and the Guard Captain—accompanied by another guardsman—were inside, speaking with each other. Their eyes locked on Vivi the moment she walked through.

She suppressed her annoyance and approached them herself, since it was obvious she would be flagged down if she didn’t. Surprising herself, she was the one to open the conversation. “The girl. Where is she going?”

Saffra should be resting, even if she wasn’t hurt. Why is she stalking straight back out into the city?

Did she have family she was returning to? Somehow, Vivi doubted it. She had the impression Saffra was on her own. Not least because: who would let their young teenage daughter fight monsters for a living?

She supposed she didn’t know much about Saffra’s circumstances, and the girl could be heading off anywhere, but Vivi asked the question anyway.

The Guard Captain’s smile didn’t falter, handling her demanding tone with grace—a quality she was quickly associating with him. She found herself annoyed for some reason. His friendliness reminded her of Lailah.

Maybe it wasn’t fair to compare any friendly person to that woman. Vivi had gotten unlucky, somehow bumping into her as one of the first people she’d met in this world.

“We insisted she stay and rest, but she insisted otherwise, and it would be inappropriate to detain her even for her own wellbeing,” Guard Captain Soren said. "She has committed no crimes and is in command of her own decisions."

“Why did she insist? Where is she going?” Vivi asked.

“Something about… looking for a cat?” He seemed confused.

Vivi paused. *A cat?*

She put two and two together. The first time Vivi had met Saffra, she had been handing out posters for a missing cat. She had quested off into the city to keep working on that previous goal of hers. Maybe she’d wanted to return to the familiar mission for peace of mind?

Despite what Saffra had been through, her first instinct was to go and help someone else.

Vivi was immediately seething. It surprised her how quickly her temper returned. Both the Guildmaster and the Guard Captain took a step back.

“I see,” Vivi said tightly, and spun on a heel. She started walking away, though she didn’t even know what she was heading out to do.

“Lady Adventurer,” the Guard Captain said. “There truly are some things we must discuss.”

She contemplated ignoring him, but eventually decided she shouldn’t. She turned and glared at him, but he wasn’t dissuaded by her expression. He inclined his head in half apology.

His continued congeniality forced Vivi to take a breath, especially since his regalia and attitude suggested he was a particularly-high-ranking individual. Maybe he was conceding his station, somewhat, being so friendly and yielding to an unknown adventurer.

She walked back up to him and the Guildmaster. “What?” she asked.

The Guard Captain’s expression was slightly strained as he smiled at her, so Vivi took a moment and forced herself to relax.

“And thank you for your help, Guard Captain,” she continued.

His tension eased. “Of course, Lady Adventurer. The least I could do in reciprocation for your valiant deeds.”

She kept a straight face and didn’t respond. The formal talk was… amusing. But probably expected from high stations in this world.

He cleared his throat. “We’ve determined the identities of the two individuals,” the Guard Captain said. “Meredith Hayes and Bennet Fisher.” He paused as if waiting for Vivi’s reaction, seeming equal parts disappointed and intrigued when her face didn’t so much as twitch. “Evaluated both at mithril, and long-standing criminals with significant bounties. Members of Morningstar. The Kingdoms have been looking for them for a while.”

Interesting. She didn’t know what Morningstar was, and considered asking, but decided against it. For her own peace of mind, she didn’t want to know what would have happened if she hadn’t come to help Saffra and Allen.

“Meaning, we might struggle to contain them,” the Guard Captain added, maybe expecting her to have understood that implication.

She stiffened. “What? Why?”

“Why?” He raised his eyebrows, but smoothed his face out shortly. “We have dedicated cells for troublesome individuals, certainly, but mithril

ranks, much less these two, are…”

“Wily,” the Guildmaster supplied, his gruff voice interjecting for the first time.

“Wily. Indeed. One can never know what a mithril-rank might have in reserve.”

A cold feeling filled Vivi. If the incompetent city officials wound up letting those two get away—

“Come,” Vivi demanded, grabbing the Guard Captain’s arm.

A [Farsight] spell and a few [Blinks] later, they appeared outside the watchtower built into the city’s perimeter. “Go. Lead,” she ordered, her attempts at an amiable temperament disappearing.

The Captain was quick to adapt, if nothing else. He oriented himself faster than Vivi would have at the sudden teleportation.

He led her to the holding cells where the two prisoners were being kept.

The reason she’d panicked was because she thought they might have somehow escaped even in the limited time she’d been gone. But no, they were there. Both sitting on the stone floor, leaning against the wall, expressions darkening the second their eyes met hers.

Vivi ignored them and inspected the cells. She felt magic radiating from their shackles and the metal bars. The enchantments layered into the cells were far from insignificant.

She had acted rashly. The local watch had things in hand. She doubted these two could escape.

But the Guard Captain had broached the possibility, so she raised her staff and cast:

“[Martial Bind].”

“[Aether Sink].”

“[Fetters of Reflex].”

Three high-level spells that drastically reduced all of their key stats for the next twenty-four hours. It wasn’t a universal solution. The Guard Captain’s point had been that when it came to adventurers of sufficient level, keeping them in place could be dicey in the best of cases—who knew what skill or item they might have in reserve?

Cutting their stats down to nearly the double digits was a good starting point though.

To be safe, Vivi also renewed her spatial tracking spell. That, at least, wouldn’t be removed. If they did flee, she would hunt them down herself.

And this time, maybe she wouldn’t let them live.

She swatted that idea away a moment later. She wouldn’t become some vigilante killer. That was a dangerous slope to start sliding down as some random girl suddenly given immense power.

“Those spells will last a day. Anyone could fight them and win now.” She waved a hand. “Decide what else you need to keep them secure, and if I can help, I will.”

Her attention was briefly caught by the runes engraved around the prison cell. She traced one with her finger, surprised by how easily she recognized the meaning of each arcane symbol.

“And these are nearly decayed. I know some enchanting. I’ll renew and improve them where I can.”

She had no intentions of letting those two go free.

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10

GUARD CAPTAIN

After everything had been taken care of, the Guard Captain turned to her and said, “While I appreciate the help, Lady Adventurer, I must protest your breach of etiquette earlier.”

Vivi blinked at him. His cool gray eyes met hers, and they appeared less understanding than they had earlier.

“By that, I mean your magical assault on my person,” he clarified. “One cannot go around seizing and teleporting city officials. It could easily be misconstrued as an attack. Thankfully, the guardsman accompanying me is a more discerning sort, but had it been another, we might have found ourselves in an… unfortunate situation.”

Internally, Vivi felt herself flush. She had already suspected that she was breaking decorum with how casually she spoke to this man, but he was right: the [Blink], especially, had been going too far. Teleporting people without their permission was likely defined as ‘magical assault’ by whatever their legal system was.

“My apologies.” That her voice remained steady pleased her. She couldn’t have managed that in her Earth body. “Your words concerned me, so I rushed to ensure the two prisoners were secure.”

“I intuited as much. Nevertheless, I request more discretion and forethought in the future.” When Vivi nodded, he did so as well, moving past the bit of awkwardness. “Now, if you could kindly return us to the Adventurer’s Guild? We have business remaining with Guildmaster Flint.” He extended a gloved hand, giving her implied permission to teleport them.

Vivi laid her own atop it, then used the [Farsight] and [Blink] combination to arrive at her desired location: the alleyway to the right of the Guild.

“Tier-nine magic, no?” Guard Captain Soren asked with apparent casualness. But even Vivi could tell it was feigned. She chose not to respond.

They walked into the Guild and met with the Guildmaster, who was trying to calm an agitated-looking guardsman. No doubt agitated because his superior had been kidnapped a few minutes prior. Vivi internally flushed a second time at the reminder.

Various other adventurers watched them as they walked in, some subtly and some not so much. Vivi supposed she’d blown her cover to the whole guildhall, teleporting the Guard Captain away from right in the middle of the building. She had really acted rashly.

“No need for concern,” the Guard Captain told his subordinate. “The lady of the hour was simply eager to ensure the prisoners were properly contained. She’s kindly offered to renew and improve the cell’s enchantments as well, though we’re waiting on a supply requisition.”

The guard eyed Vivi, but bowed toward the Guard Captain, who gave his own nod in response.

“Now, I admit requesting your help was one of the reasons I came seeking you, Lady Adventurer,” the Guard Captain said. “Magical experts are one of the more reliable methods for detaining criminals, and it isn’t every day mithril ranks need to be locked away on such short notice. To be frank, on-the-spot execution is usually where these cases start and end. Securing such powerful individuals is simply too dangerous for everyone involved. That said, having two living members of Morningstar in custody is no small boon. Perhaps we’ll finally find an opening into this organization. Interrogators and proper guards will be here shortly.”

Execution was the default approach? That was brutal… but after considering the situation, she couldn’t call it undeserved. Earth logic didn’t apply here. Criminals in her world couldn’t teleport out of their cells or use any of a thousand skills, items, or spells to complicate their detainment. Killing really might be the appropriate first step when it came to dangerous elements.

As for what ‘interrogators’ meant… she didn’t think too hard on it. She had already had a wake-up call that being dropped in a fantasy world didn’t

mean frolicking around in fields of flowers. She *hoped* the so-called good guys wouldn't resort to torture, but that happened even in her supposedly-more-humane world.

"In any case," the Guard Captain said, clapping. "That fulfills one of two goals! Now, the bounty. There was a rather significant one. Forty mithril apiece."

Vivi felt her eyebrows raise. Not *that* significant, seeing how an hour of work earlier had made a little over thirty.

She reminded herself that most people couldn't teleport around and instantly kill orichalcum-tier monsters. Even if she'd initially thought the Frostmaw Titans were merely on the high end of what career adventurers might manage. She had put together by now that her sense of scale was off. Probably because in context, Vivisari was a figure of myth. Frostmaw Titans had been decent hunting targets in the mid-game for *her*, which meant beyond endgame for regular people.

She didn't react to the announcement of the impressive sum, and the Guildmaster seemed mildly amused. He had been the one to hand off the payment for her loot haul earlier, so he knew that eighty mithril, while impressive to most adventurers, likely wasn't much to her.

"I see. You have it with you now?"

"It's being put together. Ready by morn at the latest. You'll be staying for the first day of the festival, I hope?"

Vivi nodded. But only the first. She had business in Meridian.

"Then, finally, there is the matter of credit," Guard Captain Soren said. "Such a meritorious act would provide significant advancement toward qualification for rank, but my conversation with the Guildmaster indicates you're new to the city. Ah, I misspoke. Apparently you visited around a century ago?" The sentence, which sounded strange to Vivi's ears, didn't make the man himself pause. More than one long-lived race populated this world, and they weren't rare. "More relevantly, you haven't registered with the Guild."

"I have not."

"Then I'd like to extend an offer. Feel free to refuse, naturally, but one good turn deserves another. I've spoken with the Guildmaster"—the short, strongly built man nodded when the Guard Captain gestured at him—"and he's authorized a gold-rank registration. Of course, that your skill far eclipses gold is without question, but even this is unconventional, deserved

or not. Consider it a sign of our thanks, to accelerate some of the bureaucratic necessities should you be interested in fostering a relationship with the Adventurer's Guild."

She didn't intend on climbing through the ranks of the Adventurer's Guild—why would she?—but assuming she wanted to keep an alternate identity, a quick jump to gold *would* be convenient.

And she did want to keep a backup identity. Openly announcing herself as Vivisari Vexaria everywhere she went would come with all sorts of troubles. Even when she eventually felt comfortable with the world and no longer wanted to hide who she was, having a fallback to avoid the scrutiny that came with being a figure of legend would be nice.

"The gesture is appreciated," she said.

He smiled and nodded. She was struck by how good-natured the Captain of the Guard seemed. Her thoughts went, again, to Lailah, and how Vivi had been convinced by that woman's charm, too. That experience had soured how quickly she would trust.

"Glad to hear, Lady Adventurer. I'll be taking my leave, then. My plate is beyond overfull. The festival alone is enough to cause a Captain of the Guard a headache to last a month, much less all of this unfortunate business. Do you need anything else of me?"

She shook her head.

"Then let me offer my thanks once more," he said, bowing deeply at the waist.

She returned it, though hesitantly, and since he didn't seem to find that odd, she guessed she'd done the right thing.

He strode out, his guardsman falling in step behind him.

Guildmaster Dougal Flint faced her next. His expression was considering, and he crossed his arms as he visibly mulled over his words.

"Same goes for me, for the record, but not for what you did to the Morningstars," he eventually said. "Shoving those two in a dark hole will be good for humanity, don't get me wrong, but that's not what I'm grateful for."

Vivi tilted her head.

"You've seen it yourself, I think. That girl, Saffra. She's one of the good ones. Been watching her since she came in a few months ago, had that look about her that said she might need help. Did fine though, I never had to step

in. Allen too. He’s a good one. The temple will have their own thanks to give for helping one of their own.”

Dougal rubbed his chin as he considered his words, seeming frustrated.

“Look,” he said. “I became Guildmaster for a reason. Most people working as adventurers, not everything’s going perfectly for them. There are easier, more comfortable ways to make a living. I could’a settled down, you know, I’m no pushover—most Guildmasters in the cities aren’t. We did our time, made our small fortunes almost dying. No. I became Guildmaster because I wanted to look out for the folk who needed lookin’ out for. I failed this time. Don’t know how I let those monsters walk around without noticing.”

His expression was deadly serious as he squarely met her eyes.

“You stepped in where I couldn’t. That’s how community ought to work, but it still stings a little, if I’m being pure honest. You ever need something, come ask. I’ll do what I can and then some.”

Vivi… wasn’t sure how to meet such sincerity. Especially when she was still blaming herself for how *poorly* things had gone. She didn’t deserve to be thanked like this. She disappointed herself when her only response was a nod.

The Guildmaster didn’t seem to mind. “Alright, now let’s get you registered.”

Twenty minutes later, she had a card identifying herself and a badge marking her as a gold-rank adventurer. She used the name ‘Vivienne’ instead of ‘Vivi.’ It seemed smart to separate herself from Vivisari, no matter how trivially.

The metal badge was engraved with a symbol of a staff, marking her as a generalist mage. There were a number of symbols to choose from, though, according to Dougal, most people requested one of the major five.

Soon enough, Vivi extricated herself from the clutches of the Guildmaster, not that he’d been trying to keep her around.

Finally free, she went through her usual routine: alleyway, [Invisibility], [Fly], [Blink].

Her conversation with the Guildmaster still churned inside her head. Particularly the part about Saffra. She’d seen the girl stalking out of the guild earlier and had decided to leave her alone. Saffra probably wanted to go through life and forget the events of today had ever happened.

Vivi would encourage that. Yet even the Guildmaster had mentioned how the girl seemed to be ‘one of the good ones.’ From what Vivi had seen, she was inclined to agree. Saffra had only joined Lailah because Allen had; she had wanted to look out for him. That had been made clear in the accounts of the events the guards had extracted. And despite that pure motive, things had nearly turned out in the worst way for her.

The girl had clearly been shaken. She’d plastered on a mask of bluster, trying to come off like she’d moved past it already, but even Vivi had seen through the act. Then, the catgirl had run off at the first opportunity to return to her previous quest: that missing-pet poster.

She could imagine how that task of Saffra’s had manifested. A dejected kid who’d recently lost their pet asking for help from the silver-badge adventurer—because the teenaged adventurer was more approachable than the adults. And Saffra hadn’t been able to deny them.

Maybe that was all fantasy, but it didn’t seem out of place for what Vivi knew of Saffra.

Vivi summoned the poster from her inventory and scanned it.

If there was something she could do to make the actual hero of this dreadful debacle feel better, she would do it. She would locate this missing pet and somehow orchestrate events so that Saffra was the one who tracked it down and assumed all credit. She deserved a win.

With these grand and mystical powers Vivi had been given, she had a cat to find.

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11

MISSING CAT

Vivi had fallen in love with Seven Cataclysms in part because of the spell diversity. The developers had tried to make magic feel real, a part of the world. The arsenal available to a high-level mage wasn't just fireballs and bolts of lightning, though the show-stopping offensive spells alone might have sold her on the game.

No, a mage had access to deeper and wider magic than that—as seen by her buffs and debuffs, invisibility, spatial warps, and even her tracking spell. All had been usable in the game, and often helpful in quests and combat.

There was even divination magic. The classic abilities, of course: [Detect Presence], [Detect Magic], [Detect Poison], and so on. But more interesting ones too: [Identify], for example, which described items more comprehensively than the built-in [Inspect], and [Farsight], which she'd made heavy use of.

For the most part, they were utility-based spells. Not a comprehensive branch of magic, and probably the one she was weakest in, since, speaking from a reasonable meta perspective, developers could hardly implement 'reading the future.'

Scrolling through the filtered list of spells, she found what she wanted nestled between [Locate Person] and [Locate Object].

[Locate Creature].

Unfortunately, the spell required something to anchor off. An article of clothing for a missing person, perhaps. For a pet: hair, a collar, something like that. While she was a powerful mage, she wasn't omnipotent. She

couldn’t will the location of the missing cat into existence with nothing to go off of.

After studying the instructions for how to cast the spell, noting the suggested spell circle, she nodded to herself and dispelled the skill screen. She opened her inventory and tapped the icon to summon the poster again.

Touching items wasn’t actually necessary to bring them out of inventory, but muscle memory was hard to shake. Seven Cataclysms hadn’t hooked into the brain so deeply it could read a person’s thoughts, which meant physical gestures had often been necessary. But the system in this new world *did* read people’s minds. Mental commands were often enough to perform a given task.

Which weirded her out when she thought about it—that something was reading her mind to fulfill her silent requests. She piled it atop the growing mountain of strangeness.

With poster in hand, she scanned the drawing of a dapper gentleman of a cat. The paper announced him as Monocle, the name no doubt inspired by the distinctive black-fur eye patch. A reward stood out in bold at the bottom: a full gold piece. She had a skewed sense of money, surely, but she expected that was quite a lot for a missing animal.

She didn’t have a great grasp on how technologically advanced this world was, and she doubted she could rely on her tentative understanding of Earth’s development as a parallel when magic suffused the world so thoroughly. But she didn’t think paper would be the cheapest thing to procure in large quantities in this time period. Creating posters to hang and pass around wasn’t something a commoner would normally bother with.

Thus, it didn’t surprise her when her quest took her to a wealthy-looking three-story manor in one of the better parts of Prismarche. Having flown over the city a few times, she knew where the Noble’s District was, but this was decidedly not that. A well-to-do merchant, perhaps, but not a family drowning in gold.

A servant received Vivi when she arrived at the door: a young woman in a maid’s outfit. She secretly admired the uniform since, aesthetically speaking, she had always loved maids and butlers. Her own assistant—personal assistants were an integrated feature of Seven Cataclysms—had been a butler.

Winston. She wondered whether he was alive. It had been a hundred years, so it wouldn’t be unreasonable to assume natural causes had claimed

him. But maybe not, if his high level had prolonged his lifespan.

After Vivi explained why she'd come, the maid escorted her to the sitting room. Ten minutes later, she met with the person responsible for the save-Monocle campaign. Vivi's earlier guess had been right: it was a young girl, around nine or ten, with brown hair and brown eyes. She looked hopeful as she walked into the room, earnestly blurting out, "You know divination magic?"

"I do," Vivi said, standing to meet her. "But I'll need something of his. His brush, if you have one. A toy. Hair would suffice but wouldn't be ideal. The more conceptually linked the item is, the better the results."

"Wow," Daisy breathed.

"Divination magic is unreliable in the best of circumstances, Miss Daisy," the maid said, obviously trying to moderate the young lady's expectations for her own sake. "Not that the help isn't deeply appreciated," she added gracefully, giving a curtsy toward Vivi.

"Are you from the Institute?" Daisy asked.

Vivi took a second to place the term. The Thaumaturgical Institute? It had been a fairly prominent organization in Seven Cataclysms, especially for mages, since it was the background location for a number of Class Quests.

Lore-wise, the academy served as a place of learning for magic users of all varieties—excluding those who drew their power from the divine, like priests. But all others, such as mages, druids, conjurers, necromancers, and so on, attended the Institute. She'd been there many times and had a strong mental image of the looming tower of white stone, with all its winding staircases, classrooms, and multi-storied libraries within.

"I've visited," Vivi said. "But I'm not a graduate, or officially associated."

Daisy seemed disappointed, but surprisingly for a ten-year-old, she had the grace to wipe the look away. Vivi wasn't so socially daft she couldn't read a child's expression. Apparently, an Institute education represented a badge of merit for mages in this world, and not having one meant the opposite.

"Um," Daisy said, remembering the thread of conversation, "a brush or toy? We didn't brush him much." She glanced at the maid, who nodded in confirmation. "There was a ball of yarn he liked though? He played with it every day. I could go find it."

“That would suffice.”

Vivi idled in the waiting room for a handful of minutes before Daisy and the maid returned with the ball of pale blue yarn. The thing was a shredded mess. Good. It seemed like a well-used toy of Monocle’s, an item that had become closely associated with him over the years.

“This will help?” Daisy asked hopefully.

“Perhaps,” Vivi said, already wincing at how she would need to fake a failure. The spell would almost certainly work, but she would have to claim that it hadn’t. She was orchestrating a sinister scheme: Saffra would be the hero of the day, not her.

She took the ball of yarn and set it on a side table. Her staff appeared with a *pop* of displaced air. Lowering the length of wood toward the item, she began to cast.

She considered whether to repress the vocal command and hide the spell circle, but ultimately saw no reason to. The glowing arcane diagram appeared in the air as she slowly pulled together the spell. Very slowly. Trying to seem less competent than she was, so Daisy wouldn’t be surprised when she failed.

The maid pulled a starry-eyed Daisy a few feet back, and Vivi glanced toward them, mildly offended at the implication that she might hurt someone with wayward magic. But she guessed she couldn’t blame the maid for being protective.

“[Locate Creature].”

There had been a chance the cat was dead. It might have escaped somehow, yes, but it also might have met some grisly fate that had been covered up by the parents or another party. So she suppressed a sigh of relief when images filled her head and confirmed that Monocle was alive.

As she had discovered earlier, even basic spells tended to be amplified when cast by her, no doubt thanks to the outrageous several-million points she had in the two primary magic stats. She could adjust the strength mentally if she focused, but in this instance she hadn’t. Divination magic was finicky, and she had wanted the best information she could get.

It turned out, the mythical Sorceress who had purged the world of seven earth-rending Cataclysms had more than enough magical strength to divine the location of a missing cat.

Images appeared in her head, snippets of Monocle jumping out an open window, being startled by some crashing noise out of vision, and bolting

over the low garden wall. He disappeared into the hectic mass of the city.

The visions settled on a rather bedraggled cat, not nearly as finely distinguished as in his poster, slouched in a dark alley somewhere. And not *somewhere*—a tickling in her brain had her eyes drifting in the direction automatically.

“Did it work?” Daisy asked.

Vivi braced herself for crushing the dreams sparkling in the eyes of a ten-year-old girl. “It did not. I’m not certain why. I apologize.”

The poor girl deflated so badly it looked like she might start crying. “Is… is there anything else you can do?”

Playing the villain, even if she wasn’t *actually* being a villain, was harder than she had thought it would be. Thankfully, the dismay didn’t reach her face. “I’m afraid not. I’ll keep an eye out, though.”

“I understand,” Daisy mumbled.

Vivi extracted herself from the scenario, feeling like dirt even if Daisy would be reunited with her beloved cat in an hour or two.

Now the trickier part: arranging Saffra’s rescue mission.

First, she wrapped herself in [Invisibility] the moment she escaped from potential curious eyes. Flying across the city, she followed the magical link pointing her to Monocle. Divination spells typically gave vague hints at best, but she had enough mana to raze a city, so Monocle’s presence was a blazing beacon to her senses.

She found the cat slumped in that alleyway she’d seen at the end of the divination. She dispelled her invisibility and stepped cautiously toward him. Sensing her, Monocle sprang to his feet, hissing and spitting with an arched back.

She paused as she considered what to do. *Should I just… kidnap him?* She hadn’t formulated a master plan. The extent was: find Monocle, get him in front of Saffra, and let her be hailed as Daisy’s hero. Seizing the poor creature with a [Telekinesis] spell felt rather mean though.

She cast [Calm] on him first, and his panic at some stranger invading his alleyway eased into him settling on his haunches and seeming wary.

Mentally, she checked on Saffra’s tracking spell. She wasn’t far, searching through the same wealthy section of the city Vivi had just come from. Not a bad idea, but somehow Monocle had ended up slinking around the slums. No wonder Saffra, or anyone else, was having little success finding him.

“Guess I don’t have any choice,” she sighed. “Sorry for this, Monocle.”

Two [Invisibilities], [Flies], and a [Telekinesis] later, she was escorting her prisoner across the city. As expected, the cat found the whole process more than a little disturbing. She cast [Calm] as needed, though it was a band-aid solution.

“Oh, it’s for your own good, stop complaining,” she said to the flailing animal, feeling guilty.

She flew until she found the red-haired catgirl prowling along, eyes swiveling left and right. She was stopping occasionally to show the missing cat poster to random passersby, who received her with varying levels of politeness, or not. Vivi almost set one of the rude ones on fire, but that probably would have been an overreaction. She still considered it.

The floating, invisible cat who was only being moderately assuaged by Vivi’s calming spells made it clear she needed to sort this situation out sooner than later. She set him down in the corner of a set of steps and layered one last [Calm] onto him before dispelling the invisibility and hovering away to see how the situation developed.

Saffra’s vigilant posture wasn’t for show. Her swiveling head and keen eyes landed on Monocle the moment she turned the corner and found the—perhaps more disturbed than was logically appropriate for the situation—cat. She froze, referenced the paper in hand, and hesitated.

For a second, Vivi feared she would dismiss the creature as some other stray. The difference between the cat in the poster and the cat in reality wasn’t small. Monocle had had a tough few weeks.

But she didn’t. Incredulity spread across her face. Monocle’s trademark black eye patch likely dispelled her doubts. Or maybe she was hoping for a win and seized it when it came.

Appeasing and securing the cat made for an ordeal that Vivi watched with amusement.

Forty-five stressful minutes later, Saffra had made her way across the city and arrived at Daisy’s house.

Daisy started howling the moment she laid eyes on the filthy cat—surprisingly, he wasn’t put off by the loud noises and sobbing girl; Monocle appeared quite happy to be scooped up and pampered.

Daisy made such a ruckus the lady of the house came down and checked on her, seeming surprised but pleased her daughter had reunited

with her pet, though the woman wrinkled her nose and made a clear allusion toward the maid to get it cleaned up posthaste.

Saffra all but glowed with happiness throughout, and even staunchly refused the reward of a full gold coin.

It was when Vivi was basking in satisfaction at a plan well executed that everything went wrong.

Daisy, clearing the last of her tears away and still petting Monocle despite the maid's tentative but increasingly desperate requests to have him bathed, asked Saffra, "Did the woman from earlier help?"

Saffra blinked, a cup of tea half-raised to her lips. "The woman?"

"The demon. With white hair. Vivi, I think she called herself?"

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12

PEACE DAY CELEBRATIONS

Vivi watched Saffra freeze. Daisy, being the ten-year-old girl she was, continued obliviously. “She cast a divination spell. Locate Creature? But she said it didn’t work. Do you know her?”

Saffra lowered her teacup onto her plate and set both gently on the table.

“She did, did she?” she asked slowly.

Daisy bobbed her head with total innocence, even as Vivi withered and died inside.

Why would Daisy think they knew each other? Sure, the timing may have seemed like a coincidence, but only that. With the hefty reward Daisy’s family had posted for such a simple task, the household had probably been receiving constant visitors. *Why bring* me *up?* Vivi thought with dismay.

Everything had almost gone perfectly. Only children could bulldoze through good intentions like this.

“The spell was really cool! I don’t get to see magic often, and hers seemed *super* strong,” the enthusiastic Daisy chirped, happily petting the exhausted-but-relieved Monocle. “I thought it would work,” she said, slumping inward at the memory. She perked up a second later. “But you found him! So you two don’t know each other?”

“I’ve seen her at the Guild,” Saffra said, her face blank. “But no, not really.”

“Oh. She seemed… nice, at least.”

The hesitation gave away Daisy's uncertainty, and even Saffra seemed amused by it.

"I think she *is* nice," Saffra said. After a moment in which she stared down at her tea, she murmured, "But… I found him hiding behind some steps. I don't see how she could have…" She shook her head. "Divination magic is unreliable, no matter who you are. It was just a coincidence." She nodded to herself, seeming to make up her mind. "I guess she read the poster I gave her and came to try to help."

"You've been passing those out?" Daisy exclaimed. Her face scrunched up and she burst into tears again, hugging Saffra fiercely, which Saffra seemed to be half-embarrassed and half-secretly-pleased by.

The maid watched the exchange fondly, though interjected at the next opportunity with another desperate request to get the filthy cat cleaned up.

After watching the interaction a little longer, Vivi realized it was kind of creepy of her to magically spy on other people. Now that her involvement in the situation had concluded, she departed.

Overall, the mission was a success. She wasn't sure how suspicious Saffra was, and would have preferred Daisy never brought her up, but Saffra hadn't seemed to assume the truth. Because there was a simple explanation for Vivi's visit: that she had stopped by because of the poster. It wasn't like Saffra's first thought would be to assume Vivi had orchestrated a rescue-mission-by-proxy.

The only loose thread was that Saffra knew Vivi was a powerful mage, so a [Locate Creature] spell failing might be suspect. But, as Saffra herself had said, divination magic was the least reliable of all branches, and mages had specialties. It was far from a stretch that even a powerful mage might fail a divination.

A clock tower chimed in the distance, and Vivi's eyes turned its way. Five o'clock. Evening had finally arrived and the festivities below were ramping up, the streets packed as nearly every citizen started to mingle throughout the city.

From high in the sky, she could see where the bulk of activity clustered. The market and the town square were busiest, with preparations underway

in the park—they were building a stage of some sort. *Probably for later in the celebrations?* The centennial Peace Day festival would last for seven days rather than the usual one, which meant a whole list of events.

Surprisingly, it had only been six hours since she'd arrived. It felt longer. A lot had happened.

She hadn't intended to get involved with Prismarche, especially not to this extent. She had wanted to look around and get her bearings before heading for Meridian. Now, she had terrorized a bank teller, dragged two prominent criminals into custody, and drawn the attention of the Guard Captain and the Guildmaster. And also saved a cat.

So much for keeping her head down. At least her true identity remained hidden. Only the bank teller had any idea she was Vivisari, and he had been *thoroughly* convinced to keep quiet about that fact.

There was one more task she needed to handle before she could set down in the streets and walk through the city as a normal person again. A short errand later, she'd confirmed the train schedule and that tickets could be bought as needed; she didn't need to book in advance. Her only real goal was getting to Meridian, so she was pleased she had made real progress toward that, no matter how minor. She would board in the morning, after she collected the bounty and reinforced the cell enchantments.

Somehow, she knew staying in Prismarche would only further entangle her in local events. She had found trouble even when she'd been anonymous. Now that the Guard Captain and Guildmaster knew her face and had marked her as a person of interest, more debacles would ensue. She needed to flee. Get to Meridian and check on her house and guild. Helping Saffra and Allen had been worth her time, obviously, but she had goals to work toward.

Prismarche's Peace Day celebrations were apparently something to behold, though, and they were going all out for the one-hundred-year anniversary. Vivi didn't consider herself a 'party girl,' but she wondered what lay in store. The next train didn't board until noon tomorrow anyway. She wasn't frivolously wasting time, unless she wanted to [Blink] or [Fly] her way to Meridian—and she didn't.

She wanted to experience this world and what it offered. There was no rush.

The Peace Day Festival really started to pick up when the sun edged over the horizon and the world washed orange. With the last of their daily duties completed, the citizens of Prismarche flooded the streets and shed any traces of restraint. People loved to celebrate, and there was no better opportunity than this: the day that marked a hundred years freed from the Cataclysms that had once ravaged the world.

Not that the newer generation understood firsthand what monstrosities used to crawl these lands. The Rampant Genesis of the Flesh-Weaver, the Crimson Blight brought by the Reaper of the Lost Harvest, or the Great Conflagrations called down by the Ashen Hierophant to scour entire cities.

The game had never shied away from displaying the Cataclysms in a gruesome light—the carnage left in their wake. Vivi shuddered to imagine how the inhabitants, translated into reality, remembered them. No wonder the populace revered the Party of Heroes even a century later. They had saved this world from incomprehensible terrors.

Vivi preferred huddling in a dark room with a blanket over her shoulders most nights, but being in this new body and this new world made her more comfortable with the unknown than usual. She outright enjoyed walking through the cheering crowds. Droplets of ale caught her cheek as men slammed tankards, cheering and singing while clutching each other by the shoulder, already so drunk they struggled to stand. She only felt slightly claustrophobic by the press of bodies. Emotion was infectious, and the only emotion around her was revelry thick as molasses.

Vivi could still get drunk, she discovered.

She didn’t go to parties often… or like, ever, in recent years… but the universal salve to awkwardness was alcohol, and she didn’t mind partaking when the opportunity called for it. It was hard to resist even if she wanted to, when everyone in sight had a cup in hand and the obvious glow of intoxication about them.

She didn’t overindulge, though. Only had a few. She ate a lot of street food—the fried balls of batter with gooey insides were as delicious as anything she’d ever tasted—and melted into the masses. She didn’t linger anywhere long or talk to anyone beyond frivolities; she didn’t belong here, not on any level big or small. She was a ghostly spectator.

Around ten at night, one of the truly extravagant displays began in the town square: a parade. Floats trundled through as people cheered from behind guardrails. To her interest, amusement, and horror, it was a

procession representing the Cataclysms. In order, from start to finish as Vivi remembered clearing them.

Leading the string of floats was a hunched-over lich jerkily lurching forward on a withered black staff. Actors in masks, warriors and rogues and mages, fended his minions off. He was the Umbral Regent, bringer of the Cataclysm of Eternal Twilight. Though not realistic to the campaigns Vivi remembered, the representation was clear.

Then came the second of the Cataclysms: the Crimson Blight wrought by the Reaper of the Lost Harvest. Plagues and starvation, led by a husk of a human in red robes. Also valiantly defeated.

The Cataclysm of the Hungry Deep. A kraken—the Maw of the Abyss—leading raiding parties of fish-like humanoids that emerged en masse from the ocean. The beast had terrorized the coasts and isles of this world since time immemorial.

Rampant Genesis. The Flesh-Weaver and his grotesque creations, haunting the otherwise-peaceful elven forests.

Sundered Earth. The Colossus, straightforward in raw destruction and claiming more lives than any besides the final Cataclysm.

Fractured Time and the Shattered Oracle, a cautionary tale for peering too deeply into the most profound and esoteric magics. The least destructive, but the most horrifying in many ways, trapping his victims for millennia in alcoves of stuttering time… among other terrible fates.

And lastly, The Ashen Hierophant, a twelve-foot-tall titan of black plate armor. He was the most accurately represented Monarch, maybe because Prismarche knew his presence intimately even after so many years. His fires had cleansed more lives than disease, age, and famine combined. Entire expanses of the continent had been laid to waste, scars lingering a century later.

It was strange to watch such monsters cheered and jeered at, with such a lack of grimness, but it solidified the idea that the Cataclysms were relics of the past. Few to none of the people here had any clue what those monsters had been like, so there was no solemnness or genuine relief. That was a good thing, she supposed.

Eventually, the parade wound down. The crowd drifted away to return to other festivities.

The next major event happened an hour later. Fireworks.

They were positioned right outside the city's walls so everyone could see them. People seemed fascinated, pointing with wide eyes and grinning at the display, but Vivi found herself disappointed. She had expected… more. The bursts of color were simply pitiful.

While technology had improved, the people of this world were still far behind her own. Fireworks were much more impressive after centuries of development, even if these people had magic on their side.

Caught up in the excited revelry, she decided to give the city of Prismarche a real show. Fireworks as *she* knew them. And perhaps amplified a few times over to impress.

She also wanted to experiment with her magical abilities. Casting system-recognized spells—the ones logged in her ability list that had carried over from Seven Cataclysms—was fascinating, but she knew instinctively she could make her own too. Seeing the paltry display of explosions and lights made up her mind. She would give Prismarche a spectacle befitting the circumstances.

She extricated herself from the crowd and found a secluded alleyway, then closed her eyes to delve into the memories of her new body.

Vivisari Vexaria was the world's preeminent power in sorcery. She was no god, but as far as magic went, she was the closest mortal to being one. And that wealth of knowledge lurked in Vivienne's head now.

Creating a new spell wasn't a simple task, even as an expert. But neither was it overly complicated, not for her. Bit by bit, an arcane circle formed in her mind. Her [Grand Fireworks] spell utilized two branches of magic: elemental and illusory. Mostly fake, with a dash of real. For the scale she wanted, if she used purely elemental magic, she might cause real harm.

As Prismarche's display came to an end, she finalized her creation. She drew mana from herself, shaped it, and incanted her first self-created spell.

"[Grand Fireworks]."

A trail of red light flew from her staff, joining the dwindling sparks of Prismarche's so-called 'grand finale'. The burning ember hung high above the center of the city for a long, suspended moment, all eyes drawn to its brilliant presence.

Then it exploded.

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13

PROPOSAL

Guard Captain Soren rubbed his forehead as he received the brief from the City Guard's highest-level magical consultant. Mithril-rank, and Institute-educated, Marcus was no neophyte mage and had a prestigious career ahead of him. Soren could trust what he said. Which was exactly the problem.

"It was mostly illusory," the boy was explaining. "If not, it would have shattered every glass pane in the city and deafened anyone below silver rank."

And wasn't that a sobering statement? Bronze ranks were hardly the most durable sort, but they were well above the typical civilian in constitution. A spell that could shatter the eardrums of an entire city, including the bulk of their lower-level adventurers, was terrifying to consider even in the abstract.

"What tier was it?"

"I could only speculate."

"Try."

The boy scratched the stubble on his chin as he debated internally. "Eleventh? Twelfth?" he finally settled on.

Soren sat back in his chair, stunned. Level 1000 marked the defining line for Titled. Eleventh-tier magic put the spellcaster above that by a hundred levels. Twelfth, by two hundred. Essentially a full rank.

"At least," Marcus added. "It might be higher. Maybe much higher. I simply can't make an accurate analysis. That level of spell is way beyond

me. I just know it’s something I’ve never seen before. Even my instructors couldn’t have managed it, barring *perhaps* one of the archmages.”

Somehow, Soren didn’t think Marcus had overestimated the spell. Soren hadn’t seen it himself, locked up in his office, but he’d heard it. Heavens above, he’d heard it. “So we have an unknown Titled in the city. A mage of at *least* Institute Archmage ability.”

Titled. It wasn’t a strictly accurate descriptor, since one’s Title required official acknowledgement from one of the Kingdoms—or from the elves, demons, or dwarves—but the term had become shorthand for ‘absurdly powerful individual.’

“Power,” Marcus corrected. “The power of an archmage. Not necessarily ability.”

Soren didn’t comment on the pedantry. “Should we be concerned?”

“I don’t believe so. The illusory aspect was intentional. He was… considerate. He wanted to impress but not cause damage. To add to the festival. A rogue element, but a friendly one, or at least one without malicious intent.”

He? It was only then that Soren realized he already had a suspect in mind. And it wasn’t a ‘he.’ An image of bored red eyes and a slight, condescending frown filled his thoughts.

Was it coincidence? Throwing around and detaining mithril ranks was impressive, but Prismarche had at least six orichalcums and a Titled inside its borders. The feat didn’t qualify as something that woman alone was capable of. She had just been in the right place at the right time to mete out justice.

That said, only one of those individuals was a mage, and not one who could have done this.

Soren rubbed his temples. “At least the city got a show out of it,” he said sardonically. “If we find… *him*,” he corrected at the last second, “we ought to thank him.”

“I’m not sure we should approach that person at all,” Marcus said bluntly. “Malicious intent or not, Titled are dangerous. Especially one who hasn’t announced himself.”

Soren grunted. He certainly wouldn’t offer disagreement there.

Saffra stared at the demon in the alleyway, staff raised to the sky, the aftermath of her spell still booming through the city.

It had been mere coincidence she'd spotted the long, sharp ears of the woman who'd helped her earlier—who she owed her life to. Saffra had been wandering the crowds, feeling satisfied from her successful mission, when Vivi's distinctive figure had pulled her gaze. She'd felt guilty stalking her around, but her curiosity had been piqued. Just who *was* this woman?

She'd clearly had a few drinks, so it was comically easy to follow her without being noticed. Why did the lack of alertness make Saffra feel so much more comfortable? Probably because someone who could let their guard down wasn't that bad of a person. It wasn't a trait purely reserved for scum to always be looking over one's shoulder, but it did trend that way.

So, Saffra had prowled after the demon mage.

Then… this had happened.

An explosion of branching, prismatic fire that engulfed the sky as far as the eye could see—whose thunder had grabbed her by the arms and shook her like a ragdoll. Cacophonous. Cataclysmic. She would have sworn that the heavens themselves had descended to demonstrate their might and wonder in awesome pageantry.

And the small demon mage in front of her had been the source.

Saffra's mistake was instinctively pulling together a defensive spell. She hadn't been able to help herself, not with the world ending right above her. She was paranoid and quick to throw up defensive magic. Could she be blamed? Those instincts kept her alive.

Sensing magic, the demon mage's attention had instantly snapped toward her, and thus caught her at the mouth of the alleyway. It all happened in a handful of seconds, too quickly for Saffra to retreat around the corner.

They held each other's gazes for a moment.

In some other circumstance, Saffra might have bolted. Run for her life. But despite how terrifying this woman was, something her instincts recognized, she herself had never been scared. Despite how the demon mage could slap mithril ranks around like low-bronze apprentices, Saffra knew this woman wasn't dangerous. Not in the way that mattered.

So, she stepped out around the alleyway's corner, put one hand on her hip while pointing with the other, and announced:

"I want you to teach me. I'm your apprentice now."

The words caught Saffra herself by surprise as much as they did the demon mage. They both took a moment to stare, stunned, at each other.

Saffra's cheeks heated up, but she was in bluster mode now. She took a stab in the dark and phrased her next sentence in an ambiguous enough manner she could deflect if needed. "I know about Daisy and her cat, by the way."

Vivi's eyes widened, and Saffra wondered if that meant what she thought it did. Though she didn't know what she thought herself. *Did she actually help with Monocle's rescue, somehow?* Saffra didn't see how that could be possible.

She had only said the words to throw the woman off, to be honest.

"I'm partially Institute-trained," Saffra announced as her credentials, realizing a second later maybe she shouldn't have, since expulsion suggested some condemning things about her. "I know a fifth-tier spell even though I'm level three hundred and eighty-five." She could likely pass the gold-rank exam; she had intended on taking the one coming up in two weeks. "I won't be a bother, and I can take care of myself. I've been living alone for years. I can cook, clean, run errands, take notes, and do anything else you might need of an apprentice."

Saffra was mortified. She didn't know why she was trying to convince the woman. She hadn't planned this. The words had simply cascaded out of her mouth, and now she was attempting to support them.

The woman stared at her, and Saffra felt the heat on her face intensify. At least the demon didn't outright laugh at her, which would have been deserved.

And really, even if an orichalcum rank—after the spell she'd just seen, she knew the woman was probably Titled, but she couldn't digest that reality and so she'd settled on the more-comfortable-yet-still-incredible orichalcum—was willing to apprentice some girl she didn't know, why would it be Saffra?

She really was talented, but not the sort of talented that would impress someone truly powerful. She really was Institute-educated, but she'd been expelled. The only aspect where she stood out, sadly, was the mundane one. She was much more independent than most thirteen-year-old girls. She had traveled across half the human kingdoms and knew what the world was like—intimately so.

Not to mention how rudely she'd gone about it. 'I'm your apprentice now'? That happened a lot, where she said things out of… not a defense mechanism, she refused to call it that, since she didn't *need* defense mechanisms.

She lifted her chin higher, readying herself for the obvious answer. Why was she so invested now, despite not having planned this and knowing what the woman's response would be?

"I doubt I'd make a good teacher," the demon woman mused. "And I'll be leaving the city tomorrow morning. Don't you have friends here, or teammates?"

The words were so unexpected Saffra almost failed to understand them. Because the mage's immediate response should have been something along the lines of 'is this a joke?' or 'you can't be serious,' even if she had been kind enough to not outright laugh at Saffra.

"Um. N-not really," she responded, caught off guard. "I don't really—" She cut off and corrected herself. "People don't make friends with me easily."

Which was their fault, obviously.

Even if she *did* have friends, she would be idiotic not to take an apprenticeship under a mage of this caliber. It might even be superior to an education at the Institute. And seeing how that door was closed to her, this might be her only remaining hope for growth as a mage.

Which, now that she thought about it, explained why she was so desperate. Nothing in existence could make her beg, but for a second she considered whether she should.

"What's the fifth-tier spell you know?" Vivi asked, again catching Saffra by surprise.

Saffra grew flustered. Tier five? To a mage of this woman's strength, that was nothing. Even the spells Vivi could cast *instantly* were stronger than that. [Farsight], tier six. [Invisibility], tier seven. [Blink], tier *nine*. And likely some form of [Greater Telekinesis], after she thought about that encounter in the Glade. All of them silently incanted and their spell signatures masked.

Never mind how this woman had lit up the entire sky with magical fireworks a minute earlier. What monstrous tier of magic had that been? Saffra's best spell would look like a tier-zero [Illuminate] in comparison.

The self-doubt didn’t show in her voice. She announced with total confidence, “[Fireball]. A fully fledged one, not some imitation. My specialty is elemental magic, and I know tier-four ice and fire spells too, despite not having reached level four hundred yet.”

“[Fireball]?” The demon considered this, then nodded. “I suppose my specialty is also war magic.”

Idly, she raised a hand, and Saffra felt magic fill the air. For the first time, she saw the woman cast without suppressing the visual indicators—which was something few mages could do anyway. A spell diagram etched itself into reality in glowing white symbols.

Circles described a spell’s function using the language of magic itself. They were disgustingly complex, and she doubted anyone truly understood every glyph and how they combined, even for basic spells. Spell circles weren’t even consistent between usages. Mostly the same, yes, but a painter couldn’t paint the same artwork twice, not identically, not down to the exact brush strokes.

One comparison her instructors had often used was that casting spells was like ‘writing poetry in a language you only half understood.’ But even with fake words, there was a sort of intuition, a feel for flow and rhythm, that made a good or bad mage.

Or another metaphor, equally preferred by the instructors: Magic was a wild beast, a half-tamed lion, and spell circles were the commands a mage barked at it. A good tamer was almost always obeyed, but that didn’t mean they understood how their words were being interpreted in the head of a wild beast.

Learning the fundamentals was important, but when it came down to it, magic was more art than science.

Saffra looked at Vivi’s spell circle. Spell circles had a certain flavor to them, a handwriting, a style. Lady Vivi’s was old. The design gave her the impression of something Saffra would find in a dusty scroll in the corner of the Institute’s sprawling library. Not *ancient*, but antiquated, something her grandmother’s grandmother’s grandmother might have cast.

But old didn’t mean poorly executed. Saffra wasn’t new to magic—she had developed the talent early, invoking her first spell at six years old. Seven years wasn’t much experience compared to some mages, especially elvish or demonic ones, but Saffra knew how to read and interpret magic.

She wasn’t surprised Lady Vivi’s spell was so perfectly executed as to be painful to look at, in that sort of way someone aspiring toward competency might look at a masterpiece and despair. First impressions of arcane diagrams were more like those gotten from a painting: there weren’t indicators that a painting was ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ not objective ones, but mastery was obvious at first glance no matter the style.

The spell activated. A truly staggering ball of fire spawned in the center of the alleyway—then disappeared before Saffra even had a chance to be horrified.

“[Dispel],” Vivi said, casually flicking her wrist.

Cast in an instant, not that Saffra could be surprised at this point.

She knew the demon hadn’t done any of that to show off. She’d cast ninth-tier magic in front of Saffra already. Obscenely complex ninth-tier magic too, since spatial magics were infamously unwieldy.

Vivi had simply been recalling what the spell [Fireball] was like. Reminiscing, perhaps. And maybe revealing the spell circle for Saffra’s own sake. But fifth-tier magic was so far behind this mage that it was probably *quaint* to her.

Saffra had been so fascinated by the display that she’d briefly forgotten what they’d been talking about.

“I expect I’ll be occupied with my own business, so I’m not sure how much time I could spare,” the woman said. “And I doubt I would make a good teacher. But I’m in need of an assistant, I suppose. A trustworthy one. The world has changed while I was… occupied for the past several decades. I believe you’re both a young woman worth training and someone I can trust. So if it’s your request, and if you understand those limitations, I would be inclined to accept. Are you sure it’s what you want?”

Saffra suspected the long, stunned silence, and her stutter, betrayed the aloofness she attempted with her response. “Y-yes. Of course.” She probably should say more, but she genuinely didn’t know what.

It didn’t make sense.

This orichalcum rank—quite likely higher—had said *yes*?

Why?!

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14

RIFT

Vivi hadn’t intended to pick up an apprentice. The buzz of alcohol wasn’t even to blame for her quick decision, like it had been with [Grand Fireworks].

Speaking of that—the spell had been spectacular. She had certainly accomplished her goal of putting on a show. Too much so. The resulting explosion had shocked even her. At least she hadn’t hurt anyone. As far as semi-drunken mistakes went, things could have gone worse.

She told Saffra to enjoy the festival and meet up with her in the Adventurer’s Guild in the morning. The prospect of apprenticeship warranted a longer conversation, but only after Vivi had her wits about her and time to think. Saffra still seemed shell-shocked that Vivi had accepted and had obeyed with surprisingly little protest. She’d asked no further questions, just shuffled off, too stunned to speak.

Vivi wasn’t sure whether she’d made the right decision. Her logic was sound. Having a pseudo-apprentice to answer questions while getting her bearings *would* be useful.

But more importantly, Saffra hadn’t had the easiest life. Anyone could see that. The presumable lack of parents, the attitude, how she was a fully fledged adventurer despite being somewhere around thirteen. And most relevantly of all, how she’d seen through those two monsters despite no one else in the Adventurer’s Guild having had a clue.

Despite her past, Saffra seemed to constantly be looking to help people. First Allen, then Daisy. So in return, of course Vivi would agree to teaching

her a few things. Vivi had made it clear she might not be a suitable teacher, and that this might not be a ‘full apprenticeship’ like what Saffra expected, but if Vivi could help the girl, she would.

She normally did her best to avoid responsibilities, but this was an extenuating circumstance. Saffra needed someone to look after her, make sure she didn’t run into another disaster like what had happened earlier today. Somehow, Vivi intuited it wasn’t the first horrible thing Saffra had seen, or the second.

Perhaps there was one last reason Vivi had agreed. She, too, had been on her own from an early age. Maybe she empathized with the girl’s situation.

She returned to the celebrations, though much of the revelry had drained from her. Having determined not to drink any more, she found herself slinking away to more private locations, namely a rooftop near where a band was playing, the noises booming off in all directions, magically amplified.

She was lying on the roof, tapping her foot with her eyes closed as she enjoyed the festival from the more comfortable safety of her secluded hiding spot, when she discovered that the night had one more surprise in store.

Crack.

Something shattered to her magical senses. Eyes snapping open, she scrambled to her feet. It invoked that kind of dawning horror a person might feel seeing a friend slip off a ledge and hear something of theirs go *crunch.* Something bad had happened. Something terrible. Ruinous.

Above, the starlit night sky had broken, like a pane of glass struck by a hammer. Black-and-violet fractures spread out like spiderwebs in all directions.

Vivi’s staff was already summoned and outstretched. She braced herself for what might happen, but…

That was it.

The festivities continued. Peace Day didn’t come to a burning, screeching halt. No one cried out or screamed. Indeed, she alone seemed to recognize what had happened.

It was magical in origin. The festivalgoers couldn’t see that the starry night had shattered into a million pieces. Could other mages? Surely the

higher-tier ones. There was no way what had happened had flown completely under the radar.

When she was certain the phenomenon had just been the metaphorical ice cracking and not the entire lake she was standing on about to collapse, she relaxed and studied the disaster's mana signature.

It was… dimensional in origin. If there was one branch of magic that even Vivisari was a beginner in—and yes she meant Vivisari, not her, Vivienne—it was dimensional magic. She had more experience meddling with even time, and only thanks to the campaigns involving the Shattered Oracle.

In fact, it was those very memories that the image above reminded her of: the Shattered Oracle's experiments, which had driven him mad and transformed him into a Cataclysm so many millennia ago. His tinkering with magics best left alone.

Except this was on a grander scale than even that. The shattering spanned the entirety of Prismarche. What had *happened?*

When she was certain reality wasn't about to collapse, she took a calming breath. It looked like the festival was over. For her, at least. The revelry continued below with no signs of stopping.

After a moment's consideration, she went to find the Guard Captain. That seemed like a logical first step. She had no idea how to go about evacuation if it were necessary, or what the standard procedure for a 'nascent calamity' was.

The guards at the nearest gatehouse were happy to point her his way. While she'd been under scrutiny earlier, she had captured two of the worst sorts of criminals, so she had the City Guard's respect.

The Guard Captain was in his office. He was too high up the hierarchy to be doing anything as mundane as patrolling, yet ironically not low enough he could be excused to enjoy the festival on a night as important as this.

He was already on his feet when a guard escorted her in. "Lady Adventurer," he said smoothly, but with obvious concern for her unexpected presence. "I'm afraid the supply requisition is still underway, but we should—"

"You haven't gotten a report?"

His brow furrowed. "For… the fireworks spell, I presume?"

She stared at him, then cleared her throat. “Not that. Who’s the highest-level mage in the city right now?”

He studied her for a moment, then his attention seemed to sharpen. He could sense that something was off. This was a man not unused to taking action, so while most people would have needed time to adjust to the scenario, he replied seamlessly, “There is an orichalcum rank, but we have no means of contacting him quickly, if this is urgent.”

She grimaced—mentally, at least. Her face remained serene as always. “Who *can* you contact, of a reasonable level?”

“The guard keeps a magical consultant on standby for major events such as today. Marcus Caldwick. Over level seven hundred, and Institute-educated, if that matters.”

“Seven hundred?” she asked, confused. “That’s it?”

His eyebrows shot to his hairline, and she dismissed the incoming exchange—his remark on how he would have thought mithril rank was quite impressive, or something along those lines—with a flick of her wrist. Yes, yes, her perspective was skewed. That didn’t matter right now. “Never mind. Lead me to him. Hopefully that’s enough.”

“For what, might I ask?”

Vivi looked up at the ceiling, through the layers of stone and toward the enormous mana currents lingering in the air. The anomaly was stable, so there didn’t seem to be a need for urgency, but neither was she going to dawdle considering the scale of what they were dealing with.

The Guard Captain followed her gaze, brow furrowing.

“There’s an anomaly,” Vivi explained. “From what I can tell, I’m the only one who can see it. I want another mage of reasonably high level to confirm.”

The Guard Captain opened his mouth, probably to seek further clarification, but when Vivi glanced at the ceiling again, he closed it. He nodded. “Please, follow me.”

A few minutes later, they were in a different office. Marcus stood at the unexpected intrusion of the Guard Captain.

“Ah,” the dark-haired boy said, seeming highly interested when he saw Vivi come in. “You must be the visiting mage Captain Soren mentioned. It’s nice to—”

“Can I teleport you both?” she interrupted.

“Er…” Marcus said, glancing at the Guard Captain.

“Yes,” the Guard Captain answered for him, and that was enough permission for Vivi.

A moment later, the fabric of space spat them out on a nearby section of the city’s wall.

“Was that a… a *multi-person* [Blink]?” Marcus asked incredulously. “Where was the spell circle? The invocation?” The dark-haired man spun around several times, trying to get his bearings.

“Focus, Marcus,” the Guard Captain said. “Questions later. Something important has happened.”

Marcus wasn’t nearly as much of a soldier as Soren, because he took a few moments to sort himself out. Eventually, he shook his head clear and asked, “What is it?”

She pointed at the sky.

Marcus followed her finger and squinted into the distance. A few seconds passed. “What, pray, am I looking for?”

She had hoped he would just see it. To her refined senses, the starry night had shattered and even now looked like a broken pane of glass. Was this high-enough-tier magic only *she* would be able to sense it? *That’ll complicate things*, Vivi thought.

“It looks like this,” she said, drawing Marcus’s attention.

She extruded mana into the air and manipulated it, imitating the currents she could see above—the echo of the lingering spell signature, or what part of it she could make out. She sucked the mana back into herself once she’d finished demonstrating.

He seemed fascinated by the display. “That’s an *incredible* level of control,” he told her. “And a *very* interesting pattern, I’ve never seen anything like it. So *dense*. How many simultaneous flows were you manipulating? And is there really something… like that… up there…?”

He trailed off, having studied the sky with Vivi’s rough model as a hint.

It was obvious when he finally spotted what she’d wanted him to. Confusion flickered across his face, head tilting. And then he *really* saw what the problem was, and he blanched. He stumbled backward, arms raising reflexively as if to defend himself.

“What is it?” the Guard Captain asked.

“W-what the hell *is* that?” Marcus stammered. “I—I can’t even—”

“What *is it?*” the Guard Captain demanded, all of his usual friendliness evaporated. It was an order from a superior to a soldier.

Marcus's spine straightened by the sheer command in the Captain's voice, and he turned to face Soren. He opened his mouth, about to answer—then closed it.

"I don't know," he said plainly. He looked at Vivi for help, almost pleadingly.

"Dimensional anomaly. I felt it the moment it happened. It was like the sky cracked." Or reality itself. That was why she had panicked, why a sense of wrongness had jolted through her. "It's been ten minutes or so."

Weirdly, Marcus's panic disappeared. He gave her an enormously dubious look. "*Dimensional?* That other dimensions exist is an *extremely* unlikely supposition, with no supporting evidence. Much less that magic as a fundamental force is even capable of interacting with such boundaries."

She stared at him. He shifted, growing embarrassed, but he didn't back down.

"That is nothing less than what most Institute grand magi would say." He looked up at the sky again and went pale immediately, his head hunching down and shoulders dropping in a flinch. "That said. If there *were* such a thing as a dimensional anomaly… my professional opinion is that its residual signature might, uh, look like that."

The Guard Captain wasn't interested in the theory. "How much danger is the city in?"

"I have no idea, sir."

"That isn't a helpful response, Marcus."

"It's stable," Vivi interjected. "I'm fairly certain the anomaly is repairing itself."

They both turned to her.

"How can you even *begin* deciphering that mess?" Marcus asked. "It's blinding."

Vivi paused. *Blinding? How so?* "It's definitely stable, and I can confirm that the cracks are healing."

"How much danger is the city in?" the Guard Captain repeated, but at her this time. "If you would be so kind as to help, Lady Adventurer."

She hesitated. "I think someone tried to open a gateway."

"A gateway?" the Captain asked.

"Someone or something tried to punch a hole through. They failed. All of that"—she gestured at the sky—"is someone trying to throw a rock through a window but without enough force. In fact, I think it would have

taken an order of magnitude more." She glanced at the center of the fracture. "It's definitely repairing. But slowly. It'll linger for months. Dimensional boundaries are stable and self-regulating? Interesting."

The Guard Captain didn't seem 'interested' in the event and what insights Vivi was gleaning about this unusual branch of magic. "The city is in no danger?" he asked to confirm.

"It's impossible to say. And also impossible to say what would happen if a gate *did* form." She shrugged. "I'm growing more certain by the moment that there's no active threat though."

"That's more than just about any mage in the kingdom could give," Marcus said, "assuming you haven't invented everything you've said to sound intelligent."

"Marcus," the Guard Captain reprimanded, surprised.

"I don't think she did, for the record," Marcus said. "It's just a bit… unbelievable. Who *are* you? With all due respect, Lady Adventurer."

Vivi eyed him and didn't answer. She turned to the Guard Captain. "I only came to make you aware of the situation. Do you have any means of contacting Meridian?"

"Meridian?"

"The Institute. You'll probably want to get the mages there to study it." She flicked her eyes up, attention lingering briefly. It really was fascinating, no matter how much it had panicked her at the start. "I'll get in contact myself, once I arrive in person."

"We have a scrying mirror," the Guard Captain said. "You're leaving the city soon?"

"Tomorrow morning."

The Guard Captain seemed to have mixed emotions on that revelation, but he didn't voice them. "I see. Could you help form the preliminary report with Marcus, for the Institute's perusal? You've done our city a great service for a second time, Lady Adventurer." He bowed deeply, catching her off guard.

She found herself miffed. It wasn't like she could say *no*, after being asked so politely.

What a headache, though. She had just wanted to enjoy the festival.

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15

APPRENTICESHIP

It was well past midnight when Vivi retired. Thanks to the festival, finding an inn with a free room turned out to be an ordeal, but at least the more expensive ones weren't fully booked—and she had enough coin to convince her way in.

She discovered the wonders of magic for a second time as she prepared for bed. Washing up and drying was as simple as casting a few spells. Her hair handled the magical wash remarkably well too, coming out straight and glossy without need for brushing. That alone made [Tidy] a contender for her second-favorite spell.

It even worked for brushing her teeth. She assumed. *Leaves my mouth feeling clean, anyway. Think I'd rather find actual toothpaste though. If this world even* has *toothpaste*.

After the events of the day, she was quick to pass out. She'd been feeling the tug of tiredness for hours now, and while it was easier to ignore in this body than her previous, she suspected that despite all her levels she would want sleep every night. Levels didn't immunize her against basic needs, though if she needed to, she could probably ignore them for quite a while.

Having horns thankfully didn't mess with her sleep. If she had preferred sleeping on her side or stomach, it might have been a rather annoying shift in her physiology. But as it was, she slept on her back, so the protrusions didn't bother her.

A magical timepiece woke her on the nine o’clock bell. She groggily rolled around and almost fell back asleep before forcing herself to her feet with disheveled hair, which she cured with another [Tidy]. Yes, that spell was definitely one of her favorites.

She had two errands to run before heading for the Convoy, the colloquial term for the train system in this world. Both were at the guardhouse, so she [Blinked] there after a quick breakfast.

The supply requisition had gone through, which meant Vivi had the materials needed to renew and improve the enchantments securing the two criminals, who had thankfully not escaped. They were being watched over by a man with a green badge on his shoulder, now. Orichalcum rank. Vivi doubted anyone would be wiggling away from *that* kind of surveillance, especially with the other protections layered in. *And* the set of massive debuffs she recast on the two prisoners before leaving.

Next, she found the Guard Captain. Their conversation was brief. He’d gotten in contact with the Institute, and apparently they were extremely interested in her, thanks to the ‘intriguing observations’ and ‘novel mana-current diagrams’ she had made. Evidently, they fervently wished to discuss the topic via scrying table and had impressed that near-demand on the Guard Captain. But Vivi declined and left, and he didn’t try to stop her, perhaps sensing that between annoying the Institute and annoying her, the former was far preferable. She refused to get mixed up further in the city’s business.

Of course, she would be following up herself on the potential danger of the dimensional anomaly once she arrived in Meridian, and she would also be checking in on Prismarche with [Greater Warp], but there wasn’t much else to do since the anomaly seemed stable and was slowly healing itself.

The Institute—the world’s nexus of magical knowledge—would be able to make more headway researching it anyway. Vivisari was a genius with magic, but mostly in regard to practical applications. She’d been able to sense the anomaly and decipher the mana currents to categorize it, but anything beyond that, she didn’t know where to begin. The problem was too complex. Maybe if she could see such magic cast in real-time, she could reverse-engineer it.

Loose ends tied up, she went and found Saffra at the Adventurer’s Guild.

The redheaded catgirl was slouched over at one of the tables on the far end of the open lobby, her head in her hands. Both her tail and ears were drooping.

Vivi frowned. Had something happened?

“What is it?” she asked as she walked over to the teenager.

Saffra jumped. The girl had clearly been so lost in thought that she hadn’t heard Vivi approach. Saffra gaped at her. “Did you—did you change your mind?” she blurted out. A flush immediately colored her cheeks. “I mean, i-is the plan the same?”

Vivi raised an eyebrow. Was *that* what she’d been stewing over?

“I had business to handle, but it’s taken care of. I’m ready to leave. You’ve packed?” Vivi’s eyes flicked to the brown rucksack at Saffra’s side. “Leaving so quickly isn’t an issue, is it?”

“No. No issue. I’m ready.” She bolted to her feet and scooped up her pack, like if she didn’t hurry she risked the whole arrangement falling through.

Vivi nodded, turned, and headed for the door. She had no further business in the Adventurer’s Guild, nor had she made any contacts she needed to say goodbye to. She’d deliberately been avoiding getting entangled in Prismarche, in fact, so it was impressive that she’d been involved in no less than four debacles in a single day.

The pair of them didn’t last a full two minutes walking through Prismarche’s streets before Saffra blurted out, “Can I ask *why*, at least?”

“Why what?”

“Why me? You weren’t supposed to say yes!”

“I wasn’t?”

“Not that—I don’t mean—it just doesn’t make sense.”

“It makes sense to me.”

“But why?”

Vivi mulled over her response. She did have her reasons, but explaining them to Saffra probably wouldn’t go over well. To some degree, it was protectiveness and sympathy, and she doubted Saffra wanted to hear that.

“Because you’re the kind of person I want to teach,” Vivi said, and it was the unblemished truth. If she could pass down some of her fortune, Saffra would make a great recipient. The girl’s heart was undeniably in the right place—she seemed like a good person. What better trait could there be in an apprentice? “Not that I expect I’ll be good at it,” Vivi amended.

Saffra seemed to struggle through that response as they walked. In the end, she didn't press. "You said you were 'occupied' for a long time," she eventually said. "Several decades. And that you need a guide and helper you can trust. What did you mean by that?"

Vivi noted how Saffra didn't ask *what* she had been busy with. Maybe the girl didn't want to push her luck by prying.

"Things have changed since I've last mingled with society. I've forgotten a lot. Since I don't want to draw too much attention, it's convenient to have someone who I can ask questions of."

"Questions? That's it?" Vivi could feel Saffra giving her an extremely dubious look. "Also, you've been *avoiding* attention?"

"I haven't been doing a great job, I know."

Vivi almost added that Saffra was at fault for that, with the biggest debacle being what had happened with the Morningstars, but decided even allusions to that event were best avoided.

"More than just answering questions, though, tell me when I'm doing something strange," Vivi said. "Especially if it's common sense, or a lapse in etiquette, or such. Point out the obvious. There's no need to be overly respectful." She spared a sideways look at the girl. "I don't think respect is your strong suit anyway."

Saffra sniffed. "I could call you Mistress Vivienne if I was absolutely forced to," she joked. "But I'm not sure about more than that."

She immediately snuck a worried look out of the corner of her eye to check how Vivi interpreted the words. Saffra was definitely still nervous around her, and Vivi didn't think that would change for a while. They *were* strangers, and she could tell Saffra trusted slowly.

"Definitely don't call me 'Mistress,'" Vivi said, grimacing at the idea. "Vivi is fine."

The idea of being given that title didn't sit right with her because while she wasn't a fraud in the literal sense, since Vivisari's magical knowledge and talent had been packed into her head and thus she *did* have the credentials to teach a young mage, she nevertheless felt like she would be deceiving Saffra. Being called 'Mistress' as if she was some wizened sage didn't appeal to her.

"So that we understand each other," Vivi continued, "what are you expecting out of an apprenticeship? Practically speaking."

Saffra hesitated. "Well, the apprenticeship itself, of course," she started.

Vivi tilted her head. She could tell she had missed something. Saffra sensed it too.

“The apprenticeship. Um. The status.”

“The status?”

“For… apprenticeship,” she said somewhat dumbly. Disoriented for a moment, she asked, “Is this one of those things you mentioned?”

“Always assume it is. I told you not to be afraid of stating the obvious.”

Saffra seemed to perk up at that, funny enough. Maybe just happy to have found a way to tangibly help Vivi, and through something as simple as common knowledge.

“When someone takes an apprentice of a lower level and similar-enough class, the apprentice gets an apprenticeship status. A buff. It boosts experience gain and is stronger the bigger the gap between master and apprentice.” Saffra came to an abrupt stop, and Vivi had to do the same. The girl looked deeply worried for some reason. “Wait. If you didn’t know about that, then…?”

“You don’t need to keep asking if I’m going to change my mind. I expect I’ll be busy, but I *will* set time aside to help you where I can. And in the worst case, I’ll arrange other lessons for you. I have contacts, if need be.”

Well, maybe. She could make new ones if nothing else.

“Right.” Saffra hurried back forward, and their pace resumed. The girl’s cheeks were flushed, embarrassed at her repeated shows of insecurity.

“It’s an interesting mechanic,” Vivi said. “The apprenticeship. It has a number of implications, someone of a high level always being able to pass down their legacy.”

“Means even an idiot can fly through the levels, as long as her family is rich enough,” she muttered, sharing her less-generous interpretation.

Vivi raised an eyebrow. That seemed targeted toward a specific person, but she didn’t mention it. “Setting that aside, you didn’t answer my earlier question. What else, practically speaking, are you expecting from this?”

Saffra chewed on her lip as they trekked through the busy streets. She had to dip out of the way to avoid hitting passersby, then scurry forward to catch back up. Vivi realized that, conversely, people were making space for her as she walked. She hadn’t even been paying much attention to the crowd, but they split for her as if by instinct. Huh.

“I guess… personal spell coaching is the biggest thing? Having someone show a spell over and over and telling me what I’m doing wrong is night and day from stumbling through it myself. But also all the other stuff, I guess. Mana-control exercises, a routine, and… just… advice on how *you* reached such a high level?”

“My case isn’t something to model after. Which is why I don’t think I’ll be the best teacher.”

“What do you mean?”

It was a thorny question to answer without sounding arrogant. But she guessed she would have to. “A person can’t reasonably compare their progress to mine. I can’t and shouldn’t be imitated.”

Saffra didn’t give her a weird look for that explanation. In fact, she nodded vigorously. “Geniuses,” she said. “I kind of hate them, but they exist, and you have to deal with it.” She stiffened, visibly panicking. “Not that I hate *you*, um, I was just saying—”

“You don’t need to be so nervous around me,” Vivi said, amused. “But yes, I agree, geniuses are frustrating. Effort matters too though. Maybe more than natural ability. The world is full of unrealized talent. Just do your best.”

A platitude, some would say, but she stood by it. This was one of the few topics she could speak on with a reasonable amount of wisdom. While ‘rank one in an extremely popular skill-based video game’ wasn’t the most impressive credential in the world, she *did* have experience with the concept of genius versus hard work.

In the end, the peak talents—the absolute best of the best—of any field had some ratio of genius, hard work, and luck. Almost none completely lacked in any one of those categories.

For her, she had leaned heavily on the ‘pour an absurd number of hours in’ method of improvement, but she had undoubtedly been blessed in both luck and natural skill too. She’d picked up the game much faster than other people—without initially meaning to.

“As for demonstrating spells, suggesting exercises, and creating a routine.” Vivi hummed. “The first and second, I can manage. The third, I might not be the best source on.”

“The first is the most important,” Saffra assured her. “Especially if you can demonstrate some, you know, *unique* spell designs for me?”

“Meaning?”

“Even at the Institute, the best designs are locked away. Or restricted by guilds and families. Anything available to the public is… not the best. I’ve made some improvements on the designs myself, but I can only do so much. I’m no good at spell architecture.”

“The Institute. You did mention attending. What happened?”

Saffra grimaced. “Just… stuff, you know…”

Vivi raised an eyebrow, and while Saffra squirmed, she didn’t volunteer anything more. But also didn’t offer up a lie, which Vivi appreciated.

“We’re headed to Meridian, so you’re aware,” Vivi told her.

Saffra slammed to a stop. “We are?” she asked with such utter dismay that Vivi was suddenly concerned.

“Is that a problem?”

The distraught expression went nowhere, but finally she wiped her face clear and strode forward. “N-no, that’s fine.”

Clearly a lie, but the sort anybody would give. It wasn’t ‘fine,’ but it was fine. She would deal with it.

Vivi pursed her lips, wondering if she needed to press. She decided she could find out more later, once Saffra was comfortable with her. It was obviously a touchy topic.

What trouble had Saffra gotten into at the Institute? And it had to be trouble. She seemed to be a magnet for that, based on Vivi’s impression of the girl.

Which reminded Vivi of something. “Oh, right. Here. Take this, just in case.”

Saffra blinked as Vivi removed a healing potion from her inventory and handed it to her. The girl’s brow furrowed as she looked at it.

“I can’t [Inspect] it. It’s too high level.”

[Inspect]. The built-in skill that identified an item’s characteristics and spat out information. In the game, there had been various criteria determining how much a person could see, the primary ones being level and crafting ability. Alchemists could naturally identify herbs and potions better than most people, for example.

For Vivi, the screen read:

Phoenix Blood Elixir
Lv. 2000

A miraculous healing concoction derived from the blood of a phoenix and numerous divine-grade herbs and catalysts. Capable of healing nearly all lethal wounds and purging the vast majority of toxins and curses for entities up to level 2000.

“It’s strong,” Vivi said. “You’ll probably need to dilute it before drinking. By a lot. I don’t think it would be toxic, exactly, if you drank it straight, but it’s a bit… beyond your level. Best to be safe.”

“Uh huh,” Saffra said skeptically. “Just a little.” She stiffened, remembering she’d forgotten something. “But, um, thank you, of course.”

“It’s for if something happens and I’m not there to help. Take one of these too.”

Vivi gave her a mana potion next. She had extras, and while they were valuable even by her standards, she was hardly going to hoard them when they might save the girl’s life. Saffra seemed to attract trouble, and traveling with Vivi would probably worsen that issue.

Saffra took the potion with an even-more-impressed look at the blue liquid inside, and said another thank you.

A minute later, they’d arrived at the train station.

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THE CONVOY

While this world had rail travel, people hardly used it for daily commuting. Nor was the Convoy as widespread as the public transit systems Vivi knew back home. The Convoy linked cities throughout the continent, but only major ones, and was for transporting goods as much as people. Since the train had already arrived, she saw workers hauling crates away, hurrying to meet the tight schedule.

Her turn at the ticket booth arrived, and she stepped up. A pimply-faced boy no older than sixteen greeted her. A brief exchange followed in which Vivi questioned him on the different types of passage.

Unsurprisingly, the lowest tier was an economy ticket where commoners could pack in for an affordable ride—relatively speaking—between cities. According to him, it was an especially good value today since they would be light on passengers. Everyone would be able to stretch their legs. Most people in Prismarche were staying for the full festival, not leaving after the first day.

Higher up was an equivalent to business class, then first class, and finally something he called ‘access to the Lounge,’ which he explained only after being pressed.

For the first time in her life, she had enough money to not have to worry about wasting it, and the train ride would be over twelve hours. Why not make the trip in comfort?

The cost was two mithril to Siroc, the first leg of the trip. She would have to pay a similar fee for the next chunk of distance too.

How valuable was two mithril, in terms she could understand? Since all coins traded at a ten-to-one ratio, that meant twenty gold coins.

Gold was valuable. Everyone knew that. But some people didn't realize *how* valuable. Those standard-size ingots that weighed under thirty pounds were worth well over a million dollars back on Earth. Learning that, Vivi had gone on an internet crawl out of curiosity. A shocking tidbit was that a standard quarter, if made of pure gold, would be worth more than a thousand dollars. For that tiny bit of metal.

Seeing how Seven Cataclysms' gold coins were roughly twice the size of a quarter, meaning four times the volume, that meant four thousand dollars each—probably more.

Of course, she had no idea if these coins were pure gold. They were probably mixed with some ratio of other metals, because thanks to its softness, pure gold made for poor coinage. And trying to compare purchasing power across time periods, much less worlds, didn't make sense. She knew that even without a degree in economics.

Still, if she did some math? Two mithril, equaling twenty large gold coins, each of which was worth roughly four grand?

Eighty thousand dollars?

For a *train ride*? Per ticket. For just the first leg of passage.

She blanched, but she'd already handed over the coins. She'd done the calculations while walking away.

It explained why Saffra had a horrified look on her face. "You bought one for *me*? Why?"

Vivi frowned. If the girl had taken the perspective that she shouldn't have wasted the money on either of them, that would have been fair. But if Vivi had bought one for herself, why wouldn't Saffra deserve a comfortable ride too?

"Coin isn't an issue," Vivi said dismissively, and that was the truth of the matter, even if her frugal half paled at what she'd done. "Also, that reminds me." She pulled out a pouch filled with forty mithril, mentally staggering as she realized just how much money that was. "Your half." She would have passed over the entire bounty, but suspected Saffra would protest.

Saffra took the bag with a furrowed brow, untied the string, and peeked in. She stiffened at what she saw.

"My half of what?" she asked, suddenly tense.

“Those two had bounties on them.”

Vivi knew she’d done something wrong by how Saffra froze, clamped the bag shut, and swiveled her head to Vivi.

“So why are you giving me half?” she snapped, eyes wide, her posture panicked. “I almost got myself *killed*. And Allen too. I didn’t help *at all.*”

“You were the one who—” Vivi started.

“I wasn’t careful enough. I didn’t take the precautions I should’ve, and in the end I sat there useless and was saved by a miracle no one in their right mind could have expected. Half? Why would I get half?” She shoved the bag toward Vivi. “Take it. Take it back. I don’t want it!”

Vivi accepted the pouch, if only because she sensed that now wasn’t the time to argue the point. Saffra was trembling and seemed ready to sprint away.

Vivi wasn’t good with people, and here was the evidence. She had done something callous without meaning to. Far from a first in her life.

She had also vastly overestimated how much Saffra had ‘bounced back’ from the events of the prior day. In retrospect, Vivi was a massive idiot for doing so. Being assaulted and nearly captured alive wasn’t something a thirteen-year-old girl ‘got over’ in a single night.

Someone else might have had the right words to smooth things over, but not her. And she’d learned saying nothing was usually better than digging the hole deeper.

“Sorry,” she offered, if nothing else.

Saffra had composed herself by the time they were arriving to the train, but was still looking miserable. “I’m sorry too,” she mumbled.

The Convoy—the train itself—was an impressive sight. It was larger than most trains, at least as Vivi knew them, squat and blocky, layered with armor thick enough to stop a cannonball.

Which, upon a moment’s reflection, made sense. This vehicle sailed through thousands of miles of monster-infested territory. Seeing how the rail lines spanned to the remote reaches of Prismarche, the Convoy traveled into very *dangerous* territory too. Her eyes drifted to what looked like gun turrets stationed every few cars. Mana thrummed through the devices. They looked like they could pivot around, and were presumably piloted from beneath. No doubt magical artillery for fending off the worst of the monsters. *I wonder how much firepower they can put out.*

A man checked their tickets, eyes flicking to the badges on their chests—Vivi wore her gold-rank badge in hopes she wouldn't automatically be assumed a child—then tore the stub off and handed back the rest.

"I hope you ladies have a nice trip," he said, bowing slightly.

Vivi sensed a hint of confusion in the words, no doubt thanks to their ranks. A gold and a silver shouldn't be wealthy enough to be boarding this carriage.

The interior of the Lounge was spacious, but not especially so. Seating arrangements filled the space: plush armchairs clustered together, a communal area where velvet sofas surrounded a table of polished dark wood, and seating at the far end that offered a modicum of privacy.

Toward one wall of the car was an elegantly set table with an array of pastries, fruits, and other morsels—a snack table, though that phrase felt too low-class. Two impeccably dressed butlers stood attentively nearby, presumably ready to assist their clients.

The Lounge bled wealth. Not that Vivi was experienced enough with 'high-class' to know faux material from real, but she was certain this was the real deal. The gleaming wood paneling, the luxurious carpets, the rich upholstery. *I really don't belong here*, she thought with a flash of unease.

A tingling of that sixth sense pulled her attention away. Her eyes bored into the walls, past the paneling, and into the metal shell of the car itself. Enchantments. And not weak ones—ones that made the mithril-rank holding cells in Prismarche look like a cage crafted of tissue paper.

Vivi realized suddenly that the exorbitant cost wasn't for the luxury of the experience. In fact, all things considered, this was only a bit above what she would expect of a first-class ride. Maybe even less, since it wasn't private.

No, the price was for safety. This room was so well-defended she doubted even monsters above level one thousand would have much success piercing the shell. Should something go wrong with the train, anyone inside this carriage would be perfectly defended until help came. Against any reasonable threat, at least.

In the world of Seven Cataclysms, there were plenty of *unreasonable* threats, monsters that would give even Vivi a—mild, admittedly—run for her money. Such monsters would take apart these defenses with ease. But enchantments of this strength were likely some of the best a person could expect, meant for nobility or other elites.

That explained why despite the cost, the Lounge was tightly packed. It was a rolling fortress first, a luxury experience second.

Maybe she'd wasted her money, because she had little need for safety. At least Saffra would be better guarded.

Regardless, it was the finest travel accommodations Vivi had ever seen, so she would enjoy herself.

Saffra also ogled the Lounge, walking in hesitantly alongside Vivi. Vivi knew she needed to take the lead between them, even though she was feeling awkward too. She belonged in 'high society' no more than Saffra.

Other passengers had boarded already, and they looked every inch the expected image of 'elite and wealthy.' The only person she'd spoken to with any level of status was the Guard Captain, and while he gave off the air of a noble, he was more a military man.

These were real nobility. Five of them relaxed on sofas in the central area: four adults and a child, all male. A maid—a personal one—quietly watched over the group. Their attention was on one man in particular, a round fellow whose suit needed to be tailored yesterday and strained to hold him in. Based on how everyone hung on his words, he held the highest rank. He gesticulated as he spoke, his voice nasally, and he was obviously enjoying the attention. Vivi couldn't say why, but she instantly disliked him.

The group's gazes turned to Vivi and Saffra as the pair walked in, probably because anyone entering the Lounge was of automatic interest. The cost weeded out all but the wealthiest of people. It took a certain sort of individual to pay such an exorbitant fee.

The lead noble's nose wrinkled during his inspection of them. Vivi had on her usual robes which, under a constant [Illusion] to hide the fact they were the Vestments of the Voidwalker, were rather plain-looking.

Saffra's outfit revealed her place in the social hierarchy much more blatantly. She had donned her adventuring get-up: practical, well-used gear. Boots, pants, a loose shirt and shawl, a belt with pouches, and a hefty backpack slung over her shoulders. She came off as what the badge on her chest identified her as: a silver-rank adventurer.

The nobleman's lip curled, obviously disapproving of the sight they made, but he kept up a façade of decorum.

"Welcome, ladies. A rare pleasure to see such… unconventional company in this carriage."

His tone was fishing—he wanted to know how a silver and a gold, obviously not of noble birth, had afforded a ticket.

Vivi briefly wondered whether it was too late to get a refund. The accommodations seemed nice, but she hadn't known she'd been signing up for the snooty-nobleman treatment.

"The pleasure is mine," she said, tersely. She turned and pulled Saffra along, headed for the opposite end of the room, toward the more private seating.

She made it three steps before an affronted lackey squawked, "That was Lord Barnaby *Caldimore* who greeted you, if you were unaware."

Saffra stiffened at her side—apparently, she knew the name. Weirdly, it tickled something in Vivi's memories too. Caldimore. *Was that a plot-relevant lineage in Seven Cataclysms? I can't remember.* If so, it hadn't been an especially important one, because she was drawing a blank.

It was probably best she gave a token response. Repressing a sigh, she turned back. "Vivienne. Saffra." She gestured at each of them. "As I said, a pleasure."

"Vivienne? An unusually human name for a demon," Lord Caldimore said mildly.

Was it? That was a useful tidbit, even if this interaction was already annoying her. She hadn't known people would think her name odd. In retrospect, it made sense.

"Perhaps," Vivi replied, turning away again.

She'd expected them to press the issue, but they didn't. They began muttering about her rudeness, and something about 'low-rank adventurers,' but didn't escalate pointlessly. She guessed she would give them credit for that.

She sat with Saffra in the corner of the carriage, in a duo of plush seats. Impressed, Vivi wiggled around as she got situated. *So this is the privilege of the aristocracy*, she thought, only half sarcastic. She could get used to the comfort.

Saffra looked uneasy. She sent a worried look to the group of nobles before turning back to Vivi. "Should… you have done that?"

Vivi considered. She studied the man, then threw up a silencing spell so they could talk without concern.

"You knew that name. Caldimore. Who is he?"

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17

RANGER

"You don't know who the *Caldimores* are?" Saffra asked incredulously.

"The name sounds vaguely familiar."

"Vaguely?" Saffra rubbed her face with both hands. "They run the most powerful guild in the Kingdoms. Not him, I'm sure, I've never heard of a Barnaby, he's probably from a branch family. Even so, he's a count, and a Caldimore!"

"A count?"

"You know what a count is!" She seemed unsure. "You know what a count is."

Vivi was doing a good job demonstrating her lack of common knowledge. She *did* know what a count was—sort of. If someone asked her whether a count or an earl ranked higher, she had no idea. *Dukes are right below the king, right?*

She waved a hand dismissively, playing the part of Vivisari. "I haven't thought about human nobility and their titles in a long time. I've forgotten."

Saffra blinked, then seemed to accept that explanation. "Oh. That's fair." She hesitated. "You told me to point out if you're doing something strange, right?"

Vivi raised her eyebrows. "Yes. Always. I'll tell you if it's intentional."

"The silencing spell around us. It's rude."

"It is?"

"And suspicious. They've probably noticed."

"Wanting privacy is suspicious?"

Saffra shrugged. “No… but yes?”

“It’s fine. I don’t care what they think.”

“If you’re trying to keep out of the spotlight, antagonizing a group of noblemen—and a Caldimore especially—isn’t the way to go about it.”

“They weren’t polite to us, so I don’t intend to return the favor.”

Saffra didn’t press the point, though seemed torn.

“So, a count is important?” Vivi asked, continuing the thread from earlier. “And how could you tell he was one?”

“The insignia on his lapel.” She fiddled at her neck to indicate where she meant. “A count isn’t as high up as you can get, but disrespecting nobility in general is a bad idea. It could get you thrown in a cell if they’re in a bad mood, executed in the worst of cases.”

Vivi shouldn’t have been taken aback by that, but she was. This wasn’t the fair, democratic society she was used to, she had to remind herself.

“I guess not you, though,” Saffra said. “Not with your immunity.”

“My immunity?”

“Because of your level.” She tilted her head when she saw that Vivi didn’t know what she meant. “I’m not sure what the real term is. When it comes to settling disputes between high-leveled people and nobility, you get an honorary rank, so that there aren’t… issues. As far as the law goes, mithrils are treated as barons, orichalcums as counts, and Titled as marquesses. If I remember right.”

That answered her question on how the ranks went. Baron, count, marquess, duke, then the king. And the High King above that, unifying the five human kingdoms.

“But in this case, it isn’t even about rank. You might have an honorary legal title, maybe even higher than his, but disrespecting the Caldimore family is the part that’s really playing with fire.”

“They head a powerful guild, you said. Which?”

“The Wardens.”

Vivi had wondered whether she would recognize the name, perhaps as one of the competing guilds in her previous life. But it rang no bells.

“Hm. What of Vanguard?”

Saffra looked surprised. “The Party of Heroes?”

“Their guild, yes.”

“Well… nothing? I mean, the only members were the five heroes, and their craftsmen and other staff, but the support members scattered to the

wind. Since the guild can't *really* exist anymore, not without an officer. I mean, you do know what happened with the Party of Heroes, right?" She blinked. "Surely."

"I do."

Bringing herself up in a roundabout manner hadn't triggered a sudden realization in Saffra. Enough indicators were there to form a suspicion: extremely high-level demon mage missing for many decades narrowed a person down, especially one named *Vivi*. But some things were too unbelievable, she supposed, to formulate in one's head. To Saffra, Vivisari was a hero of legend. The girl might never make the connection unless Vivi hit her over the head with it.

As for her guild. In stasis, she supposed? She knew the guild *existed*, thanks to how her affiliation appeared when checking her status screen, but anything beyond that remained a mystery. Hopefully the building still stood —more importantly, the vault. The items inside were more valuable than even her personal stash.

"Anyway, point is, being rude to a Caldimore, branch family or not, is maybe not the best idea," Saffra said. "I'm just letting you know. You can do whatever you want, of course."

Vivi intended to.

The conversation stilled as a newcomer boarded, drawing all attention his way. A longbow and a quiver hung strapped to his back, and he wore earthy tones: dark browns and greens. His hood was pulled down to reveal a thin face with stubble on his chin, a prominent nose, and blue eyes. He paused at the entrance, gaze flicking around in a way Vivi recognized as scanning for threats. His eyes lingered on Vivi, narrowing in interest, before he turned away.

A green badge was pinned to his chest. Orichalcum rank.

The greeting he received couldn't have been more different from theirs. Barnaby, followed by his band of admirers, stood from the semi-circle arrangement of sofas and made a dramatic show of welcoming him.

"Ah, now there's one of the Kingdom's finest!" Lord Barnaby exclaimed gregariously. "Jasper Trevane, if I'm not mistaken?"

To Vivi's immense amusement, the ranger-adventurer didn't even attempt a stiff level of politeness like Vivi had. He walked in, turned left, and headed straight for the side table spread with food and drink. One of the

servants stepped forward as if to aid him, but he waved the help away, grabbing the nearest bottle of wine to tear the cork out with his fingers.

Only after he'd downed eight deep glugs of the red liquid—holding a finger up at Barnaby in the meanwhile as if to say, 'I'll respond when I'm done'—did he finally drop the bottle and sigh in contentment.

"Alright," the adventurer said, turning to the group of noblemen. "I'm ready to kiss my legally mandated ass, since Mae said if there's one more incident I'll be out on mine. So, one at a time, ladies, I'm sure you can't wait to start hurling your titles at me." He gestured with the wine bottle at Barnaby, sloshing some of the red liquid onto the carpet. "You first, ringleader. Gotta be someone important, since you've got a White Glove attending you."

White Glove? Jasper's eyes had flicked to the maid as he used the term, though the woman hadn't reacted. She stood to the side, hands clasped in front of her apron, posture ramrod straight, face smooth and green eyes calm.

Lord Barnaby Caldimore's smile had frozen. "I heard you were a character," he said, the boisterous cheer from earlier strained. "I suppose it takes a certain personality to reach the heights you have."

"Oh? I get ass kissing of my own? Do go on." He took another drink.

"Lord Barnaby Caldimore," the nobleman said, inclining his head respectfully. "A true pleasure indeed."

Jasper wiped his mouth, his eyebrows raising. "Caldimore. Guess that explains the Glove, even though you're just some count." He returned the bow, and even Vivi could tell it was several degrees too shallow.

Barnaby didn't respond to the dismissive remark about his rank. "Orichalcums always have the most fascinating stories. Care to join our table?" The offer didn't sound genuine.

"Maybe after I catch up on my quota." Jasper waggled the bottle, spilling more onto the carpet.

Barnaby eyed the growing red stains, but once more didn't comment. His tone was stiff when he said, "I see. I look forward to it."

Jasper dropped into one of the chairs separated from the main group, a distance away from Vivi and Saffra as well. Vivi caught him peeking out of the corner of his eye at her, and, seeing her looking, he waved a lazy hand and winked.

Vivi ignored him. "White Glove?" she asked Saffra.

Saffra jumped, having been as absorbed in the earlier exchange as Vivi. “Um. They’re… maids and butlers. Is she really one? She does seem… serious.” Her gaze drifted over, now extremely interested in the maid.

“They’re more than that, I take it,” Vivi prompted.

Saffra tore her eyes back. “If she’s actually a Glove, she’s at least mithril rank. I think. The White Gloves are some of the best bodyguards in the world. And they can run an entire estate’s staff too. Everyone in the world wants one. They’re stupidly expensive. Even if he is a Caldimore, I’m surprised he hired one. Does he have a reason for it?” Her attention drifted away from Vivi, lips pulling down into a frown as the girl studied him. “I can only imagine he’s expecting an assassin, or something crazy like that. Or maybe he’s just paranoid. I guess when you’ve got more gold than a dragon, even Gloves aren’t expensive.”

“Mithril rank doesn’t seem very strong, all things considered.”

Saffra paused, then snorted. “To you. But I guess you’re right, in the grand scheme of things. But she’s *at least* mithril. That’s what a Glove’s graduation requirement is.” She squirmed in her seat, cheeks coloring. “I think. You do know I’m basically a nobody, right? I only know about this stuff in a general sense.”

“More than I do.”

“That’s not saying much.” Saffra cleared her throat, seeming to realize the retort might be perceived as rude—she was clearly trying to be on her best behavior. “But yeah, who knows what her level is. Anyway, it’s her entire class to protect people. She should be able to fight well above her level if it’s in defense of her client. Honestly,” she murmured, looking at the ranger, “I wonder who would win between the two of them?”

Oh? Vivi thought. *Her class gives her that much of a boost, since it’s so specialized? Enough that a mithril might win against an orichalcum?*

Vivi had to admit, she was fascinated by the idea. She’d been making efforts not to stare at the maid, already interested in her outfit and prim demeanor even before she’d been revealed as some super-elite member of a combat-maid organization. Vivi had always loved the idea of combat-butlers, hence why her personal assistant in Seven Cataclysms had been one. Naturally, combat-maids were equally as cool.

Once more, she wondered what had happened to Winston. She desperately hoped he was alive, and not just because she’d taken the time to seriously upgrade him. He had to be the equivalent of a Titled, assuming he

was still kicking around. Personal Assistants hadn't had levels, per se, following a different progression scheme to better suit the game's mechanics, but he'd been more than capable of protecting the manor from assailants, or aiding her, if in a limited manner, in combat.

She wondered if he'd found someone else to serve, or perhaps had moved on in a different way. It would be understandable, seeing how it had been a century. A strange sense of melancholy passed across her. Would it be hoping for too much that when she showed up in Meridian, he would be there, having watched over the manor all these years?

"Who's the ranger?" Vivi asked.

"Jasper Trevane, like the Count said. I wouldn't have recognized him myself, honestly, and the name only kinda rings a bell. He's a poison specialist, I think? Coats his arrows. From the Central Kingdom. Not the most famous, but he *is* orichalcum. I can't remember what guild he's in, or which party."

Despite having called him 'not the most famous,' Saffra was sneaking admiring looks at him. Seeing how the man had almost polished off that bottle of wine already, Vivi couldn't help but feel like Saffra could choose a better role model.

He did have a rugged sort of handsomeness, Vivi supposed. And she would be lying if the sarcastic attitude from earlier hadn't entertained her. She had mixed feelings on him overall, but if she'd had a trace of interest in romance, her gaze might have lingered.

Pausing, she realized said rugged handsomeness might be why *Saffra's* attention kept flitting over to him. Vivi's eyes narrowed. *He's at least three times your age. That better not be why.*

"You requested I give you lessons, yes?" Vivi asked.

That had Saffra's gaze snapping back, her eyes widening, and her head bobbing rapidly. There was a clear winner between 'magic lessons' and 'interesting orichalcum rank,' and it wasn't close.

"Let's start from the beginning, then. Show me your channeling capacity."

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THE MECHANICS OF MAGIC

Saffra had been less nervous for the Institute Qualification Exams.

Which didn't make sense. She wasn't being evaluated, not in a way that had any consequences. Her magical competence clearly wasn't the primary factor—if a factor at all—for why Lady Vivi had accepted the apprenticeship proposition.

As for what the actual factors were? She had no idea. That Lady Vivi 'needed a guide' didn't explain enough. She could get one of those anywhere.

A whim? High-level adventurers, high-level *anybodies*, tended to be eccentric. Would Saffra be tossed aside in a month's time? A week's? Tomorrow?

She had resigned herself to that from the beginning, so she wouldn't be especially devastated. Even a week's tutelage from a mage of this caliber made for an unparalleled opportunity.

And if she could extend Lady Vivi's interest a few days by displaying a modicum of talent, she would do everything she could.

"I don't know how the Institute educates its students," Lady Vivi said, "nor how most mages refer to the processes of magic, so bear with me if I use unfamiliar terminology. And feel free to ask for clarification."

Saffra was interested. A mage without a formal education? Those weren't the rarest, though in the modern era they were definitely less common in the highest echelons of talent. That said, despite Lady Vivi's ambiguously youthful appearance, she had to be at least a few centuries old.

She wasn’t *from* the modern era. She had likely seen, maybe even partaken in, the fights against the Cataclysms. That was a humbling thought.

“We’ll begin with mana control,” Lady Vivi said. “Circle it through your channels. As much as you can at once.”

A common exercise, and a starting point Saffra had expected. She was on familiar ground. She supposed the basics were the basics; what else would Lady Vivi have asked for, formal education or not?

Saffra closed her eyes and focused. Her mana core sat high in her stomach, behind her sternum. It wasn’t a physical organ, but rather a purely magical structure. Over time—with training and levels—the amount of mana it could store grew.

But a healthy mana pool was only one small part of what made a mage powerful. To draw a comparison, her pool was like her stamina. But stamina didn’t mean strength. Strength was *channeling capacity*, and the better indicator of a mage’s power. After all, being able to cast ten thousand tier-zero spells didn’t matter nearly as much as being able to cast five higher-tier ones.

That vibrating molten liquid filled her magical veins, and she breathed deeply with satisfaction. She had always loved the feeling of mana suffusing her channels. It made her feel powerful, in control of a situation, however much of an illusion she knew the sensation to be. Magic hadn’t saved her any of the times she had needed saving. It would be a long time yet until she was strong enough to protect herself. It might never happen.

The test began. She only stopped flooding herself with mana when she felt ready to burst. There were dozens of exit points throughout the body—the Institute called them gates—and she struggled not to let mana leak through any of them.

She moved that primordial resource around her channels, feeling as if she were setting herself on fire. The experience wasn’t pleasant, but she enjoyed the discomfort in the way a person exerting themself physically might.

At least until the burn turned painful, then agonizing. Sweat dripped from her brow as seconds and then a full minute passed. She struggled to maintain her breathing, refusing to stop until Vivi allowed it. Her mentor had to know how difficult this was. It was a test, and Saffra needed to impress.

“That’s enough,” Vivi said what felt like three years later; Saffra pulled the mana back into herself and sagged into her seat, gasping.

Vivi gave her a moment to recover.

“That was enough flow to manage a fifth-tier spell,” she said, “but I expect not quite enough for a sixth-tier.”

Saffra couldn’t help but feel affronted. Of *course* she couldn’t cast a sixth-tier spell. She wasn’t even level four hundred yet! A fifth-tier spell at her level was already impressive, even by Institute standards—and moreover, Vivi’s wording seemed to imply Saffra was closing in on the sixth tier. That was *extremely* impressive!

Saffra’s shoulders slumped. She supposed this was the downside of being taught by a prodigy. The demon in front of her had probably been casting fifth-tier spells before she could walk. Of course Saffra’s efforts hadn’t impressed the other mage, even if she’d tried her hardest.

“But well done,” Vivi added after a moment’s pause.

Saffra snorted. She was getting better at reading the woman. Lady Vivi had clearly tacked that on because Saffra had deflated. The mismatch between Lady Vivi’s outward appearance—those bored red eyes that were borderline contemptuous—and her gentler words and actions was more than a little amusing.

Honestly, it was the reason Saffra had trusted the demon so quickly. She could see past a person’s surface layers. She was a good judge of character.

Except for a few very important instances.

Even having her thoughts brush against the most recent example made her flinch. Yes, there was definitely one major exception, and it was why she didn’t attend the Institute anymore.

Her eyes drifted over to Lord Barnaby Caldimore, taking brief note of the blurring landscape through the windows behind him. She’d been so absorbed in the lesson that she hadn’t noticed the Convoy leave the station.

Caldimore. What were the odds? She’d been irrationally worried he would recognize her, but obviously he hadn’t. In the grand scheme of things, her expulsion hadn’t been important to anybody. Not even the family most involved with it.

Saffra wondered what *she* was up to, these days. Did Isabella even care what she’d done? Had the whole thing been a joke to her?

Saffra shoved those thoughts away. She was done thinking about that girl.

“Channeling at fifth-tier, nearly sixth when I haven’t even reached the benchmark level for *fourth*-tier is impressive, by the way,” Saffra declared, sticking her chin up. “Especially when I have half the education most casters do.”

The words were for her own benefit, and she felt embarrassed the moment they’d come out of her mouth. But thinking about Isabella had sent her spiraling again, and she always felt better when she blustered.

That she still cared so much after eight months infuriated her. Isabella certainly didn’t. She’d probably howled with laughter for days afterward, then promptly forgotten about Saffra entirely.

“I expect it is,” Vivi said in her usual calm voice, though those red eyes were watching Saffra carefully. Some of what she had been feeling had probably leaked through.

“What now?” Saffra asked, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

Vivi’s attention lingered a little longer before she replied, “Let’s see your external mana manipulation.”

Saffra seized the distraction.

Internal channeling capacity determined how quickly a mage could funnel mana through their body, their channels, and out their gates. Not only was it the limiter for how high tier a spell someone could cast, it also decided how quickly a spell could be formed and activated. A spell required a certain amount of fuel, and the faster a mage fed it, the faster it could be formed and then incanted.

But power and speed weren’t everything. Technique and knowledge were equally important. Perhaps more so. It didn’t matter how fast a mage could feed their spell if the design was inefficient, or worse, unstable. Moreover, it didn’t matter how excellent the spell design was if the user’s technical ability—how well they could execute said design—failed to reach incantation requirements.

“Do as I do,” Vivi said, lifting a pointer finger and extruding an orb of mana.

Saffra focused. Liquid energy thrummed through her as she siphoned mana from her core. This time she didn’t circle it around her body pointlessly as a channeling exercise, but instead expelled it through the gate on her pointer finger.

Mana in one’s own body was many times easier to control. The moment it entered the air, it began to wriggle away like a live, buttered fish. The

mana still belonged to her, but heavens above, it didn't *want* to. Only with concentration did she wrangle the mana into a neat orb, compressing it down into a sphere that wobbled slightly.

Vivi's ball of mana was so glassy-smooth and unwavering that no matter how hard Saffra squinted at it, she couldn't sense the smallest fluctuation.

She had a feeling she was about to be humbled even more than she'd braced herself for.

Vivi waggled her finger left and right, and the orb followed. Saffra did the same; that part was easier than holding the mana in a sphere.

A series of demonstrations ensued in which Saffra did her best to imitate Vivi. She moved the orb left and right, up and down, in circles then in geometric shapes, a triangle, square, pentagon. These weren't unfamiliar training routines, since moving mana around in deliberate ways was fundamental to drawing spell circles, but Saffra struggled to keep up. Vivi slowed whenever Saffra faltered, but it was clear the woman wasn't having issues herself. Not that Saffra would expect a mage of her caliber to.

When Vivi extruded a second orb, Saffra really had to focus.

"At your level, I expect controlling many simultaneous streams isn't important," Vivi said. "Low-tier mages are limited by their channeling capacity, not how quickly they can trace the circle itself."

It took Saffra a second to understand, because ninety percent of her brain was occupied with keeping the spheres moving. If holding one wriggling fish was hard, imagine two.

"That's how you cast so fast," Saffra said. "Almost instantly. You have the channeling power, obviously, but you can also draw the whole diagram at once by painting with ten brushes at the same time. Or… how many streams *can* you manage?"

In demonstration, Vivi split the two orbs into four, then eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two. Saffra sat back numbly in her chair as she watched the mass of orbs fly to their respective positions and each trace a portion of a low-tier spell she recognized as [Ignite]. With so many 'paintbrushes,' it took less than a second. And Vivi had clearly slowed the process for Saffra's sake.

When would she stop being stunned at what this woman was capable of?

"…that does explain it," Saffra muttered.

Vivi canceled the spell circle and sucked the mana back into herself, which made Saffra wince. Reclaiming expelled mana was more than a little painful, yet Vivi's face didn't so much as twitch.

"At your level, it's forgivable to deprioritize multitasking." Lady Vivi extruded a single sphere, and Saffra smashed her two existing ones back together to mimic her. "Fine control is more important as a beginner. It'll be some time before you can move past that fundamental weakness of mages."

Their fundamental weakness: slow cast times. Mages made poor solo fighters because of that, though they *could* handle themselves if they ensured they always had the drop on their enemy. A disabling spell into some form of artillery worked wonders, and it wasn't hard to set up with preparation. But there was no way to guarantee the first strike in every encounter, so mages primarily worked in teams.

"Then again, if you focus on simultaneous mana streams and low-tier magic, you could succeed with a versatile, rapid-casting strategy," Lady Vivi said. "It depends on what your desired outcome is."

"I don't mind being artillery." The standard mage role. Rapidly casting weak spells wasn't nearly as appealing to Saffra.

Lady Vivi nodded. "Then focus on fine control. Let's talk spells. Which do you use most often?"

Saffra's pulse sped up. This was what she'd been hoping for. Useful as mana-control exercises and such were, the *true* value of an experienced mage taking her under their wing—besides the eventual apprenticeship boost, which could take days to manifest—was being taught new spells, or how to improve and perfect existing ones.

"I've been hoping for an elementalist class evolution," Saffra said, "so I've been relying on mostly fire and ice spells. Depending on the monster's resistances, I use [Flame Bolt] or [Ice Spear] as my go-to. [Fireball] when I have a lot of time to channel, like when we have the drop on a strong one. A basic [Arcane Shield] for self-defense, of course, and [Frostbind] or [Ice Slick] for utility and disruption." She bit her lip. "Those are the most common, but I have a larger arsenal than that, of course. I… I can show you my grimoire if you want."

Normally, a grimoire was something a mage protected fiercely, sometimes not handing it over even to their spouse. It represented, literally, a mage's life work, revealing every spell of theirs that the Grand System

recognized proficiency in. Saffra had a total of thirty-three spells in her grimoire, but most were low-tier.

In classic fashion, her attempt at earnestness and her implicit show of trust were pointless, because Lady Vivi simply looked curious. “Grimoire?”

Saffra stared. This one was criminal. “Grimoire. You’re—you’re one of the strongest mages I’ve ever seen! How can you not know what a *grimoire* is? The book that has all your spells in it!” Bewildered, she said, “You summon it through your spell screen?”

Vivi tilted her head. “Spell screen. Does every mage have one of those?”

“As soon as they learn their first spell, they should.” It was more than a little disorienting to be answering such basic questions for someone who was her senior in magic by several orders of magnitude.

Saffra had a working theory for the origin of Vivi’s gaps in knowledge, a grim but plausible one. Memory loss—maybe magical in origin, maybe as simple as a head injury earned during combat. She couldn’t imagine another explanation for why the woman knew so much and so little, in seemingly random fashion.

“I see. Interesting.” Her eyes latched onto, presumably, her spell screen. “I have one, then? A grimoire? How do I access it?”

Saffra opened her own spell screen and commanded, “[Grimoire].” The screen disappeared, and a book dropped into her hands.

A person’s grimoire evolved throughout their life, changing in design according to the individual, and in thickness according to the number of spells inside. Saffra’s was earthy-red leather with tan strings tying it closed. At thirty-three pages, it wasn’t the most pathetic grimoire in existence, but it certainly wasn’t impressive. Level four hundred wasn’t shabby even for adult mages, but it wasn’t remotely approaching the pinnacles of magehood.

Archmage Lysander, the headmaster of the Institute, liked to carry his massive grimoire around strapped to his belt, obviously to show off. And as much as she disliked him, she begrudgingly admitted she was impressed whenever she laid eyes on that white, gilded tome. It took dedication to add that many spells to one’s arsenal, even if he’d been vain and learned low-tier ones to fatten the book out. Which she wouldn’t put past him.

Grimoires were status symbols in the mage world. They were a way of signaling one’s breadth of magical knowledge at a glance—much like an adventurer’s badge, but with even more personalization and flair.

Lady Vivi studied Saffra's book with interest, then turned her attention toward her own spell screen.

"[Grimoire]," she said.

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GRIMOIRES

The tome that landed in Vivi's lap was unexpectedly substantial in all dimensions—tall, thick, and wide. Unlike Saffra's, Vivi's grimoire featured a polished obsidian cover adorned with elegant designs made from an unusual, almost pearlescent violet metal. Centered on the front was a raised ivory crown, points tipped with red gemstones. Ornate didn't begin to describe the book's appearance.

There was a solid heft to the grimoire as she picked it up, and when she flipped it open, the spell diagram and description of her lowest-level spell met her: [Illuminate], a tier zero design that would summon a glowing ball of light. Looping black ink on cream parchment described the ability. She saw no additional information over what she could have found on her spell screen, but she admitted it was an interesting feature, being able to summon her spell list into a physical vessel.

When she lifted her gaze, she found Saffra gawking at her with an even-more-pronounced look of astonishment than usual.

Vivi almost sighed. What had she done this time? "What is it?" she asked.

"How many spells do you *know?*" Saffra sounded almost horrified in her response.

Vivi paused. The thickness of her grimoire *would* indicate how large her arsenal was, wouldn't it? And as an above-level-two-thousand archmage who had picked up just about every spell in Seven Cataclysms that wasn't

locked behind a super-high-tier subclass, the tome was impressively massive.

“A few,” Vivi answered. “Why do ours look so different?”

“Grimoires change based on their owner. Class, level, and so on,” Saffra said, staring at her dumbly even as she replied to Vivi. “I’ve never seen anything like yours though. Not even the Headmaster’s comes close.”

“The Headmaster? Of the Institute?” Vivi dug through her memories. “Aeris?”

The question seemed to dispel some of Saffra’s astonishment. Her mouth stopped hanging open as she studied Vivi with a furrowed brow. “Archmage Aeris? No… he stepped down shortly after the Turning, I think. He’s a professor now.”

“The Turning?”

“The day the Party of Heroes defeated the Seventh Cataclysm. But wait, you know Archmage Aeris?”

Vivi pursed her lips. “In a manner of speaking.” He had been moderately involved in the game’s plot, being one of humanity’s most powerful archmages. And also the Headmaster of the Institute, thus appearing in various class quests. “Someone took his place?”

“Archmage Lysander,” Saffra said, nose wrinkling. She wasn’t a fan, Vivi could tell.

Speaking on this topic reminded her that Saffra had been expelled from the Institute for a yet-unknown reason. She wondered whether she should press that matter.

Vivi lifted the heavy tome with one hand and held it out to Saffra. “Trade.”

Saffra froze. “What?”

“Trade,” Vivi repeated, holding her other hand out and gesturing with a ‘give-me’ motion. “I’ll look through yours, as you offered, and you can look through mine.”

Saffra continued doing her best impression of a statue. “You’re giving me your grimoire.”

“Stay to the first six tiers, don’t flip past that. Find something in there you want me to teach you. In the meantime, I’ll see what you’re working with.” She waggled the book impatiently.

Saffra didn’t move an inch. Just sat there, wide-eyed. Was the offer that shocking?

“Take,” Vivi ordered, pushing the grimoire into Saffra’s hand.

The girl finally seized the heavy obsidian tome, hastily handing over hers in return. Even when she had the book in her lap, though, she sat there frozen, afraid to touch it. Her eyes flicked between Vivi and the grimoire repeatedly.

“*Open it.*”

Clearly, Saffra was finding this a much bigger deal than Vivi had assumed. She guessed having one of the world’s most thorough compendiums of magical knowledge dropped in one’s lap would be overwhelming to an aspiring mage—even if Vivi was only allowing access to some of her lowest-tier magic to the girl.

With the sort of slow and careful movement reserved for handling the most brittle artifact in the world, Saffra opened the heavy black cover of the obsidian grimoire. Her eyes widened as she drank in the sight of the first page, the tier-zero spell [Illuminate]. It really wasn’t impressive, so why did Saffra’s eyes keep rounding?

“Find a spell you want to learn,” Vivi reminded her. “I have [Flame Bolt] in there somewhere, if you want to improve on the design of one of your staple spells. Or pick a new one entirely. Your choice.”

Saffra nodded rapidly, red hair bouncing with the motion, apparently mute.

Having the girl look through only the first six tiers shouldn’t be an issue. There were some rather… *revealing* spells deeper in, but there was only so much insanity a mage could get up to in the lower tiers. Saffra already knew Vivi was a ridiculously powerful mage, so exposing the first portion of her grimoire wouldn’t matter.

Vivi looked down at Saffra’s much-smaller book. It was a plain thing, reddish leather tied with strings to hold a few dozen pages together. The grimoire of someone who wasn’t quite a beginner, but also not even into gold rank.

Saffra was in the high three-hundreds, and while that was respectable, doubly so for her age, she’d only had time to pick up a few spells. A grimoire showcased breadth of knowledge, and Saffra was too young to have learned much more than the daily arsenal she used for adventuring. Especially having been expelled from her place of education. Vivi suspected a mage’s list of spells increased more than linearly with level and age.

She flipped through the grimoire. As the young mage had told Vivi, Saffra knew a few utility spells—[Illuminate] served as a staple for how simple and useful it was to an adventurer, so it was the first spell in her book as well. Otherwise, she had learned mostly elemental combat magic. Predominantly ice and fire as she'd said, though two earth spells and a single air. [Fireball] occupied the last page, her only tier-five spell.

"It's nothing impressive, I know," Saffra mumbled, her state of awe replaced with obvious insecurity, shoulders hunched.

Vivi considered her. She leaned forward and, using the girl's own grimoire, lightly smacked her on the top of the head. Saffra's ears flattened in surprise, and she looked at Vivi, a startled expression on her face.

"It's the life work of a diligent, earnest young woman," Vivi scolded. "I would ask that you don't insult her right in front of me."

Saffra stared at her for a long moment, then lifted Vivi's grimoire to hide her rapidly reddening face.

"R-right," she stammered. "Sorry."

Vivi shook her head, then returned to studying Saffra's grimoire. This time, the spell circles in specific.

They were… not good. Horrible, to be honest. Vivi could improve Saffra's general casting ability twofold with just a few quick tweaks to the awful designs. Vivi could also restructure them from scratch—that would be even better.

The new spell circles wouldn't even need to be more complex. They could be simpler *and* better. Though the best designs would, admittedly, require techniques beyond the girl's current ability.

Saffra had mentioned that the best spells were hoarded within guilds and families. Even the Institute, an establishment of learning, didn't yield its best to its students. She found herself deeply disapproving, but she supposed humans were humans. It wasn't like things worked differently in her world. People hoarded wealth and power there too. Why would it be different here?

It took Saffra ten minutes to find the spell she wanted to work on. Hesitantly holding Vivi's grimoire up, she displayed the page describing [Scorchlance].

"An upgraded version of [Flame Bolt]," Vivi said. Saffra had said she used [Flame Bolt] most often through her adventures, a standard fire-type spell that balanced cast time and destructive potential. It was tier three,

however, and [Scorchlance] tier four. As far as picking a single efficient upgrade to her overall combat potential, [Scorchlance] was a good choice. “Very well.”

They traded grimoires back.

“Was that a test?” Saffra blurted out.

Vivi gave her a baffled expression. Or rather, that was what she felt internally. As always, her face barely twitched.

“Like, I wasn’t supposed to get too greedy, or something,” Saffra mumbled.

Ah. She *had* been surprised Saffra hadn’t gone for the highest-tier, flashiest, rarest spell she could find. There were a lot of unusual spells in Vivi’s grimoire, even in the lower tiers. Saffra’s choice had been practical and efficient instead. *That explains why*, Vivi thought with amusement.

“It wasn’t a test,” Vivi said. “You can change your mind, though I do think this is a good starting point.”

“Starting point?”

Vivi tilted her head.

“…I’ll get to pick more?” Saffra asked hopefully.

“Of course. Once you’ve grasped this one.”

Saffra bobbed her head eagerly, cat ears perking up at the news.

Thus, the first lesson began. Everything prior had been more evaluation and planning. Now, Vivi drew mana from her core and painted it into runes on the air, tracing the spell circle slowly for Saffra’s sake. Saffra did her best to imitate her, though the girl was horribly clumsy in comparison.

Vivi reminded herself that she had never struggled through any of this herself, and by all indicators Saffra was well above average. That meant it would be unreasonable to judge her by how easy the techniques seemed to Vivi personally.

Patiently, she pointed out Saffra’s mistakes as she made them. Too much curve in that line, not thick enough there. Any time the spell circle had deviated far enough that she knew it wouldn’t activate—and probably run wild in the process—Vivi called the attempt off and had Saffra dissolve her mana and try again.

Moreover, she had Saffra redoing the same few runes over and over until they met her standards—standards that weren’t anywhere near perfection, but Saffra struggled fiercely even so.

This was what Vivi had meant when she said she wouldn’t make a good teacher. How strict should she be? Should she focus on getting Saffra to complete the spell circle to the bare minimum? Or should she insist on higher standards, even for a first cast?

Her instincts told her to keep drilling Saffra until the girl’s runes met some minimum level of quality. But could Vivi trust her instincts? They came from arguably the world's best mortal caster, but who knew if that meant a good intuition for teaching?

After an hour, Saffra hadn’t been able to complete even twenty percent of the spell design to Vivi’s specifications. Vivi could feel a slight frown pulling on her lips as she decided to take a break, and the catgirl withered at the expression.

“I’ll do better next go,” she declared with false bravado, but she didn’t puff out her chest like usual. Instead, she stared at her lap, hands clenched.

Vivi was definitely failing as a teacher. Maybe transparency was best. “I expect you could have come much closer to activating the spell by now, but I want it done properly or not at all. It might be the wrong approach. As I said, I have no experience teaching.”

Saffra’s mood brightened at that. Maybe she had assumed that every time Vivi called an attempt off, it was because the spell would’ve failed entirely.

“Oh. That’s not so bad, then. Usually my Institute instructors focus on reaching invocation first, then refinement of the circle afterward.”

Vivi pursed her lips. “I don’t know if that’s better. We’ll try my way for a while first.” She would listen to her instincts unless given a strong reason not to. “I don’t want a shoddy first invocation—it needs to be at least acceptable.”

Saffra nodded, encouraged. “I’ll do better next time,” she announced. “And, um,” she said sheepishly, stealing a glance at the other side of the carriage. “I didn’t have breakfast, so would you mind if…?”

“Feel free.”

“I’ll get you something too!”

Vivi almost stood to join her, since she wanted to peruse the spread of food, but, while she wasn’t normally good with people, she sensed that Saffra wanted to do something ‘apprentice-y’ to give back to the dynamic somehow. So, she let the girl trek off to put together two plates.

They probably could have let the servants do it for them—the two staff were stationed by the table still and could have been hailed—but she hadn't even considered it. When it came to 'thinking like a commoner,' Vivi was no different from Saffra.

She sank back into her seat and ruminated over the situation. Perhaps starting with a tier-four spell had been too ambitious. Saffra technically wasn't even at the standard level for those spells yet, though she wasn't far. Vivi's rigorous requirements might be better applied to a lower-tier spell, so Saffra wasn't discouraged by being stuck on the same design for too long.

And it would be a while yet. Despite Saffra's fake-confident claims, they had only worked through a fifth of the spell circle—and on top of that, the earlier parts were easiest because balancing and proportions mattered much less. The deeper into a design a mage went, the more the composition as a whole mattered, and thus difficulty and complexity rapidly grew.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a minor commotion. Vivi's attention turned to the snack table—she wondered if there was a fancy word nobles used, since 'snack table' felt too pedestrian—to find that Saffra had been joined by the youngest of the nobles. The boy was probably around Saffra's age, though a little shorter than her, and the effect was made more prominent by Saffra's tall cat ears.

Saffra's entire posture radiated discomfort. She was holding a plate which she'd been stacking food on, with another set aside presumably for Vivi. The boy was standing entirely too close, especially with the obvious signals Saffra was giving off.

Vivi felt her hackles rise. She almost rose and stalked over, but calmed herself and honed her senses to listen in. Considering her stats, hearing across the carriage posed no challenge. Which was the entire reason why she'd thrown up a silencing spell. If she could eavesdrop, other people could too.

"You *decline*?" the boy asked, his words sharp with haughty indignation. "My father is merely interested in how a silver and a gold procured Lounge tickets. He wonders who his… *guests* are. You should be ecstatic to oblige his curiosity."

Ah. Vivi had expected this to rear its head again. She'd tentatively given credit to Lord Barnaby Caldimore—who she was fairly certain was this boy's father—for brushing past the minor offense Vivi had given, but apparently she would have to retract that respect, even small as it had been.

He'd sent his son after Saffra. Vivi would have been ten times more forgiving if Barnaby had confronted her directly.

"I should get back, my lord," Saffra said, sounding almost frightened, not at all like her usual self.

Vivi had to remind herself that nobility *were* important in this world, and made for dangerous people to offend. Her own blasé attitude born from experiences on Earth was simply inappropriate. Even Saffra, normally spirited, didn't let herself get an attitude with a noble's son. She clearly wanted to be anywhere else.

Saffra tried to edge away, and so the boy reached out to grab her arm.

That erased whatever traces of Vivi's patience had remained. [Telekinesis] formed, and she seized the boy's hand, pried his fingers open, and bodily grabbed him with the spell, sliding him across the carpet to put six feet between him and Saffra. Not roughly, of course—the brat wasn't even a teenager, and his behavior was probably a parenting issue. Not to excuse it, of course. But she wasn't going to hurt a child.

Unfortunately, she wasn't the only person who had been watching the exchange. It had drawn the attention of everyone in the relatively small carriage. Lord Barnaby Caldimore bolted to his feet and spun, face beet-red and body vibrating with such outrage that she was almost impressed by how fast it happened.

He pointed a wobbling finger at Vivi and thundered, "You *dare* lay hands on my son!"

I guess this was inevitable, she thought with irritation.

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GOAD

All eyes fell on Vivi following Lord Caldimore's outburst. She didn't like being the center of attention, but she'd been put in the spotlight frequently since her arrival in this world. *That's something I'll just have to get used to.*

Temporarily ignoring Caldimore, she let her gaze slide to Saffra. The boy next to her was clearly affronted at having been grabbed by a spell, but was also watching his father with eager excitement for how this would unfold. Saffra herself had gone pale-faced.

Vivi clamped down on her anger. If this event had only involved her, she wouldn't have been half as annoyed. But Saffra had been dragged into the middle of it.

Vivi gestured for the girl to join her, and she obeyed, abandoning the plates to scurry over.

"Sorry…" Saffra mumbled.

Vivi bit down on her response. *Sorry? What are you sorry for? How is this your fault in any way?* She would deal with that in a second.

Lord Caldimore had stomped up to Vivi. "You dare *assault* my son?" he bellowed. "I don't care whose student or child you are, brat, I will not stand for this."

Child? she thought, eye twitching. But she kept a lid on her temper.

"He grabbed my apprentice," Vivi said, trying to take a moderated tone, but the words came out frosty even to her ears. "I reacted accordingly."

He seemed taken aback by the word ‘apprentice’, but barreled forward a second later.

“Accordingly? No court in the land would classify what you’ve done as anything *but* assault with magical force. Against a scion of a noble house, no less. Know your place, *child*.”

Vivi opened her mouth to say something that would have escalated this beyond any chance for a peaceful resolution, but she was interrupted by laughter—laughter that drew everyone’s attention away from Vivi and Lord Caldimore.

It was the orichalcum rank, Jasper. She had forgotten about him.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” he said, his mirth clear. “This is gonna be hilarious.” He lifted his wine bottle to his lips, but paused, grimaced, and slowly lowered it. “Then again,” he sighed, “we’re stuck in this carriage for another ten hours together.”

He tapped a finger against the seat’s armrest before coming to a decision. He turned to face—of all people—the maid who hovered behind Lord Caldimore’s right shoulder.

“I have to ask,” he said to her. “Why do you do it?”

The maid’s face remained calm and impassive. “Do what, Lord Adventurer?”

“Serve people like him.”

A long, pregnant pause. When she responded, there was a hint of danger in her otherwise polite tone. “I warn you, sir, I will not suffer aspersions cast on my lord’s name.”

“Of course, of course,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I meant no offense. But I do wonder.” He hummed. “If you and I fought, which of us would win?”

At the seemingly random question, the maid returned a level gaze. Maybe because she didn’t know where he was going. Vivi didn’t, at least.

His smile widened. “It wouldn’t be close, would it?” His eyes flicked to her lapel. Vivi noticed there were two thin pieces of metal pinned there. “I’ve seen your kind before. Not *just* a White Glove, but Second Class. Less than one in ten reach that rank. You’re a monster even among those monsters you call peers.”

The maid said nothing, yet Jasper seemed to be enjoying himself. “If I tried to attack that man”—he gestured at Lord Caldimore with his bottle of wine—“there wouldn’t be much more than a smear left of me afterward,

would there? What kind of fortune does it cost to hire you, even for a week?”

Lord Caldimore was apparently done humoring Jasper. “What is the meaning of this?” he demanded. “What are your implications?”

Jasper sighed, his amusement swapping to irritation in an instant. He turned a disdainful look toward the nobleman. “As hilarious as this would be, we have a long ride ahead. Consider this a friendly suggestion, *Lord Caldimore*. Ask your White Glove what she thinks of this ‘child’ you’ve blindly picked a fight with. She’s a keen woman. I think she’ll have something interesting to say.”

The maid’s gaze turned to Vivi. Those pale green eyes appraised her with an utterly blank expression. Paying closer attention, though, Vivi noticed how tense the maid was underneath her elegance and poise.

Ah. She supposed a woman from an elite bodyguarding organization was capable of recognizing genuine threats to her client’s health. She wasn’t half as idiotic as the man she was serving.

Lord Barnaby Caldimore’s face reddened, but he wasn’t so rash as to discard an orichalcum-rank adventurer’s advice—however rudely it had been offered.

He stiffly turned to the maid and said, “Explain.”

The maid was quiet for a long time. She didn’t turn and meet Lord Caldimore’s eyes when she finally answered, and that seemed to unnerve the man, the way she kept her gaze locked purely on her potential opponent. As if refusing to allow even a fraction of an opening.

“She sees me as no threat whatsoever,” the maid said calmly. “I would advise against escalating tensions, my lord.”

He was nothing less than dumbfounded at the words. “She’s a gold rank!”

The sound of a palm hitting a face drew everyone’s attention. “This is what I mean,” Jasper exclaimed to the maid. “Why him? You have your choice of assignments, surely. He’s a complete—”

“If you finish that sentence, Lord Adventurer,” the maid interrupted, “there will be no recourse but one. I will *not* suffer aspersions cast on my lord’s name.”

Even Jasper’s cavalier attitude heeded that warning. His teeth clicked shut. A moment later he pursed his lips, obviously unhappy, and nodded at the woman.

He did make a show of peeling off his orichalcum-rank badge, summoning a gold-rank one from his inventory and pinning it to his chest. He flourished both hands at the badge, then fell back into his chair with an eye roll.

Lord Caldimore gaped between the three of them. His gaze finally settled on Vivi.

She could see the moment the reality of the situation set in. He began abruptly sweating, the moral outrage disappearing like a switch had been flipped. Vivi suspected he'd just wanted to rant and throw his weight around, more than he was actually offended—not that it had been entirely an act.

"Does make me wonder what kind of monster you are, though," Jasper said to Vivi, clearly enjoying the show being put on, "to scare a Glove of the Second Class. What dark crevice did you crawl out of? Heard all sorts of stories like this before, mysterious mages showing up out of nowhere." He took a long swig from his bottle. "Let me guess. Dragon in disguise, come to play with the mortals. What do you think of us so far?"

Vivi could feel Saffra's wide eyes turn to her, as if genuinely considering the possibility.

She shot the man an annoyed look and briefly considered whether teleporting him out of the carriage would be an overreaction.

He raised his hands in mock surrender. "Please don't eat me, Great Serpent Queen. Not in public, at least." He winked at her. "Behind closed doors is another matter."

Vivi was impressed at the audacity, if nothing else. However, making an actual *innuendo* gave her the justification she needed. She pulled her staff out, pointed, and cast a spell.

The wine bottle vanished. The man tensed, then relaxed at seeing he wasn't about to fight her.

"I wasn't done with that."

"If I *were* so dangerous, why are you goading me?"

"Mae says I have a death wish. But really, I just like poking bears. It's fun. Try it sometime."

"Seems like it could very easily backfire."

He cracked a lopsided grin. "That's *why* it's fun."

She shook her head and put him out of mind. Facing Lord Caldimore, she said, "When a young woman attempts to excuse herself, is grabbing her

by the arm appropriate behavior?”

His expression soured, and he shot a displeased look at his son, who had gone pale at the preceding exchanges. “That was… unbecoming for one of his lineage,” he gritted out, “and I will not contest that fact. Nevertheless, he is young and entitled to some indiscretions. Your reaction was disproportionate.”

Unsurprisingly, there wasn’t much real remorse in his words. He had taken a more levelheaded tone than before, and clearly was no longer enjoying the confrontation, but his pride—the fact he was being watched by a number of his lackeys—prevented him from backing down entirely.

Vivi wondered how to handle this. Her annoyance had simmered because of Jasper’s interruption. *Actually… did he do that on purpose?*

She was still plenty irritated though. But where she’d been ready to put Barnaby into his place, forcefully if need be, now she just wanted it done with. He’d been cowed. He was just trapped by a need to maintain appearances.

“I assure you, my reaction was proportionate,” Vivi said coldly. “Involve my apprentice a second time, and I will show you a response that is not.”

Turning, she pulled Saffra with her to their spot at the far end of the carriage. Lord Caldimore, wisely, did not stop her.

Saffra was on edge when they sat.

Vivi frowned at her. “There’s only one thing you did wrong, and I expect you don’t know what it is.”

Saffra blinked.

“Why did you apologize?” Vivi asked.

That wasn’t what Saffra had expected, clearly, which was the problem in the first place. “What?”

“Why did you apologize? For what?”

“I… it was my fault that…”

“It was *your* fault?”

“Well… no. But it still happened because of me.”

“You know it didn’t.” Vivi shook her head, trying to calm herself down. “I shouldn’t be scolding. I’m sorry that happened. But don’t blame yourself for things that clearly aren’t your fault. That’s my first rule from master to apprentice.”

Saffra gave a slow, hesitant nod.

Movement in the corner of Vivi's eye caught her attention, and she looked over to see a butler carrying over two plates.

The man cleared his throat. "Sorry to interrupt. These were yours, I believe, my lady?"

Saffra flushed and took them, checking the plates and handing Vivi hers. The butler bowed deeply and left. Once he had, Vivi and Saffra came to a silent, mutual agreement to put the debacle out of mind.

Vivi looked at the assortment of food. The plate was covered with tiny sandwiches with green filling, golden tarts with white cream, other pastries, assortments of fruit, and pieces of what she assumed was chocolate. After plucking one of the sweets up first, she confirmed the fact: definitely chocolate. A little more bitter than what she was used to, but made of quality ingredients.

"Thank you," Vivi said, and Saffra dipped her head.

A minute of sampling the food later, Vivi said wryly, "I think we would have been more comfortable in a different carriage. At least we'll be able to downgrade"—not that it would actually be a downgrade—"at the next station."

"It is a little… tense in here," Saffra admitted, sneaking a look that was, thankfully, now more amused than worried toward the group of noblemen. The men had reclaimed their seats and were purposefully not looking their way. "If I'm being honest, I—"

Saffra's hand had been sneaking up to her neck, a habit Vivi had seen a few times, but the girl froze as her fingers didn't find the silver chain that usually hung there. Whatever she'd been about to say cut off. She groped around, gaze snapping down in horror.

"What is it?" Vivi asked, though it was hardly difficult to guess.

Saffra ignored her. She dragged her pack over and began tearing through it, panic rising with every item she ripped out.

"Saffra," Vivi said, but the girl ignored her. Vivi's concern grew. Obviously, the necklace Saffra had misplaced was more than just something she liked wearing around. "Saffra, calm down."

Vivi considered stopping her, but let the girl go through her frantic motions. For all Vivi knew, she might actually find it.

Eventually, Saffra sagged into her seat with a shell-shocked expression.

"Where did you see it last?" Vivi asked.

“What?” Saffra only then seemed to realize Vivi had been watching the whole event. She didn’t even grow embarrassed—she appeared too miserable. “I… it should have been…” She bit her lip as she tried to remember. Her eyes squeezed shut in sudden realization. “My room at the Guild. I took it off last night. It must have gotten lost in the sheets, and I didn’t remember to look for it when I woke up.”

Vivi nodded. “Give me a strand of your hair.”

“What?”

She supposed it was a strange request to ask out of nowhere. “For a [Locate Object] spell. I’ll go and retrieve it.”

“…what?” Saffra looked out the nearest window at the blurring landscape beyond. “We’re hours away. By Convoy.”

“It shouldn’t take me more than an hour or two.” She had a warp point in Prismarche, naturally, and she could also place one right outside the train to reduce how many [Blinks] she needed to catch up with it. “Hair, please.”

Vivi could wait until they reached the next city, but she worried that something would happen to the necklace in the meantime—perhaps it would be scooped up with the sheets and laundered, ruining it somehow, or maybe be stolen. She had magical solutions if either of those wound up being the case, but for an item so clearly important to Saffra, she would rather just go fetch it.

Returning to Prismarche to check in on the dimensional anomaly was worth a trip anyway. Knowing she’d left a city of vulnerable people behind with that thing hanging over their heads made her skin itch. There was no harm in verifying it was still stable. Plus, the two prisoners were worth checking on.

“But how?” Saffra shook her head, probably coming to her own conclusions. “No, it’s fine.” It clearly wasn’t. “You don’t need to do that. I’ve already been so much trouble…”

Vivi gave her a look. “You haven’t been *any* trouble. And I have my own business that makes the trip worth it. It’s a simple errand.” She held her hand out.

Saffra seemed immensely relieved, but also guilty. She plucked out some strands of red hair and gave them to Vivi, who stored them in her inventory.

Before [Blinking] out of the Convoy to set a [Warp Anchor] near the tracks, Vivi paused. Her eyes slid over to the disgruntled group of

noblemen. Surely they wouldn’t try anything while she was gone, but best to be safe.

“I’m going to put some defensive spells on you, just in case,” Vivi told Saffra. And by that, she meant her highest-tier defensive ones. The full array. The Ashen Hierophant himself would have struggled to break through. “And if they try anything, tell them I’ll be back shortly and will be *very* displeased.”

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DELAYS

The world lurched. With a sensation like she'd been grabbed and hurled across the continent by a titan, Vivi materialized in Prismarche's town square.

The space bustled with activity. The Peace Day festival carried on in full swing, though there wasn't quite the same level of fervent celebration underway. Excitement at that pitch couldn't last a full week, not to mention it was still early in the afternoon. By evening, she had no doubt the city's raucous revelry would return.

Since she found it unlikely that Lord Caldimore and his goons would try anything with Saffra, she was in no rush. But she had also picked up on the fact that Fate, if it existed, liked playing games, so she didn't intend to dawdle.

She made her way across the city and into the Adventurer's Guild. Inside was much the same as outside: a spirit of excitement filled the air. A man was slumped against one wall, likely passed out from the prior night. It seemed like he'd had a little too much fun. She doubted he was the only one.

About two seconds after she'd walked in, a hush started to fall over the gathered adventurers. All eyes slowly landed on her. A building's worth of people stopped what they were doing and turned to look at her with plain interest. Vivi nearly crawled out of her skin.

Her reputation preceded her. Seeing how she had arrived in Prismarche only a day prior, she officially chalked up her mission of 'lying low' to a

catastrophic failure.

Feeling eyes digging into her back, she walked to the receptionist's desk. Funnily enough, the brown-haired woman seemed *less* hungover than yesterday.

Her eyes, like everyone else's, glimmered with curiosity. What had she been told? Had the Guildmaster or Guard Captain been spreading compromising information? Even if not, Vivi had been teleporting around in plain sight. She had herself to blame for this.

She needed to wash her hands of Prismarche as soon as possible. Unfortunately, that wouldn't be happening for a while with the giant dimensional anomaly hanging in the sky. She couldn't bury her head in the sand when people's lives might be at stake; she would be here often over the following weeks.

At least the receptionist stayed professional. "How can I help, miss?"

"I'm looking for a necklace," Vivi said without preamble. "Saffra's, if you know her. Red hair, cat beastkin. She thinks she left it in her room."

"Let me see if anything was dropped off." She disappeared under the counter. A moment later, she rose with a wooden container in her hand. After rummaging around, she pulled out a handkerchief and unfolded it. "Would this be it?"

Vivi blinked at Saffra's silver necklace lying nestled in the cloth. The ridiculousness of yesterday and this morning had conditioned her to expect every task to somehow turn into a quest. She hadn't even needed to use a divining spell.

"Yes, I believe so. Thank you."

She took the offered item. It was a simple silver locket. She almost popped it open to see what was inside, but stopped herself. Supremely powerful mage she might be, that didn't give her permission to go sticking her nose where it didn't belong. While her curiosity urged her to take a peek, she wouldn't violate Saffra's privacy.

She tucked the item into her inventory for safekeeping.

"That's all I needed. Have a nice rest of your day."

"You as well, miss."

Upon turning, she saw a blond knight waiting a polite distance away. He smiled when their eyes met, then started to approach with a confident stride, hand resting casually on his sword's pommel.

No, definitely not.

“[Blink].”

Space warped around her, and she appeared in the alleyway to the side of the Guild. Having deftly avoided what had surely been another side quest, she nodded to herself in satisfaction. She might have heard the man out if he’d looked worried or desperate, but he hadn’t.

Next up was the City Guard. Specifically, the two prisoners. The tracking spells she’d dropped on them told her they were still where they were supposed to be, but she wanted to put eyes on them herself. It was becoming a nervous habit, like constantly checking for her purse and phone whenever she left her apartment. She paused at the absurd comparison, and snorted.

Every minute she wasted in Prismarche was another [Blink] spell to catch up with the train hurtling across the continent, so she set a brisk pace.

After a discussion at the guardhouse, a guard escorted her to the holding cells, and another ran off to undoubtedly make a report to the Captain. Internally, she sighed. She would probably wind up having to speak with him as well. Seeing how she’d been gone all of a few hours, though, she doubted much could have developed on the dimensional-anomaly front.

“We have visitors, just so you’re aware, Lady Adventurer,” the middle-aged guard said, sounding nervous to address her—which continued to weird Vivi out. Tiptoeing around *her* with respect, seeming concerned about how she might reply? Being scared of her? She was some stick-thin shut-in girl whose head barely came up to most people’s chests—including this man’s. It felt way too bizarre.

“Visitors?” she asked.

“From the Enchanter’s Guild.”

Her brow furrowed.

Ah. No doubt related to how she’d fixed up the cell’s wards. But she hadn’t done anything crazy, had she? The enchantments had been simple.

…to her. She braced herself to discover another fresh way her perspective was skewed.

The guard unlocked the iron door and let her in.

The sight that met her nearly made her laugh with resigned exasperation. Sure enough, a gaggle of robed enchanters were inside. Seven in total, five in their waning years, two young. All had a book in hand, or multiple, and were discussing something fervently amongst themselves, or

muttering. Their eyes flicked from books to wall repeatedly, and they wore expressions of incredulity, amazement, and in one case, greed.

Two were arguing so heatedly their voices carried above the rest. An older man and an older woman, giving the impression they were the two eldest—in both manners of speaking—members of the local branch of the Enchanter's Guild.

"—utterly ridiculous suggestion! *Kaltaz* clearly flows into *Mylna*, suggesting a rerouting of external forces into the internal. For a sufficient—"

The woman wasn't listening. Her voice vied with his in volume: "—the buffoonery to even *suggest* this design is following modern enchanting patterns when even a *first-year* could identify a classical pre-Turning—!"

The creak of the iron door succeeded in drawing the attention of everyone present. Once more, all eyes fell on Vivi.

Mentally, her nose wrinkled. *Yeah, this sucks. I really need to be more careful about keeping a low profile*.

The orichalcum-rank warrior seated on a wooden chair nodded at her, the only person to react in a nonchalant manner. She nodded back. The man didn't look happy to be watching over the mithril-rank prisoners with such a raucous crowd of enchanters crowding the thin hallway.

"You're her," one of the robed individuals said dumbly.

She surveyed the men and women, internally cringing. "I'm here to check on the prisoners." Her voice was flat and unaffected, which she hoped would dissuade them from pestering her.

It didn't. "Aha!" the male of the two bickering elders crowed. "We can put your inanity to rest, Sylvia." He swept his robes aside and strutted forward with a peacock's confidence. Arriving a few steps away, he bowed at the waist with a flourish. "Mistress Enchanter, if you would do us the honor, I have a few questions about the work you've done here."

Vivi almost wished she'd developed a reputation for having a bad temper and generally being dangerous to speak to, because people were *much* too comfortable walking up to her. It wasn't that she didn't want to help people—she did, what else would she use this power for?—but rather that she wasn't great at saying no even when she had places to be.

"…what is it?" she asked, resigned to her fate.

He shot Sylvia a gloating look, as if he'd secured a great victory by requisitioning a moment of Vivi's time. "I hope you don't mind our

intrusion—these enchantments you've worked are truly fascinating." He gestured at the runes written to both sides of the two cells. "It's been some time since I've been in the presence of a Grandmaster of Enchanting, which surely you must be?"

The flattery didn't do much for Vivi, especially because she didn't have a frame of reference for what a 'Grandmaster of Enchanting' even was. *An internal hierarchy within the guild, maybe?*

"No. I am not."

He seemed taken aback, then nodded to himself. "Or the demonic equivalent, of course, I'm afraid I'm not familiar," he said, making his own assumptions. "Regardless! This here." He walked over and gestured at an arrangement of runes.

Vivi looked at the alert faces of the enchanters who were clearly hanging on whatever she was about to say, and she repressed another sigh.

She stepped inside, holding up a hand to temporarily cut off further questions; first, she wanted to confirm that Lailah and Dominic were in their cells. Dominic was asleep on his cot, or at least pretending to be. Lailah sat against a wall—she had been gagged. Vivi paused seeing that, then felt a vindictive flash of entertainment. She wondered what the woman had said to warrant the treatment. She could imagine. The woman glared at Vivi, as always, and she ignored her, also as always.

"Alright," Vivi said, satisfied nothing had changed. "What was your question?"

"This arrangement of runes." The man gestured excitedly at the clumping. "There's been a professional disagreement as to their purpose. See, *Kaltaz*, flowing into *Mylna* surely represents a redirection from external into internal. Considering the context…" He trailed off, blinking owlishly at the surrounding runes. "Which is admittedly abstruse even to me, I've put forth the postulation that the intent is a rebounding effect of sorts—to catch and return spells originating inside the cell that are targeted outward."

She considered. For all that the man didn't have the most endearing attitude, he clearly knew what he was talking about. It was a great guess. Deciphering magical runes could give even high-level mages a headache. Of course, Vivisari could read the designs as if they were written in plain English, but only she was fortunate enough to be borrowing the experienced mind of the world's eminent archmage.

“That’s partially correct,” Vivi said. “It’s only targeting a specific subbranch of magical phenomena. Spatial manipulations. It’s a spatial lock.”

The man went silent, his briefly gloating look at the words ‘partially correct’ fading into a dumbstruck expression.

“A spatial lock?”

Vivi nodded.

It was a crude implementation, seeing how she’d needed to work with the supplies the City Guard had given her, but she assumed it would suffice for anything below level fourteen hundred.

“I… see.” The man pulled out a notebook and a pen appeared from nowhere. He began scribbling furiously. “If you would be so kind, could you elaborate on that idea?” He jabbed the butt of his pen at the wall and circled the air to indicate another clumping of runes. “This would be the definition array, then, for the local effect zone?”

With dawning dread, Vivi realized it might be some time before she could escape. She needed to learn to say no to people… but today apparently wasn’t that day.

When she reached Meridian, she was *definitely* going to do a better job of keeping to herself.

Guard Captain Soren found her a half hour later surrounded by an unwanted group of seven bright-eyed pupils. To her immense relief, he gave her an excuse to flee.

The Guard Captain’s eyes twinkled. He clearly could tell she wanted to be free of their clutches—deciphering that wasn’t hard with how quickly she ran away. He was too much of a professional to comment though.

“Prismarche thanks you again for sharing your wisdom, Lady Adventurer,” he said instead. “I must admit I was surprised when I received a report that you were visiting so soon.”

“Just ensuring those two haven’t escaped, somehow. And checking on the anomaly.” Her eyes flicked up and to the right, finding the mana currents through the layers of stone.

“Indeed. Though, I was under the impression you were departing the city. I was told you were seen boarding the Convoy. Yet here you are. Did something happen?”

She couldn’t quite be annoyed that the City Guard was keeping tabs on her, even if she didn’t like the idea that her movements were being tracked. It was only reasonable for a security force. “I did leave. And intend to catch back up. I simply needed to retrieve something that was left behind.”

He blinked. “I… see.” He shook his head as if to dismiss his curiosity. “I’m pleased there’s nothing to concern myself over. However, and I extend my apologies in advance for this request, the Institute has questions regarding the anomaly that Marcus simply cannot answer. They have a team on the way, but would like as much information as possible, as quickly as possible. If you could help him formulate his response, Prismarche would be even further in your debt.”

He bowed deeply.

Ugh. How can I say no when he’s so polite? Curse this man.

She’d known she would get sidetracked in Prismarche, so she had given her estimate to Saffra with that in mind.

“Every minute I spend here the Convoy gets farther away,” Vivi sighed. “But yes—I will spare a minute. Only that, though.”

“You… truly plan to catch it,” Captain Soren said. “The Convoy. The same one you boarded three hours ago.”

“Yes.”

He stared at her, then nodded. “Of course. Without further delay, then. I shall escort you.”

Vivi followed behind the Guard Captain as he turned crisply on his heel and walked away.

After this, she promised herself. *No more getting sidetracked*.

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22

SUDDEN

It was a given that apprentices were burdens on their masters. Even so, Saffra couldn't help but feel she'd been nothing but a nuisance to Lady Vivi, and she'd been her apprentice for all of half a day.

Guilty as she felt, her relief was stronger. Her necklace was the last thing she had to remember her village by. Even the prospect that she might have lost it had her hands turning clammy and anxious energy filling her.

But Vivi would find it. She could cast [Locate Object], and the resonating link should be strong enough to guarantee the divination. Especially since Saffra had only lost it that morning.

How would Lady Vivi make the trip to Prismarche and back in 'one or two hours,' though? [Blink] was a short-range teleportation spell, and even that woman didn't have infinite mana. Did she have access to even-higher-tier spatial workings?

Saffra had been avoiding thinking about just how strong the woman teaching her was. In all honesty, it stressed her out. That she was being personally trained by an orichalcum already felt too ridiculous to be real. And the likely reality that Vivi was *higher* than that was something she couldn't come to terms with.

Someone like her would never luck into a Titled mage as a teacher, even if the arrangement was temporary. This wouldn't work out in the end, Saffra knew, since nothing did. But she was ready for that, and all she wanted was a little training until then. Being a nuisance to her mentor wasn't helping in that regard.

To settle her unease, she dove back into practice. She'd memorized the spell design for [Scorchlance] even if she couldn't trace it yet. Maybe if she made progress while Vivi was gone, that would make up for the errand Saffra had sent the woman on.

She'd been worried Lord Caldimore or another of the nobles would approach her, but no one did. Neither did Jasper Trevane—she wouldn't have been surprised if he came over to pry about Vivi either. She didn't dislike the man, or sense anything suspicious about him, but he did make her nervous in the way any orichalcum would—or, honestly, any adult man she didn't know well. But more so the first part. It was only sensible to be doubtful of people who could fight entire battalions of bronze-rankers and come out unscathed.

Saffra was deeply focused on tracing the third rune of the twenty-seven in [Scorchlance]'s ridiculously complicated design when, all of a sudden, up became down. She slammed into the ceiling, hit the wall in the next instant, then was thrown down the carriage with such force she broke the table of food in half. Dishes shattered around her, and an utter cacophony of other noises joined in.

It wasn't just her. The entire carriage had erupted into chaos.

Disoriented, she scrambled to her feet.

Had the Convoy *crashed?*

She hadn't felt a thing even though she'd been hurled across the cab. Rainbow sparks had flown with every heavy impact made with ceiling, wall, and furniture, and when the turmoil ended, the carriage's wall had become the floor. Yet she hadn't experienced even a hint of pain.

She'd spent months as a career adventurer, and even before had been no stranger to a sudden crisis. Her heart threatened to gallop out of her throat, but she kept control of her panic and made sense of what had happened.

Jasper Trevane and the White Glove were, like her, alert and standing. The different noblemen were crumpled or sprawled in various places. None looked injured, just shocked and slow to respond. Either their personal artifacts had activated, or the Lounge's internal enchantments had.

Not a single glass window had shattered despite the impact. This carriage was better protected than some castles, she reminded herself.

"What in all of creation!" Lord Caldimore bellowed as he was helped to his feet by the White Glove, whose uniform remained, somehow, unruffled. Her expression didn't indicate a hint of concern or shock, as if this was

utterly routine. Everyone knew White Gloves were cut from a different cloth, but Saffra was impressed to see the proof of it.

The interior of the train car was ruined. Most of the furniture had been bolted down and thus hung from the floor-turned-wall, but shards of dishware were everywhere, and the rich velvet upholstery was torn in places, revealing white stuffing.

Saffra checked herself over. That was always the first step after coming out of a fight that had gone wrong. But she was fine. Not a cut anywhere.

She owed Lady Vivi yet another debt. It might have been the Lounge's enchantments that had protected her, since everyone else looked fine too, but the sparks of prismatic light told her it had more so been Vivi's spells.

Jasper Trevane was the first to take action. He walked up beneath the exit door, jumped to grab the release lever, and pulled.

She felt immensely relieved that there was someone competent in their midst. A second later, she realized that the only reason there weren't *two* such individuals was because she had sent Vivi off to retrieve her necklace.

Saffra started laughing. She couldn't help herself. If everything in her life prior to this moment hadn't been enough proof, this confirmed it: Fate hated her. The Convoy had derailed, and by pure chance, the likely Titled mage who could've protected everyone had been sent off on a pointless fetch quest.

Her laughter drew concerned looks from those in the carriage, but she ignored them. The hysterical amusement left her shortly, and she went quiet.

Jasper hadn't paid much attention to her. He had pried open the exit door—to an explosion of protests from the passengers—and peeked outside.

"Better to know what we're up against," he called to the complainers. "And people are gonna need help. Not everyone's got an enchanted carriage to hide in. Don't worry, I'll close it after me, you slimy bastards."

The last was delivered under his breath, though loud enough she doubted anyone had missed it.

He hefted himself up and out—surprising herself, Saffra rushed after him.

He paused when he saw her, then reached in and offered a hand. She jumped and grabbed it; he hauled her out.

“If you get yourself hurt, your master will probably kill me,” he commented amusedly—yet he didn’t try to talk her out of her decision. He closed the door behind him, and Saffra felt the enchantment seal the space closed.

The Lounge was safer than anything for a hundred miles, and Vivi had paid two *mithril* to give her access to it. Why, exactly, had she rushed out of it?

“Can’t the… the White Glove help too?” Saffra asked.

“Not unless her lord orders her to, and you can take a guess how likely that is.”

Jasper stood and scanned the aftermath. Saffra, frowning at his answer, did the same.

It was a sobering sight.

They were in the middle of a yellow, orange, and red field of grass, hills rolling off into the distance as far as the eye could see. The Emberblade Plains. She wasn’t familiar with the terrain this far north, but this scenery was iconic. A mithril-rank hunting ground, yet still one of the safest ways into the secluded reaches that hosted Prismarche.

The Convoy had derailed. Dozens of carriages lay on their side, having torn up the field and left huge tracts of dirt and flattened grass. The frontmost section of the vehicle had slid two hundred feet at least—whatever had hit them, had hit them *hard*. As her gaze followed the snaking trail of cars, she saw that the second half of the train—mostly cargo, but some passenger cars—remained upright and connected to the track.

It was as if the front had decided to take an abrupt left turn and dragged most of the Convoy along with it. With expected results.

The Convoy was the safest, fastest way to travel in the Kingdoms, but it wasn’t *perfectly* safe. One in a thousand trips, events like this did happen.

Thankfully, because it wasn’t an unheard-of event, a response team would be on the way. Until then, however, they would be on their own.

Jasper whistled. “Now *that’s* a beastie,” he murmured with genuine awe.

Stomach sinking, Saffra turned around.

Half a mile away, a two-headed crow the size of a building was dragging the engine car off in two enormous talons, wings flapping desperately as it tried to haul its prize into the air. It was failing—no doubt thanks to the defensive enchantments. The block of metal was simply too heavy and protected, even for a monster of that tier.

She tried to inspect the beast, but received a screen that read:

Inspection failed.

Unsurprisingly, the monster was so far beyond her that she couldn't glean even its name, much less level and other details.

"What *is* it?" she asked, horrified. She had read through a number of bestiaries in preparation for making adventuring a career, but she couldn't remember finding an entry on something like *that*.

"Ghul-Feather," Jasper said. "Undead type, level 1205." He laughed, somehow finding that terrifying statement amusing. Something was wrong with this man. "It's after the power cores, thank the heavens. Even I couldn't do much if it came after us. Good thing it has what it wants already."

Twelve hundred and five. Saffra's mind boggled. Everyone knew Titled-rank monsters existed, and in unsettlingly large numbers, but unless someone went questing out into the most dangerous parts of the world, you would never actually *see* one. Humanity, and every other race, had settled far away from such zones for a reason.

"Never mind that, though," Jasper said as Saffra watched the gigantic crow give up on trying to lift the engine car into the air and instead begin scraping its claws and pecking its beaks into the door. "Let's see what we can do about this."

She shook herself out of her morbid fascination and turned to the derailed train. A sense of grimness settled over her. Because right—never mind the monster. They had a more pressing disaster to deal with.

How many people had been killed? While nobody in the Lounge had been more than bruised, common folk didn't have the benefit of defensive artifacts and the Lounge's protective enchantments. Nor the enhanced constitution that came with levels.

The collision wouldn't have killed *most* people, but there would undoubtedly be fatalities—and far more injured.

Jasper was already jogging across the carriages, jumping the gaps with long strides. He didn't wait for her to join him, which pleased her. So many people treated her like a child despite the badge on her chest. Jasper hadn't given a word of protest when she'd climbed out of the Lounge, nor was he babying her now. He expected her to keep up. Or do as she pleased, independently.

"Aren't there people in these cars?" Saffra yelled as she hurried to catch him. She passed over a window painted with blood on the inside and felt her skin go cold.

"The rich ones can take care of themselves," Jasper called back. "They'll have emergency potions. Plus, first class is where golds and mithrils will be. I'm headed for the back, where they'll need us more."

That was reasonable, even if Saffra squirmed at the idea of ignoring *anyone* who might need help. But if there was a group that needed *more* aid, then yes, Jasper was right. That was where they should go.

There were parts of the train that were much worse off. Certain sections had crumpled in entirely, the connectors having twisted and snapped as momentum carried one carriage into another. It was one such grisly portion of the Convoy that Jasper stopped at.

"It's not going to be pretty," he warned.

Saffra nodded. He almost seemed like he would say more, but didn't. He looked at a window, grimaced, then stomped on it. The impact rattled the surrounding metal. He stomped harder. The glass cracked. The basic defenses of the Convoy were more impressive than she'd assumed, taking direct hits from an orichalcum.

The window broke on the third blow, and he used his longbow to scrape the opening clear. He stuck his head into the hole, looked around, and hopped inside.

Bracing herself for what she might find, Saffra did the same.

It was… not as bad as it could have been. If there was one silver lining to this nightmare, it was that the disaster had come when the Convoy was running at low capacity. Few people had left Prismarche in the middle of the festival. Normally, the Convoy's cheaper carriages would be packed to the gills. She didn't want to imagine what the interior would have looked like if that had been the case.

Even still, there were two dozen people who had been thrown around. Most were pale-faced and panicked, wrapping their injuries with their

jackets and shirts, or aiding others with similar. They'd moved away from the window Jasper had been breaking through, not knowing it was an adventurer. Upon catching sight of him, or rather, the badge on his chest, they seemed immensely relieved twice over—first because it wasn't a monster, and second, because an orichalcum-rank adventurer had come to help.

The seating inside was torn and tossed around, since the cabin itself had been bent at nearly a ninety-degree angle. Personal belongings were strewn everywhere. One of the men was cradling an obviously broken arm.

Hope bloomed on their faces as they looked at Jasper, but the adventurer didn't spare a second glance for them.

"Monsters will start swarming before long," he called to them. "Get to the back of the convoy, where the aether cannons are still standing. Quick, now. Out the back door, you can reach it yourselves."

He scanned the space as he spoke, not paying attention to his audience. Those were the ones who had lived and were conscious, after all. He'd come here for other reasons. His eyes fell on a body pinned between two rows of seats, caught in the worst way by how the carriage had bent on impact.

Saffra had seen corpses before, and had seen people killed in less-kind ways than this. At least this one had been fast. Still, she wasn't some war veteran who had spent years on the front lines. She forced herself to stay calm. Panic made a person worse than useless.

Jasper went for the man and Saffra jogged after him, while also looking through the rest of the carriage for anyone else who might need help. But miraculously, the only casualty seemed to be the one.

She grimaced as she watched Jasper slide between the seats. The dead man's torso was bent over one of the chairs. She wasn't sure why Jasper was—

"He's alive," Jasper said, and Saffra looked at him in horror. He patted the man on the cheek but received no response. "There'll be at least one gold-rank healer in the Convoy, a mithril if we're lucky, but it's going to take time for everyone to organize. I'm not sure we can do anything for this one."

He shrugged and slid out. The callousness—even if Saffra knew pragmatism was necessary when dealing with a disaster of this scale—stunned her. She couldn't accuse him of not caring, not after how he'd left

the Lounge to come help with the aftermath, but she blurted out, “Don’t you have a potion or something?”

It was only then that Saffra remembered *she* had a potion. The realization struck her dumb.

Jasper looked over his shoulder. “The only ones that could fix a crushed spine,” he said, thumbing at the pinned man, “I need to keep for myself. If I use one of my emergency potions and don’t have it when I need it while defending us from monsters, I might kill the entire Convoy in turn. No. My potions are for me.”

It was the sort of cold, brutal logic that, painful as it was, had to be acknowledged. The idea of purposefully leaving someone to die ‘for the greater good’ made her feel sick though.

“I have one,” Saffra mumbled. “But I don’t know if…”

Jasper’s brow furrowed. It took a moment, but he was a sharp man; he drew the correct conclusion. “Your mentor. She gave you an emergency potion.”

It was hardly an unusual practice, hence the quick deduction. “I think it’s really strong. She said I would have to dilute it if I wanted to use it.”

He frowned. “Dilute it? A single drop of water might cut a potion’s potency in half. She *told* you to do that?”

“I’m nearly gold rank, and she said it would have to be diluted ‘a lot.’”

He raised his eyebrows, then turned considering. “If true, it’s strong. Something that might even fix that.” He glanced at the mangled man.

“Yeah.”

“But a potion like that is beyond valuable. The sort of relic even I can’t get my hands on.”

Saffra’s shoulders slouched. “Yeah.”

He studied her, then finished stating the problem: “I can’t imagine many masters would be okay with their apprentice using their emergency potion on a stranger. Especially a relic-class potion. She gave it to you, for you. For *your* emergency.”

Saffra closed her eyes.

Jasper worked his jaw back and forth. He looked at the unconscious man who would surely be dead soon.

“Well, it’s yours, not mine. Make your decision,” he said, not unkindly. “He doesn’t have long.”

Saffra hesitated.

Then, obviously, she withdrew the potion.

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23

PLANS

The liquid inside the conical flask was surprisingly inconspicuous, as was the container itself. Made of plain glass with a skinny neck plugged by a cork, the bottle had a design that wasn't nearly fancy enough for how powerful she knew it must be.

Saffra asked, "Can you see anything when you [Inspect] it?"

"No." Jasper seemed impressed. "Not even a name. And I can identify potions better than most. One of my teammates is an alchemist."

Saffra swallowed. It made sense that *she* couldn't decipher a name and level from Vivi's potion, but even an orichalcum familiar with alchemy couldn't?

"Open it," Jasper said. "It's not an accurate way to measure how strong a potion is, but you can get a feel for its potency by the fumes. The stronger ones leak out mana, sometimes a lot." He glanced at the man pinned between two rows of seats. "Quickly, now, if you're considering this. I wouldn't blame you if you chose not to. Dragons are stingy about their hoard. Even a regular master might not be happy with their apprentice giving away a top-tier potion, let alone whatever your teacher is."

"She's not a dragon," Saffra said. It felt somewhat surreal that she was only *mostly* sure of that fact.

"Yeah, sure, kid. On with it."

Saffra hesitated a moment longer before pulling out the cork.

Magic flooded the air, so thick and bright to her senses that she jerked her head and eyes away. The raw vitality of a thousand verdant forests and

all the life within gushed in waves out of the glass. She swore the air congealed physically, the mana was so dense.

In a panic, Saffra fumbled the cork back on. Trace amounts of the potion's total mana stopped leaking out.

Trace amounts?

That was the impression she'd gotten from the *fumes?*

She shared a wide-eyed look with Jasper, and even he seemed speechless for the first time. His mouth worked soundlessly.

"She's definitely a dragon," he said.

"She's not a dragon." Saffra wasn't convinced anymore, not remotely.

"Well, I reckon it'll do the job. Decide. We're not flush with time."

Saffra looked at him with distress. "What *should* I do?"

"That potion is liquid starmetal," he said simply. "Easily level fourteen hundred or above. Probably higher. A genuine relic. I don't know anything about you two though. She's your master, not mine. How upset would she be?"

"She took me as her apprentice this morning," Saffra said miserably.

Jasper paused. He patted her on the shoulder. Not unsympathetically, he said, "Decide."

This wasn't fair.

She was already on rocky footing with Vivi. While she seemed like the sort of person who cared about keeping people safe, this potion was beyond valuable. It was undoubtedly the most expensive item Saffra had ever held —by orders of magnitude. Quite literally worth its weight in starmetal.

Would Vivi be furious if she used it to heal people who wouldn't survive otherwise? Angry enough that she would nullify the already-tentative apprenticeship and perhaps seek repayment?

Or retribution? It might be valuable enough to warrant that.

Saffra didn't get the feeling that Vivi would care much if it were a normal potion, or even an orichalcum-rank potion like Jasper's, but this flask of liquid might be worth a small castle.

Or perhaps it was literally priceless. The sort of miraculous panacea the High King himself would keep on his person.

Why had Lady Vivi given one to *her?*

She felt sick to her stomach. No matter what happened, whether this potion wasn't rightfully hers to give away, she couldn't let people die if she could do something about it.

“How much do I dilute it?” Saffra asked.

Jasper didn’t try to convince her away from her decision. He focused on the practical; Saffra had already wasted enough time. “Estimate high. He’s going to be in bad shape once I pull him out and will need instant healing. Say… nine parts water, one part potion.”

Saffra gaped. “You said a single drop of water might cut it in half.”

“It’s not a science. And you felt it. There’s enough restorative magic in that potion to regrow a forest—several of them. I think that might be too *little* dilution, but I’m no alchemist, I just know one. Quick, now.” He was already positioning himself in front of the seat.

Saffra fumbled her waterskin off her belt and uncapped it, then uncorked the potion. She had to mute her magical senses so she didn’t go blind. It was indescribable, the feeling of overgrowth that radiated out of the thin neck of the flask.

Her hands shaking only slightly, she poured one part potion to nine parts water into the waterskin. The red liquid swirled orange as it fell and made a sizzling sound upon impact.

She capped both containers and shook the waterskin, mixing the substance around.

“Ready?” Jasper asked.

Saffra nodded.

With a hard pull, the orichalcum-rank adventurer ripped the seat out of place, freeing the unconscious man. Jasper grabbed him, pulled him over, and dropped him to the ground. The rough handling didn’t matter; either the potion saved the man or he was dead anyway.

Jasper stuck a hand out. Saffra gave him the flask, and he uncapped it and poured some into the man’s mouth, massaging his neck to force the liquid down. It was a first-aid technique every adventurer knew, for this exact scenario.

The man’s body had been… broken. Gruesomely enough that Saffra had been struggling to keep her eyes on him. She couldn’t believe he hadn’t died instantly. Even a high-tier potion shouldn’t have been able to help him, not with such an imminently fatal injury.

Yet, even diluted ten times over, and thus probably hundreds of times weaker than its base state, Vivi’s potion had no trouble whatsoever. Saffra watched with morbid fascination as the man’s body *fixed* itself. It was as unnerving a sight as the injuries themselves, to be honest. He glowed white

and green with pure, overwhelming restorative magic, flesh weaving and spine snapping together with a noise she would always remember.

He shot up, hacking and gasping, both hands clutching at his chest. Brilliant light leaked from his skin, excess magic flowing out. His head pivoted from side to side, eyes wild—and slightly glowing—trying to understand what had happened.

Jasper looked at the waterskin in his hand. He shook it, liquid sloshing in response.

"Fuck me," he muttered. "Barely used a swig of it."

Meaning her flask was now a miracle solution with at least a dozen more doses inside.

Saffra tried not to think about what even the small percent of the potion she'd used was worth. Definitely more money than she would earn in her lifetime. This was a Titled's emergency potion. Something beyond that.

A potion taken from a dragon's hoard, maybe.

She shoved that ridiculous idea away. Lady Vivi wasn't a dragon.

Right?

…it did explain why her 'common knowledge' was so spotty. And why someone so obscenely powerful had shown up out of nowhere.

I am not *apprenticed to a dragon*, Saffra firmly reassured herself.

Jasper patted the man on the shoulder. "No time to explain. Glad to see you're alright. Go join the others." He stood, capped the waterskin, and tossed it back to Saffra, who caught it with a fumble.

"Let's go see who else we can save," he told her.

It was bleak work, picking through the wreckage to find those who needed Vivi's potion. Saffra took refuge in the fact that, no matter how bloody the experience and how concerned she was for her tentative apprenticeship status, she *was* saving lives.

Enough time had passed that the passengers of the Convoy had begun organizing. Particularly the adventurers. Jasper and Saffra weren't the only ones working through carriages for the injured.

As Jasper had predicted, there were a few healers, though sadly none above gold rank. Those four individuals had set up near the functioning

magical artillery—the other turrets disabled by virtue of being planted into the ground—and they were treating the injured as they came.

When the chaos had settled, Saffra had used more than three-quarters of the potion, repeatedly diluting it with her waterskin. She stared at the flask with dismay sinking low in her stomach. Yes, she'd definitely ended her apprenticeship before it began. An apprentice being a nuisance by forgetting a necklace a city over was one thing, but one burning through tens of thousands of gold without permission was another entirely.

"Worry about it later," Jasper said. "We're far from out of this. Let's meet up with the rest."

The overturned part of the Convoy had been evacuated, and civilians were boarding the less-damaged section at the back. The adventurers above bronze rank stood outside in a group of fifty or sixty.

On the way over, Jasper muttered, "Hate being the leader. Not my role at all." He strode up to the group of adventurers and, despite what he'd said, called out in an authoritative voice, "All eyes on me."

All eyes did, indeed, turn to him. Bodies too, after they saw who was speaking. In moments, the group's heated discussions had stilled. They all looked at Jasper. As a result, at Saffra too. She shrank at their attention.

"Organize," Jasper ordered. "Silvers, golds, mithrils." He pointed to a fresh section of grass with each rank. "Let's see what we're working with."

There was a moment of silence as those gathered considered him, then everyone obeyed. An orichalcum rank commanded instant respect. It was possible several people recognized Jasper simply by face and reputation. Titled were the rarest adventurers, but orichalcums were uncommon enough their names crossed kingdom borders as well—especially the more established orichalcums.

Saffra wondered if the order applied to her too, and she took a hesitant step toward the gathering group of silvers. But Jasper's hand dropped onto her shoulder when she did, so she stayed put.

There were three mithrils, twelve golds, and a few dozen silvers. Jasper looked them over, then nodded. In any other situation, it would have been an impressive gathering.

In a bright tone, Jasper said, "I'll be honest, gents, we're probably fucked. At least one of you has put it together, right?"

That brought a sober silence to the group. Some faces were taken aback by the opening announcement, some confused and angry, and some silently

grim. Those were the ones who knew what Jasper meant, probably. Saffra herself didn't, so she gave him a confused look.

It was one of the silver ranks who spoke. An old straight-backed woman with a sword and shield, face severe. "The Ghul-Feather disabled the engine car. That's where the power cores are."

"Right you are," Jasper said. "Meaning, these lovely aether-cannons? Just for decoration." He paused and amended, "They might generate enough power to deal with some mithril-level monsters and lower before they sputter out. Not more than that."

A uniform look of horror fell over the adventurers who hadn't known. Saffra too. She knew this was a terrible situation, but Convoy attacks weren't unheard of. The aether cannons were supposed to handle threats even beyond Titled—though obviously not level twelve hundred, like that Ghul-Feather. She had thought everyone would simply hunker down and wait for help.

She could have intuited that the engine car's removal would create complications, but she hadn't known it would disable their defenses entirely. *Why does the Convoy have such an obvious single point of failure?*

Probably because there was no helping it. And that 'single point of failure' was absurdly fortified. A glance into the distance showed the level 1200 monster still failing to penetrate the carriage's hull. It was pacing around the block of metal, clearly frustrated. It let out a two-headed caw that filled the air for miles in every direction, making Saffra wince and her ears flatten against her head. She didn't know how the monster had torn the engine car away, but the carriage itself was unbelievably tough.

"So what do we do?" one of the gold ranks demanded.

Jasper planted his huge bow in the ground and leaned on it, grinning. "There's one bit of silver lining, so don't go crying for your mothers quite yet."

Everyone hung on his words, until it became clear Jasper was waiting for someone to prompt him.

An irritated mithril rank, a dwarven warrior, growled through his thick beard, "Stop with the theatrics, son. Not the time nor place. Speak plainly."

"The silver lining is that our glorious hero is no doubt on her way."

He waited expectantly, and one of the gold ranks was impatient enough to prompt, "Our glorious hero?"

Saffra had a bad feeling. She reached up to pull on Jasper's sleeve and hiss something at him, but he stepped away and flourished two open arms at Saffra, as if presenting something incredible.

"Behold," Jasper cried out. "The apprentice of the great and terrible—"

Before the third word out of his mouth, Saffra had already begun repeatedly kicking the man on his shin. Thank the heavens, he cut himself off before finishing whatever insane title he'd been about to give Lady Vivi. He laughed as he danced away from her furious attacks.

Her face was burning so brightly it probably matched her hair. "Shut *up*," she hissed. "What is *wrong* with you?"

If Vivi *was* a dragon—and she wasn't, there was no way she was a dragon—then she wouldn't want it announced to the world. She'd explicitly said she was lying low, however poor of a job she was doing.

More seriously, Jasper faced the group of adventurers and said, "There's a Titled on the way. A strong one. This girl is her apprentice."

All attention fell on her, mortifying her just as much as Jasper's antics a moment earlier. She squirmed in place.

"Who?" a voice called out.

"No clue. Never heard of her," Jasper said. "But suffice it to say that once the cavalry is here, we'll be safe until a proper rescue party arrives."

He grew serious.

"Problem is, we have to survive until then. She's… how many hours away, kid?"

"Just one?" Saffra answered hesitantly. Lady Vivi had said one to two hours, and an hour had passed. "At the most. That's what she told me, at least."

That bolstered the spirits of everyone around.

"We won't last an hour without the aether cannons," the old woman said, not ready to seize false hope. "There are hundreds of people in the Convoy. Combine that with the magic the train and engine car are putting off, and every monster for ten miles will come running. And these are mithril-rank hunting grounds. Meaning at least a few stray orichalcums." She raised an eyebrow at Jasper. "How many could you handle?"

"Less than what'll be here soon," he said cheerfully.

"And I doubt three mithrils will change much. All due respect," she said, nodding at the trio of adventurers wearing blue badges. Facing back to him, she said, "You don't sound suicidal. You have a plan?"

“Sure do. Retrieve the power cores and power the aether cannons back up.”

The woman stared at him, then looked at the increasingly frustrated Ghul-Feather in the distance. It had to be at least forty feet tall, so even a half-mile away, it was intimidating.

“That’s a Titled-rank monster,” Saffra said, voicing what everyone was thinking.

“And a nasty one,” Jasper agreed. “Level twelve hundred.”

That created a ripple in the gathering. Most if not all were too low level to [Inspect] it, so they hadn’t known the monster’s exact strength.

“Even I’m so weak it didn’t give me a second look,” he added helpfully. “Not tasty enough to be worth the effort. Those power cores are all it’s interested in. Lucky us, right?”

“Enough with the games,” the dwarf rumbled. “State your plan.”

“Well, it’s a work in progress. What do we know about Ghul-Feathers?”

“Aren’t you the expert?” Saffra asked.

“I’m hardly a walking bestiary.”

“They’re cowardly,” someone offered. “Opportunists. Not really monsters that get into direct conflict often. They’re supposed to be extinct.”

As adventurers, everyone had read a bestiary or five, and Titled-rank monsters were usually the most fascinating. With so many dozens of adventurers present, they had a body of knowledge to work with. People called out what they had.

“Weak to divine spells and fire, like most undead?”

“Most of ‘em use ranged attacks?”

“An [Invisibility] of sufficient strength could be viable, I believe. Certain stealth skills might have success?”

“Not at twelve hundred. It’ll see through anything we have, for sure. Maybe an orichalcum rank one?”

They looked at Jasper, and he shook his head. “Nothing suitable myself.”

“Even if someone got close enough, how would they get into the engine car?” the old silver-rank woman from earlier asked. “Isn’t it locked?”

The discussion picked up, murmurings filling the air.

“Will retrieving the power cores even matter?” a voice called out, confused. “Wouldn’t we need the entire car to reconnect?”

“There are emergency power slots elsewhere in the Convoy,” Jasper said.

“There are?”

“Yes. Meant for if the link between the engine car and the train breaks for some reason.”

Nobody asked him how he knew that. The discussions resumed. They didn’t make much headway. Jasper watched, clearly not expecting them to find a real answer, yet seeming at ease with the situation. Saffra wondered why.

“I don’t see how it’s possible,” the severe-looking older woman finally concluded. “So tell us your plan already.”

“Someone said it earlier,” Jasper said. “Ghul-Feathers are cowardly. They mostly use ranged attacks. All we need is someone who’s all but invulnerable, who can stride right up, walk in, take the cores, and leave. The Ghul-Feather will do its best to kill them from a range, but if it can’t—it’ll give up.”

Halfway through, Saffra understood. She paled, yet also felt a surge of hope.

“Ah. Yes,” the old woman said dryly. “All we need is someone who’s invulnerable to Titled-rank monsters. Such a simple requirement.”

“In fact, it is.” Jasper turned toward Saffra with a sly smile. He pulled an arrow out of his quiver and nocked it. “I saw those shields your master put on you,” he said casually, drawing the bowstring. “Went through a damn book of spells, didn’t she? Lucky for us, she’s a paranoid woman. Mind if I run some tests?”

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DASH

Unsurprisingly, the gathering stirred at an orichalcum-rank pointing his bow at a thirteen-year-old girl.

Saffra, for her part, merely considered the situation. Jasper might have a flippant attitude, but she knew he wouldn't hurt her. He was strange, but she'd tentatively categorized him as an okay person.

"I'm not sure what exactly she put on me," Saffra said eventually. "But knowing her, they have to be pretty strong."

Jasper loosened his draw and pointed his bow down. "Think it could hold against that?" he asked, gesturing with his chin toward the Ghul-Feather.

"Now, wait here, son," the mithril-rank dwarf said. "I don't know what you two are talking about, but you best not be sending *her* to get the cores."

Saffra bristled. She faced the dwarf and crossed her arms. "Why not, if I'm the best option?"

He didn't hesitate to answer. "Because you're a child, child."

Saffra felt her hackles rise, and she bit out, "I'm thirteen, thank you. And so what? How does that change anything?"

The dwarf opened his mouth to respond, a look of forced patience on his face, but Jasper interrupted, "For the record, I agree. If we had any other choice, a duty like this shouldn't fall to a kid."

She gave him a betrayed look, and Jasper shrugged.

"That said, we don't even know if this is viable yet." Turning to his audience, he explained, "Her master put defensive spells on her before she

left. Powerful ones. The question is whether they can hold up against a Titled-rank monster and anything it might throw at her. I won't send her unless we can be certain she's safe."

"We won't be sending her regardless," the dwarf said flatly, eyes hard.

Jasper paused. Irritation showed through a tightening of his mouth. "I understand the sentiment, old man, but sometimes there *are* no good options. Would you kill everyone else here for that shining ideal, including all the *other* children aboard?"

He had no good answer to that, though seemed far from convinced.

Despite the man trying to keep a casual air, Saffra could see Jasper's posture tensing. She suspected he had been involved in a number of these 'no-good-options' scenarios, based on how quickly he had come to his decision and how little he was wavering.

"It's up to me, anyway," Saffra said, glaring at the dwarf. "You don't get to decide what I do. And neither does he." She gave Jasper an annoyed look as well.

The dwarf clearly wasn't happy, but he sensed the crowd wasn't with him—though almost all of the adults looked ashamed. That irritated her even more.

"You said the Ghul-Feather is level twelve hundred," the silver-rank old woman said to Jasper. "Which means you're the only one who can even come close to testing her defenses."

"Sort of. Strength-wise, yes. But I want to verify that her shields at least *trigger* against every attack type—not just physical ones and common magic." He nodded. "And that it can stand against my best, of course. If the barrier eats a level nine hundred's strongest attack without flinching, I'd say we have good odds. I'm open to other suggestions though."

After a moment of silence, the woman grunted. "I see no better option, unpleasant as this is."

Jasper nodded. He brought his arrow back to full draw and pointed it at Saffra. "Hold a hand out. I'll aim for your palm and start light."

Having an orichalcum aiming an attack at her made her skin crawl, but she trusted Jasper as much as she could a relative stranger, and moreover, she had enough of Vivi's potion left to bring her back from the brink of death. Losing a hand to an experiment wouldn't be pleasant, but she'd been an adventurer for eight months, so risk of bodily harm hardly scared her. Not when so much was at stake.

“Everyone stand back,” Jasper said, putting distance between himself and Saffra. “I’m not liable for any accidents,” he cheerfully added—which, despite being a joke, wasn’t inspiring confidence in his audience.

Saffra herself felt no concern. An orichalcum-rank ranger could pin a gnat into a board at a hundred paces. His arrow wouldn’t go astray.

She flinched when he finally loosed it, even if she managed to keep her hand locked in place.

Something sparked against her magical senses, and a prismatic ripple passed over her hand. But she didn’t feel a thing. Not a sense of pressure—not even like her palm had been flicked. Nothing at all.

“Promising,” Jasper said. “Bit stronger, this next one.”

He nocked a second arrow. His blue eyes locked on his target, and a tingle of danger-sense shivered down her spine. The first attack had been with his passive skills suppressed. This was going to be a ‘real’ attack by an orichalcum, if just a basic one.

Feeling her stomach clench, she watched Jasper loose the second arrow and—

It shattered against the barrier harmlessly.

“Didn’t feel a thing,” Saffra said, impressed despite herself. With everything she knew of Vivi, she couldn’t say she was surprised, but it was incredible to see an orichalcum-rank attack ignored with such ease.

“One more, then,” Jasper said. “The best I have.”

He took a dozen paces backward, then nocked his third and final arrow. He struggled as he hauled back the string, the draw suddenly much heavier. His arms trembled as he held the position, eyes coming to a razor focus on her palm.

For the audience’s benefit, he spoke the barrage of skills aloud.

“[Charge Shot]. [Focus]. [Armor Breaker].” His voice grew strained as he activated ability after ability—even using two skills back-to-back could be a struggle. “[Antimagic Infusion]. [Rend].” His face reddened. “[Marked for Death],” he growled out between clenched teeth.

Six skills, and orichalcum-rank ones. Saffra found herself sweating, but she held her hand steady. The audience seemed uneasy, and the dwarf almost seemed like he would jump forward to stop Jasper, but he thought better of the idea.

Jasper loosed his arrow.

She was too low level, her perception too slow, to understand what happened. There was a flicker of the arrow leaving his bow, or maybe she imagined it. Then earth fountained all around her, and her vision was obscured by plumes of dirt; the chaotic noises of pattering rocks and clumps of soil and grass filled her ears. Several seconds later, voices were shouting, but she couldn't make sense of anything since her vision was blocked. She ran her hands around her body… and once again found herself in perfect condition.

When the chaos had settled, she stood in a circle of untouched ground. Unlike the previous attacks, the prismatic shield had manifested physically, probably because the arrow had become an area-of-attack spell. She had been guarded on all sides. In a two-foot radius she saw only undisturbed grass, and past that, the ground was pulverized. Presumably from the kinetic force of the shattered arrow alone, not any explosive aspect.

What a monstrous strength, for an *arrow* to turn into a miniature fireball from sheer firing force.

Jasper was laughing when the shouting calmed. "I think she'll be fine," he said mirthfully. "Let's make sure it works against magic too though, and anything else we can think of. What's everyone got?"

They were on a time limit, so they could hardly take all day exhaustively testing every theory and manifestation of skill and spell. Ten minutes later, the group had come to the conclusion that Saffra was, at least to everyone present, functionally invulnerable.

None of the mages, including Saffra herself, had sensed a slight fluctuation or strain in the barriers. If Vivi's magical defenses were a polished tower shield, it had come away without a dent, scratch, or scuff on the metal. Not the slightest indicator it had been touched, much less damaged.

It was weird, knowing she was all but immortal until Lady Vivi's spells ran out. Possibly even to Titled-rank threats.

Monsters had begun gathering in earnest, with a few lower-level ones having charged in, though Jasper had put them down without effort. Higher-

level ones lurked in the distance, some orichalcum, and would no doubt work up their own nerve soon despite the large group of adventurers.

They had no more time to form plans. Everyone split into teams, taking staggered positions along the upright portion of the Convoy.

“The emergency power core slots are in the Lounge,” Jasper told her. “Not sure exactly where, I think the floor. Ask the engineers. Only take two of the eight, and put them in your inventory if you can fit them. Not sure you’ll be able to. Either way, the Ghul-Feather should stay interested in the engine car if you only have two, and those will be enough to power the aether cannons.” He grimaced. “I think. I might’ve overstated how much I know about how the Convoy works,” he admitted, “but this is our best shot. If we’re lucky, your master will show up before things get dicey.” His eyes flicked to a random spot in the distance, honing in on something Saffra couldn’t see. He frowned. “I need to start culling the herd. Good luck, try to hurry, and don’t die, please. Your master will definitely eat me alive.”

“She’s not a dragon.”

“Whatever you say, kid.” He paused, then added, “Oh, and for your own sake too, don’t die. That would be bad.”

She gave him an amused look, and he winked at her and clapped her on the back. There was a trace of concern behind the lackadaisical attitude though, which made Saffra nervous. Well, more nervous than she already was.

“Good luck,” he said one more time.

And then he was jogging away and drawing an arrow from his quiver, which meant it was time for her to face down a level 1200 monster. A Titled-rank beast. A creature that would make the entire city of Prismarche blanch if they heard it was approaching.

She had no time to waste. Monsters across the Emberblade Fields were being alerted to their huge clump of stranded humans. She needed to collect the power cores and install them as soon as possible. *Before* the gathering army charged.

The Ghul-Feather was half a mile away, so, taking a breath, she picked up into a jog. It was a struggle to work through the waist-high field of yellow, orange, and red grass. No monsters contested her passage, because even the dumbest were staying as far away from the Ghul-Feather as possible. No living creature with an intelligence greater than an insect’s would approach a monster that strong.

Except for Saffra, apparently.

Getting closer, she got a better look at the beast.

The Ghul-Feather was a horror of decaying avian majesty, easily the size of a three-story manor, perched heavily on the somehow-intact engine. Its twin heads, crowned with ragged crests of black feathers, swiveled independently on necks that seemed too thin to support their bulk. Patches of leathery, desiccated skin peeked beneath their plumage.

The monster's agitated movements signaled frustration, occasionally pecking at the metal with enough force Saffra could feel the ground shake even at this distance. The blows might not seem powerful with how easily the enchantments rebuffed them, but she had a feeling they could punch through city walls.

Being a silver-rank meant she was so inconsequential that the gigantic two-headed undead avian didn't notice her until she was a mere hundred paces away.

It froze, spun around, and cawed. The noise alone should have pierced her skull and killed her, but Vivi's defenses guarded against sound attacks. They'd tested it.

Then, the Ghul-Feather attacked.

With a flap of wings, concussive air impacted Saffra and erased a chunk of terrain around her, carving a hole all the way to stone in an arc twenty meters around. The prismatic barrier—the defense that activated most commonly—flared bright for the first time ever, reds and blues and greens sparkling in brilliant hues as it absorbed the level-twelve-hundred attack.

She was still alive. Her legs were wobbly, but she was alive.

The Ghul-Feather took to the air. These creatures were cowardly; it had been a cornerstone of the plan the collected adventurers had decided on. It wouldn't try to block her path forward, merely try its hardest to murder her from afar. If it *did* block her—well, there wasn't anything she could do about that. She could hardly shove it out of the way. Vivi's spells hadn't made her stronger; Saffra was simply as well-defended as the High King's vault.

Picking up into a sprint, she scrambled through the tall grass as fast as she could. The Ghul-Feather screeched, and a second later arcing rainbows filled her vision. When the barrier cleared, she looked back and saw gigantic, spear-length feathers embedded into the ground. That… would probably have been a nasty attack. But Vivi's shield continued to hold.

Halfway there, the long sunshine-shaded grass of the Emberblade Fields withered, turned white, then gray, and finally black before disintegrating into ash. All around her, necromantic energy filled the air so thickly that nothing below level one thousand would have survived. Saffra wasn't sure what spell protected her this time, but no rainbow sparks flew. Some other defense. She continued unimpeded.

Seeming like it was growing desperate, the Ghul-Feather took a risk they hadn't expected it to—it swooped down after her. Probably because it didn't sense any danger from her, regardless of the fact its attacks hadn't done anything. Saffra felt a moment of pure terror as two gigantic outstretched talons reached for her—

And grasped and slipped with total futility across a prismatic barrier.

Saffra raised her wand, trembling, and the Ghul-Feather was sufficiently cowed by the bluff. It screeched and flew away, almost falling over itself in its haste.

Shakily laughing to herself, she jumped onto the front of the engine car. She slammed her fist repeatedly on the heavy steel door.

"Hello? Please open! I—I need to get in!"

This was another point of failure in their tenuous plan for salvation. The only people with access to the engine car were the engineers, who were hopefully—for both their sake and everyone else's—still alive inside the heavily defended metal carriage. The few Convoy staff members the collected adventurers had consulted seemed to think the engineers would be, but the staff only had a weak understanding of the engine car's defenses. And none had a spare key, so it came down to luck.

"Who is that?" a shocked male voice called from inside, filling Saffra with relief.

"Saffra! Adventurer! Please let me in, it's safe for now, the Ghul-Feather is in the air!"

"What the hell is a Ghul-Feather?"

"Please!"

A frantic conversation took place between two male voices. It seemed her age benefitted her for once, because they didn't debate for long.

"We're opening. Get in, quick!"

Something heavy *clunked* inside the door, and it opened a crack. Saffra slid in, and they slammed and barred the door shut as fast as they could, catching her on the shoulder as she stumbled in. She didn't blame them.

Safe inside, Saffra clutched a hand to her chest, feeling her heart try to gallop out of her rib cage.

Huh. Step one actually worked.

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BACK

The inside of the Convoy's engine car hummed with enough magic to make her teeth ache, which was impressive considering the two years she had spent at the Institute.

Artificing lines covered both walls, centering on eight brilliant white orbs—the power cores. Those same markings radiated down across the car and would have continued to the rest of the train as well, had the carriage not been ripped away from the Convoy.

Otherwise, the interior of the room was rather plain. She had no doubt the engineering both physical and magical had been monumental, but all of that genius was compacted into an arrangement of glowing lines Saffra couldn't make heads or tails of. The language of artificing was *similar* to enchanting—which used the same language as spells—but decidedly not the same.

"Good gods, girl. How did you even get here?"

Saffra took a second to catch her breath, then, having been bent over with hands on her knees, straightened out.

There were two engineers: a bald one and a hairy one. The latter was short and musclebound, and the bald one was thin, tall, and wearing spectacles. She mentally nicknamed them 'Hairy' and 'Glasses,' since she was too pressed for time to be making introductions.

"Convoy derailed," Saffra said. "Um, obviously. A Ghul-Feather, level-1200 undead, somehow tore the engine from the rest of the Convoy. Which means the aether cannons are down and we're stuck in the Emberblade

Fields. A ton of monsters will be swarming soon. Already starting, actually. We need to get the cannons back up. Apparently there are emergency power slots in the Lounge? I need two of those." She pointed at the glowing orbs. "Do I just… yank them out of the wall?"

Glasses seemed alarmed at her explanation, eyes widening the more she talked. Hairy was even more obvious about his shock, mouth falling open.

"That's what's been attacking?" he asked. "A level *twelve hundred?"* As if to emphasize his words, the carriage shook as the Ghul-Feather perched onto the engine car and pecked, causing a deafening, gong-like sound to ring in her ears. He said over the racket, "Guess it'd have to be, for it to have broken us apart from the Convoy. Still. Heavens above. Twelve hundred."

"People are fighting even as we're talking," Saffra said.

At that, he grew serious. "How did you get past a Titled-rank monster?" He shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Yes, there are emergency sockets in the Lounge. In the floor, center of cab. Rip up the carpet, slot them in, and pull the lever. In that order, mind you, there are no safeties."

Glasses had already walked over and deactivated two of the power cores —the other six seemed to glow brighter in response. The now-inert ones had faded from bright white to dull gray.

Saffra breathed a sigh of relief that she wouldn't have to convince them.

"Just two?" Hairy asked. "We can spare all but one if need be—that'll keep the defensive enchantments going."

A single power core can fuel a barrier strong enough to hold off Titled-rank monsters? That's… impressive. Saffra suspected she was about to hold a *second* artifact that was worth its weight in starmetal.

Saffra squirmed in place, wondering if she should explain. "Yes, only two. So that the engine car has six and keeps the Ghul-Feather's attention."

Hairy blinked, and Glasses paused in his work. The corner of his mouth quirked up, and Hairy boomed out in laughter.

"Using us as bait? Fair enough. If it hasn't gotten in yet, we'll be fine a while longer. Even if there's risk, better the two of us than the entire Convoy."

Saffra relaxed, admiring just how easily the man made his decision. Not everyone was selfish and awful… Saffra had just seen more than her fair share of such people. "Backup is on the way," she told them. "It shouldn't be more than an hour before a Titled is here."

Hairy reared back in surprise. “So quick? How?”

“Not from the city. It’s… complicated.”

Glasses held the power cores out, and Saffra took them. They were heavier than they looked, and she almost dropped them.

“No time,” Hairy said. “I understand. You’ll be fine out there?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Would love to know *how*, against a Titled-rank monster.”

“I’ll explain after?”

Saffra tried to deposit the items into her inventory, and immediately sighed in relief when it worked. Some objects were weird about inventory access, especially artificed and mundane ones. Her professors had explained that it was some inscrutable function of size, weight, value, rarity, ownership, composition, and level or power density—and probably other factors.

“I’ll be going, then,” Saffra said.

Hairy nodded. “The gods watch over you.”

They opened the door, and Saffra slipped out. The moment her feet touched withered ash—remnants of what had been grass a few minutes ago—she sprinted away.

The Ghul-Feather screeched and flung attacks at her, but it didn’t pursue. It was clearly unhappy she’d smuggled away some of its coveted treasure, but overall happy to see the strange, invulnerable creature leave. It settled onto the engine car and began pecking and clawing again, with more urgency now, as if somehow sensing time was running out.

Saffra found herself laughing, somewhat hysterically, as she ran through the tall grass. She hadn’t thought she’d left on a suicide mission, but still. She’d faced down a Titled-rank monster and walked away without a scratch. *Am I dreaming all of this?* It almost felt like she had to be.

The Convoy was well and truly under assault by now. Even the weakest monsters of the Emberblade Fields were a match for most of the train’s defenders. Bursts of elemental magic—primarily lightning—exploded out of the upright aether cannons, but without the main power cores fueling them, the attacks were light slaps compared to what should have been sledgehammer blows. Even that was probably what kept the Convoy from being overrun, though.

She couldn’t see Jasper anywhere, which invoked some irrational—or maybe rational—panic. He would be the one fighting the worst of what

appeared. *Is he even still alive?* She pumped her arms and legs faster, gasping down air as she sprinted for the Lounge.

Saffra trained her endurance as any adventurer should, but she didn't have the benefit of a physical class, so her stamina was only moderately better than most thirteen-year-old girls. She moved as fast as she could, which was still painfully slow. A [Cinder Hound] intercepted her, but when it bounced off her shield two lunges in a row, it decided to try its luck elsewhere.

She scrambled up the metal bulk of the Lounge. Finding the door, she pounded her fist into the metal.

"It's me," Saffra shouted. "It's safe. I just need in again. Please open?"

It would be awfully ironic if the *Lounge* turned out to be the sticking point in this plan.

"There aren't any monsters," Saffra called. "I have power cores that—"

She cut off with a yelp as the first half of her statement became a retroactive lie. A second gray canine had charged her, this one atop the carriage. She scrambled backward by pure instinct.

Growling and thrashing, the beast proved far more tenacious than its brother from earlier. Hind claws raked into metal as it shoved its bodyweight against the sparkling prismatic barrier, not discouraged by the lack of success.

The Lounge's door slammed open, and in a flurry of white and black, a woman vaulted out. A flash of silver appeared and disappeared so quickly Saffra might have imagined it, and a second later, a bisected [Cinder Hound] fell in two halves to meet metal with a wet squelch.

A mithril-rank monster, killed in an instant. Saffra was almost getting used to ridiculous displays like that.

"At your earliest convenience, miss," the White Glove said, curtsying.

Where did her sword even come from? And go? It happened so fast.

Saffra shook her astonishment away and scrambled into the open hole. The maid joined her momentarily, pulling the door closed behind them.

"What is this?" Lord Caldimore demanded. "You aren't to be coming and going as you please! Out or in, make your decision."

Saffra wasn't Vivi to blatantly disrespect a count, much less a Caldimore, so she hastily bowed toward the portly man, no matter the distaste that surged through her. "No time to explain, my lord."

The backup power core slots were in the center of the Lounge, in the floor, the engineers had said. Seeing how the carriage had been overturned and the floor had become the wall, reaching the hatch posed a challenge. Thankfully, while Saffra's magical abilities weren't nearly impressive enough to help with the assault happening outside, she was an aspiring elementalist and could summon an [Ice Wall] as impromptu scaffolding.

The barrier grew from the ground and propelled her upward, and she managed to keep her balance. Upon reaching the halfway point, she released the spell, stabbed a knife into the carpet ahead of her, and began sawing. That no less than five noblemen and a White Glove watched her with curiosity made her skin itch, but she had more important things to worry about.

Tearing up the plush red carpet revealed an iron hatch. She grabbed and pulled on the handle, but it didn’t budge—it was especially difficult with the slippery footing. She yanked harder, panic rising, but still nothing.

Jammed? she thought, dismay flooding her. *Seriously?*

A gloved hand slipped into the handle next to Saffra’s. Saffra jolted in surprise; she hadn't even heard the woman jump up. With a tug, the iron hatch exploded open.

The maid curtsied and stepped aside, watching Saffra with calm interest.

Saffra’s cheeks heated, but she ignored her embarrassment and pulled out the two power cores.

“What is she doing?” a voice muttered.

There were eight slots inside the compartment, and artificing lines covered the metal face, similar to what she’d seen in the engine car. When the inert gray orbs got close, an invisible force yanked them from her hands, and they *thunked* loudly into the slots.

She grabbed the lever and pulled.

The train shuddered under the injection of mana, gray orbs turning white and humming with power as they expelled who knew how much energy down and through the Convoy.

She stared at the now-brilliantly-glowing cores.

I… I did it?

It had even been easy, all things considered.

A burst of exhaustion weighed her down, but she forced herself to stay upright. Releasing her hold on the mana keeping the ice wall standing, she

let the construct melt to nothingness, setting her and the White Glove onto the floor. She faced Lord Caldimore.

“Power cores from the engine car, my lord,” Saffra told him. “A level twelve hundred ripped the engine away from the rest of the train, deactivating the aether cannons, so we had no way of defending against the swarm. I had to go and grab them.”

“Twelve hundred?” Lord Caldimore said, genuinely shocked. “And… *you* retrieved the cores? How?”

Saffra took satisfaction in explaining. “Lady Vivi put defensive spells on me before she left. I walked up and knocked on the door, and the engineers let me in. The Ghul-Feather couldn’t do anything to me.”

Saffra had never, *ever* been in a position to make a nobleman squirm, so she thoroughly enjoyed the look of shock, confusion, then dawning horror on his face. He was clearly realizing just how powerful the Titled he’d gotten into a petty spat with earlier was.

“I… see,” he said after a long moment. “How… fortunate for everyone aboard.”

“I need to get back.” Saffra glanced at the exit door. “I might be able to help still.”

She hesitated before leaving, her eyes falling on the White Glove.

“There are a lot of monsters out there, and we only have one orichalcum. The aether cannons will help, but… will you join us?”

“Only if my lord wills it,” the White Glove responded.

Lord Caldimore’s attention jerked the woman’s way, eyes widening in surprise. Saffra intuited that the White Glove had spoken out of turn. Had put pressure on Lord Caldimore, however deferential her tone. That wasn’t something White Gloves did. But apparently this woman wasn’t pleased with being cooped up in a fortified cell when she was needed elsewhere. She wasn’t a bad person, just bound by duty.

Saffra’s estimation of the woman rose, but when Lord Caldimore said with a hint of irritation, “I’m sure they’re managing fine,” the White Glove didn’t countermand him; she stayed loyally at his side, dipping her head in acknowledgement.

Saffra supposed speaking out of turn was more than almost any other White Glove would have done. To them, their role as servant and bodyguard was everything.

Still. She was strong—really strong. Saffra wasn't sure how to feel about the woman's refusal to help, regardless of the circumstances.

She exited the Lounge, a frown on her lips.

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26

RETURN

Vivi escaped after a short meeting with Marcus. After [Blinking] onto the city wall and gathering another point of data for how the dimensional fracturing seemed to be healing—slowly but steadily—she had officially completed her errands.

Before setting off, she double-checked Saffra's necklace was where it belonged. The silver locket rested in the same inventory slot. Not that it could have disappeared. She was just being paranoid. Pleased, she closed the screen and began casting.

"[Greater Warp]."

A disorienting hurtle through space later, she stood in a starkly different scene, the sounds and sights of Prismarche's busy urban life replaced with a gentle breeze swaying through tall pine trees. Her eyes sought the track two dozen feet away, cutting a path through the forest.

When she had first [Blinked] off the Convoy, the first thing she had noticed was how fast the fortress of metal had screamed away, carriages flickering across her vision. She didn't know how fast the Convoy moved, but it probably equaled or surpassed a normal train on Earth.

How much distance had it covered in the… hour and a half, she estimated, since she'd left? More than what a few [Blinks] could cover. Or a hundred. Thankfully, she had enough mana to chain them without end. And also had top-tier mana potions on standby if for some reason she needed them, which she wouldn't.

"[Fly]."

Floating into the air, she watched the pine forest spread below her. As she rose, the horizon slid backward in all directions, revealing more and more of the world of Seven Cataclysms. Hovering below the clouds, she came to a stop and admired the sight.

Even an inferior version of this world had captured her attention—and the rest of humanity's—when VRMMOs had exploded into the mainstream. Being present in the flesh as she floated thousands of feet in the air, admiring the gorgeous landscape and feeling the wind flutter through her long white hair, took her breath away. After a full five minutes of just existing, she shook her head clear and dragged her attention back to reality, though she could have hovered there for hours.

Spotting the train tracks, she pointed her staff in the correct direction and declared, "[Blink]."

From her current height, the spell didn't seem to move her far. The same way even an airplane might seem like it was trundling along when looking out the window from the clouds.

"This is going to take a while, isn't it?" Vivi sighed to herself.

"[Blink]."

"[Blink]."

"[Blink]."

"[Blink]."

She'd done this once before, when questing out to the Hoarfrost Plains. That said, she hadn't needed to use *that* many. A few dozen?

[Blink] was a short-range teleportation skill. For normal mages, it was used to reposition themselves on a battlefield, not as a means of travel. Vivi's absurd stats meant the spell moved her much farther—but she could hardly [Blink] miles with each cast.

She also discovered a devastating side effect. Spatial relocation wasn't kind on the metaphorical stomach. Even one [Blink] could be disorienting, and not just from the sudden shift in landscape, but how it spawned some deeper sensation; her body was being swallowed into whatever existed between, or inside, or outside of physical reality before being spat back out.

As an experienced spellcaster, Vivi was resistant to that sensation. But after her fiftieth [Blink] in a row? It was like how spinning in a circle a few times might be fine, and if someone had a strong stomach, even dozens, but eventually queasiness came for anyone.

In a handful of minutes, she'd shifted landscapes entirely, an impressive feat considering how many miles she could see in each direction.

"Okay. No more of that," Vivi mumbled to herself.

Lowering her altitude, she relied on [Fly] instead. She picked up velocity and soon blurred by. A conical shield broke the wind so her hair and robes didn't flail around, and after that—well, the trip became pleasant. Who wouldn't love flying?

However, she had to acknowledge she wasn't moving fast enough. She needed to catch the Convoy, not just pace it.

"[Stride to the Horizon]."

That did the trick. If before the trees had been a blur, now they were a single paintbrush smear.

Was it as fast as rapid [Blinks]? Probably not, but also not too much slower, and a hundred times easier on the stomach. She could manage spamming [Blinks] if there was an emergency, but at that moment Saffra was just sitting in the comfortable Lounge, studying. There was no rush. She climbed in altitude, slowed slightly, and enjoyed the scenery.

However quick the Convoy might be, Vivi's leisurely flight was many times faster. In less than fifteen minutes, she spotted the train in the distance.

…the train that wasn't moving.

The train of which only half remained standing, the other half derailed and curled away, as if the front had been picked up and thrown.

A siege was underway. Hundreds of monsters swarmed the stranded iron fortress. Mounted turrets blasted magic through thick barrels in explosions of lightning and fire.

The sight struck her so dumb she failed to immediately process the chaos.

A part of her told her she should have expected this.

Everything slowed as her adrenaline kicked in. Something similar had happened in her fight against Lailah and Dominic, not that it had been much of a fight. While Vivi had gone through most of her day with one second being one second, when combat kicked in, her perception sharpened and a second turned into ten—or a hundred.

Red eyes flicked around the battlefield as she digested the situation, trying to make sense of it all. Off to the right, two or three miles away, a gigantic two-headed crow was pecking at the engine car, which had

somehow been torn from the Convoy. She recognized the monster. Ghul-Feather. Probably one of the Umbral Regent's creations, that had somehow survived over the years. If she remembered the map right, there was a crypt nearby.

Level twelve hundred wasn't anything to shock her, but from what she'd learned, it was nigh-unbeatable to the majority of the populace, including orichalcums. Thankfully it was only interested in the engine car.

Probably because of how much mana is coming from it. The structure was glowing to her senses. *How is it still intact?* The people of this world were more competent than she'd thought, if they could build something tough enough to resist a Ghul-Feather.

As for the monsters streaming through the flowing red, orange, and yellow grass of the Emberblade Fields, there were a frightening number of foes, but the defenders were doing a good job holding them off. The situation had looked worse at first glance than on closer inspection. Those gun turrets took apart even orichalcum-rank monsters in a few shots, and the mithril-rank ones in a single. Anything lower turned into red mist on impact.

Despite the distance—these eyes of hers were keen when she needed them to be—she spotted Saffra standing atop a train car, next to the ranger adventurer. Shock, then disgruntlement washed through her.

Why isn't she in the Lounge? What is she thinking? Her irritation, she knew, stemmed from relief. She'd feared the worst. But no, there the redheaded catgirl was, seeming uninjured. And foolishly contributing to the fight instead of keeping herself safe.

Obviously, the Ghul-Feather needed to go first. She hadn't wanted to announce herself to the entire Convoy, but now was no time for subtlety. Her desire for anonymity took a far, far distant second place to potentially saving lives.

So, she lowered her staff and started to cast.

Saffra knew the exact moment Lady Vivi returned, as did any man, animal, or monster that could manage even a shred of mana detection. The fine

hairs on her arms rose to attention, and a feeling not unlike dread filled her, a pit opening in the center of her stomach.

Something is coming.

That same thought rippled through the plains like a physical blast. The aether cannons stopped firing. Jasper's stream of arrows froze. Even the charging monsters faltered, skidded to a stop, and started pivoting their heads left and right, trying to identify the source of that tightening in their guts. A few—the smarter ones—tucked tail and ran.

Saffra almost did the same. Because whatever gathered in the distance provoked emotions that preceded logic—emotions that had kept people alive when they were still learning how to bang rocks together. Like seeing a tornado tearing toward her. Death. Death was coming. Maybe not aimed at her, but… it was still time to run.

The spell activated.

A column of white and violet, a molten bar of energy twice the width and height of the Convoy, seared across the sky, its full length manifesting instantly. Saffra's hand shot up to shield her eyes, but even the afterimage of that crackling scar carved into the air made her skin go cold.

Then the noise. Heavens above and hells below, it was like the previous night—that firework spell. Saffra thought the world had ended. That the God of Sky and Rain had descended from his pearly halls to clap his hands right above her. Thunderous didn't begin to describe it.

Blinking out the blackness, then the lingering white streak across her vision, she snapped her attention to the origin of the titanic beam of—of what? Some variant of lightning magic? Like always, Saffra didn't have a clue.

There, suspended in the sky, a barely visible dot, hovered her mentor.

Saffra's attention drifted to the destination of the spell. She knew what she would find before her eyes landed on the engine car. The Ghul-Feather was gone. Those two gray stumps attached to the carriage were probably its feet, all that remained of the creature. It was hard to tell from this distance. The rest of the Titled-rank monster—the *above*-Titled rank, being two hundred levels higher than that level threshold—was simply gone.

Stepped on like a bug.

She had no chance to come to terms with the outrageousness of the spell. No chance to confirm in her head, yet again, that the woman she'd

apprenticed herself to was undoubtedly as strong, if not stronger, than the archmages at the Institute. Maybe all three of them combined.

Because another spell formed, equally as powerful to her senses. Golden pinpricks alighted in ones, then twos, then fours, then dozens, appearing like burning stars in the sky. The dazzling radiance of the dots grew brighter and wider by the second, and Saffra realized it was because *they were getting closer.* She almost dove for cover out of reflex.

Like an entire battalion of archers loosing their bows, hundreds of giant spears flocked the sky, then descended in golden streaks. Mithril- and orichalcum-rank monsters alike were skewered by the hundreds, the radiant weapons picking targets at random. The ground thudded in a rapid-fire *thump-thump-thump-thump* that fountained huge plumes of dirt with each impact.

In total, the display—from both spells—lasted all of ten seconds.

The Emberblade Fields fell into utter silence. Every last monster had died. Not one of the horde remained.

The defenders also were quiet. Nobody could comprehend what they'd seen. They stood in mute horror. Because that was what any bug would feel, even if they were the bugs that had been saved this time. Nobody enjoyed understanding their place in the hierarchy so suddenly.

All gazes slowly turned to the speck in the distance.

Only Jasper was insane enough to speak. "So she's a show-off too. A suspiciously *dragonlike* trait, if you ask me."

"She… she isn't a dragon," Saffra whispered. But she couldn't rule it out anymore.

The speck disappeared and materialized. The process repeated several times before, all of a sudden, Vivi popped into existence in front of Saffra.

"I was gone for all of two hours," she said flatly. "How? How did this happen?" She frowned at Saffra. "And why aren't you in the Lounge where it's safe? What's a silver-rank going to contribute to this? The weakest of those were in the five hundreds."

Saffra wilted, her shoulders hunching forward. "If I can help, I'll help," she said defensively. "Even if it's not much."

Something passed across the demon's face, but while Saffra was getting better at recognizing that inexpressive face, she couldn't read every emotion.

“Yes, I suppose you will,” Lady Vivi sighed. “Explain. Start from the beginning.”

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27

REPAIRS

Vivi didn't know how to feel about the story Saffra recounted to her. In an ironic twist, the very spells meant to protect the girl were what had put her in danger. Saffra wore an expression of both guilt and muted defiance throughout her explanation, as if waiting for Vivi to insist that she should have stayed put.

Logically, she couldn't blame anyone, as much as she wanted to fault Jasper for encouraging Saffra's behavior. But what alternative had they had? Those aether cannons had been crucial to their defense. A lot of people would have died if Saffra hadn't risked herself. And thanks to Vivi's spells, Saffra *had* been invulnerable. Jasper had tested that as extensively as he could.

All of that said, why had Saffra been so willing to risk her life at the drop of a hat? *This apprentice of mine is going to be a handful.*

The burst of an aether cannon brought Vivi back to the present moment. The swarming monsters had been discouraged by her show of power, but monsters wouldn't be monsters if they weren't reckless with their lives. Every minute that ticked by, more were gathering the courage to charge again.

This problem was far from resolved, so she refocused. Her eyes swept across the derailed length of the Convoy.

"What are we doing about this?" she asked Jasper.

"Basking under the benevolent shade of our savior until help arrives, I reckon."

“How long will that take?”

“I know I look like the man with all the answers, but I only have most.” After a pause, he added, “If you mean what else can you do, there’s still injured, and the engineers might want an escort back. Then again, maybe they won’t. That’s an impressively guarded vault they’re huddled up in.”

“Injured?” Vivi was somewhat ashamed she hadn’t made that conclusion herself. “Where?”

“A healer too, are you?”

“It’s not my specialty, but yes.”

She couldn’t cast restoration spells even comparable to an equivalent-level priestess, but an archmage was defined by the breadth of their capability. There were few branches of magic she hadn’t at least dabbled in.

“Follow me, then,” Jasper said.

He led her to the train car the injured had taken shelter in. A handful of low-level healers were working on caring for them. The four men and women looked utterly exhausted—they’d burned through their mana reserves a dozen patients ago, if Vivi had to guess.

All eyes turned to her when she walked in. Vivi squirmed internally at the attention. However, she wasted no time in doing what she came for. She raised her staff and incanted, “[Mass Greater Restoration].”

A green nova pulsed through the carriage. Broken arms snapped back into place; huge bloody gouges healed over; one unconscious man jolted awake with a gasp.

A few seconds passed as everyone checked their wounds, and then Vivi was *really* being stared at.

“Is anyone still hurt?” Vivi asked the carriage.

Nobody replied. She shifted awkwardly.

The healers each wore complicated expressions. She supposed she had trivialized their efforts, strolling in and curing the entire carriage with a single spell when they had been running themselves ragged.

When no one voiced any complaints, she nodded, turned, and left.

Behind her, she heard Jasper start to laugh, and in Vivi’s past life her cheeks would have turned pink. Thankfully, her body’s new stoicism saved her.

“You were a real people person back on the Sky-Pillar Range, weren’t you? Or would it be called a dragon’s dragon?”

“I’ll grab the engineers now,” she told Saffra, ignoring him. For once, the girl wasn’t looking at her strangely after the display of powerful magic. Vivi supposed it paled in comparison to the previous. Or maybe her apprentice was getting used to the absurdity.

Saffra nodded, and Vivi took off. She flew over to the engine car, traveling the half mile in a few seconds, and pointed her staff at the door.

“[Unlock].”

The spell resisted. Mana drained from her—more and more as she leaned heavily against some unidentified resistance. No doubt she was elbowing her way through a defensive enchantment or two, and a powerful one.

A mechanism *clinked* as it gave way, and a gesture of her staff had the door swinging open.

Inside were two men, and an interesting interior. The geometric arcane lines didn’t remind her of classical enchanting; they were something else. The glowing orbs radiated an impressive aura that she wasn’t familiar with. *These must be the innovations that lifted this world into a new technological era. I wonder how it works?*

“The Ghul-Feather is dead,” she told the two men. “I’m going to bring the engine car back to the Convoy and attempt repairs.”

The two men wore gobsmacked expressions. It was the shorter and hairier man who finally made his mouth work.

“The door! How did you… you bypassed the wards?”

Vivi met his gaze and didn’t offer an explanation. He shifted in place, then said, “Uh. Yes, Lady Adventurer. Lady Titled,” he hastily corrected. She was glad she wasn’t the only one who could be awkward, though this man’s awkwardness was a little more forgivable than hers. “But… repair? What do you mean?”

“[Greater Reconstruction]. It may be possible. I’m not sure how it will interact with… all of this.” She waved at the interior of the engine car, the not-enchantments. “In any case, I’m going to put the Convoy upright again and bring you over.”

“Upright?”

“Do you want to stay inside, or come with me?”

The two men shared looks.

“Inside is fine,” the hairy man said slowly.

She left, closed the door, and picked up the hefty block of metal. Mana poured out of her as she fueled [Greater Telekinesis], but with a veritable ocean churning inside her, she was at no risk of running out.

She flew back and positioned the engine car onto the tracks, then knocked on the door with her staff. The engineers opened it and peered around, once again adopting dumbstruck looks when they saw they'd been so easily carried over.

"Now the rest of the train," she said, "then repairs. Stand by."

After flying to the segment of strained metal joints where the train went from upright to lying on its side, she gripped the interlocked structures and began leaning them up in sections, doing her best to not snap what had survived the impact.

[Greater Telekinesis] scaled, so far as she knew, with however much mana she threw at it. So she assumed the spell would be up to nearly any task.

When the many dozens of cars were standing properly, she flew into the air to get a bird's-eye view of the situation.

Her lips pursed.

Was an entire *train* too heavy?

Pointing her staff, she enveloped her mental grasp across the section of derailed Convoy—around half—then pulled. She lit up like a miniature sun as mana gushed through her magical conduits and expelled out in blinding torrents.

Delicately, she straightened the train out and put it back onto the rails.

Simple as that.

She checked on her mana, incredulously shaking her head at what she found. Even that hadn't left a dent.

How was she supposed to come to terms with what she was now? She could do whatever she wanted. She was, using no false or melodramatic comparison, a small god. That was terrifying.

She flew to the front of the train and worked from front to back, casting [Greater Reconstruction] on each carriage in order. Twisted metal bent back into proper shape; shards of glass flew from the surroundings to fuse into panes; even the chairs inside righted themselves.

When she finished, the Convoy was as good as new.

She set down and knocked on the engine car door. The engineers opened.

“Done. Did it work?” Vivi asked.

Her biggest worry was that [Greater Reconstruction] couldn’t properly interact with whatever new technology governed the Convoy. Thankfully, that didn’t seem to be the case. After an analysis in which the bald, taller man squinted at one of the power cores, eyes flicking left and right, he said, with obvious shock, “All indicators are showing green.”

She assumed he saw something she couldn’t. A status screen, perhaps, or similar.

“Incredible,” the other engineer muttered. “You repaired everything? With *magic?*” He gave her a look out of the corner of his eye—considering her in a new light.

“So the Convoy can move again?” Vivi asked.

“I…” He looked to his partner. “This is… against standard operating procedures. Normally we would wait for a rescue-and-repair car. But if we can continue, clearly we should. No point in staying.”

The shorter, hairier engineer scratched his beard with a frown. “Procedures don’t apply at the moment, I reckon. This is a first, so it’s hard to say.” He shook his head. “We should run down the length of the Convoy and double-check everything, at a minimum.”

“Do so,” Vivi said.

She flew off to her apprentice, who had been watching from a distance, near the section of the train that hadn’t needed repairs and aligning. The baffled look Saffra had briefly stopped giving her earlier was back. Vivi guessed the girl wasn’t *fully* used to the insanity.

“You picked up the entire Convoy,” Saffra said dumbly.

“More like half,” Jasper corrected. “And anyone can pick up *half* a Convoy.”

“It should be fixed now,” Vivi told Saffra. “The engineers think the Convoy can move again, but they’re double-checking that [Greater Reconstruction] didn’t mess with anything.” She turned to Jasper. “Am I needed anywhere else?”

He considered. After a long moment, his expression turned grave. Her stomach sank.

“Do you have [Summon Alcohol]?” he asked.

Her expression was always flat, but she was certain it somehow got flatter.

“If so, I’m considering marriage. How do dragons propose?” he asked. “Kidnapping a princess for you would be difficult, but not impossible.”

What was wrong with this man? “Are you *incapable* of taking something seriously?”

“No. But you wouldn’t want me to. Only happens when there’s way too much blood and screaming.”

It was clearly a joke—yet also not. Which disoriented her. She reminded herself that this was a man who’d reached orichalcum-rank as a career adventurer. His life had been so comically different from hers that she barely knew how to conceptualize it.

Since Jasper hadn’t given a real answer, she assumed she wasn’t needed anywhere else.

Stepping up to Saffra, she withdrew the rescued locket from her inventory.

Surprise followed by guilt flashed across the girl’s face. In the chaos, she’d clearly forgotten why Vivi had disappeared.

“If I hadn’t asked you to go get this, you would’ve been here from the start,” Saffra mumbled. “You might’ve saved some of them.”

Some of the ones who hadn’t made it during the initial crash. Vivi was still coming to terms with that. She had even less experience with death than Saffra, even though no one here would assume it.

“Don’t be ridiculous. There was no way you could’ve predicted this, or I. And it was my decision to leave, not yours.”

She could’ve waited until the next stop to warp to Prismarche, but the possibility of a monster derailing the Convoy hadn’t so much as crossed her mind. And these trains were supposed to be absurdly tough—by far the safest way to travel between cities in this monster-infested world.

Saffra took the locket and looked down at it. A weight seemed to slide off her shoulders.

Saffra looked at Vivi, and the guilt she’d been keeping at bay finally became too much. Maybe she could try to hide what she’d done, but she

couldn’t stand not knowing. She would rather it be out in the open and accept her fate, whatever it might be.

“How valuable was that potion?” she mumbled, fiddling with the necklace. “The healing one you gave me.”

Vivi tilted her head. “I expect very. Why?”

Saffra winced. Vivi had thought nothing of buying Lounge tickets. Two mithril had only been pocket change for this woman. To an adventurer that could erase Titled-rank monsters with a wave of her staff, even orichalcum might flow like silver. Yet even *she* acknowledged that the potion was ‘very valuable.’

How furious was she going to be that Saffra had used up almost the entire thing? Liquid star metal poured down the drain.

Except it hadn’t been a waste. The potion had saved lives.

Still, it hadn’t been hers to give away.

She wilted into herself.

Saffra felt more than saw Vivi frown. “What is it?” the woman asked, concerned. “What happened?” After a second, she interpreted what her hunched shoulders meant. “You needed to use it?”

Saffra nodded mutely.

“You were *hurt?* How? I put enough warding spells on you that nothing short of—” She cut herself off. “How?” she repeated.

“I wasn’t hurt…” Saffra mumbled.

Vivi’s sudden tenseness drained to confusion. “Explain?” she asked, in a gentler tone than Saffra had expected. Which just made her feel worse.

“There weren’t any healers strong enough to help some of the people who were hurt. And I had that potion with me…” She squeezed her eyes shut. “So I used it on them. I’m sorry.”

Several agonizing seconds dragged by as Saffra awaited her sentence. The condemnation. Or worse. She kept her eyes squeezed firmly shut. She knew it was coming. Maybe not *what*, exactly, but surely—

Something impacted her on the top of her head, gently but with enough force to startle.

Her eyes popped open, and she saw Vivi’s staff hovering over her.

Vivi had… smacked her on the skull?

“You broke the only rule I gave you.” Vivi didn’t look or sound angry, somehow, which baffled Saffra.

What rule? She racked her brain. *After the Caldimore incident*, she suddenly remembered. *She told me not to apologize for things that aren't my fault.*

"But this *is* my fault," she protested instantly.

An arched eyebrow—more expressive than what usually showed on the woman's face. "You derailed the Convoy? You hurt those people?"

"Well, n-no, but the potion wasn't mine to give away," she said, bewildered that she needed to explain *why* Vivi should be mad. "It was for me, wasn't it?"

Lady Vivi shrugged. "If you needed to use it to help someone, that's fine." She studied Saffra. "You thought I would be upset with you?"

Saffra didn't know how to respond. Her mouth opened and closed uselessly.

Jasper did so for her. "Most people would be furious their newly claimed apprentice wasted an artifact worth a small castle," he said cheerfully. "Lives are cheap. Relic-class potions aren't."

Vivi looked at him, and she almost seemed to grow angry—something twice as terrifying as it should be, because of how normally inexpressive she was. She shook her head in disgust, then turned to study Saffra again.

Vivi sighed, and Saffra became the recipient of a second, lighter bonk on the head. Baffled, Saffra rubbed the spot, her cat ears flattening down.

"That you used the potion, even when you thought I'd be upset, is the *reason* I'm teaching you, Saffra."

Saffra stared, uncomprehending, at the demon. What did that mean?

"You're not mad?" She hated how childish the question sounded, but she needed confirmation.

Vivi held her hand up, and to Saffra's utter shock, a potion identical to the first appeared in it.

She has a second one?!

And is giving it to me?!

Saffra took the item numbly.

"I'll get you level-appropriate potions when I can. And no, I'm only mad at the situation in general." Her eyes turned to Jasper. "I suppose I should thank you for watching over her. You handled the situation the best you could, given the circumstances."

Jasper shrugged. "Just doing my duty to humanity," he said. "I'm accepting any and all riches you deem to bestow for my selfless service,

Great Serpent Queen.”

He had definitely been joking, but Vivi pulled out yet *another* of the health potions and tossed it to him.

Jasper caught the item, seeming stunned—even he had his limits. He stared at the flask of red liquid, mouth working, yet no sound coming out.

“Huh,” he said. “Not very stingy with your hoard. Maybe you aren’t a dragon after all.”

Vivi ignored him. Saffra wished she wouldn’t. She really wanted a hint as to whether Jasper’s joke-that-might-not-be-a-joke was true or not, but Vivi kept stonewalling the man.

“What now?” Vivi asked.

Jasper tucked the potion into his inventory and considered her. His eyes swept across the Emberblade Fields.

“I wonder how much the loot from hundreds of mithril- and orichalcum-rank monsters is worth?” he mused. “Probably shouldn’t let it go to waste.”

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FLIGHT

Vivi let the adventurers who had defended the Convoy claim the spoils of war, but only after extracting a promise that the commoners would also be taken care of.

True, many of the adventurers present had only fought for their own sakes, but their efforts had delayed the monsters and prevented a worse disaster nonetheless. And it wasn't like she needed the coin herself. Hopefully the tragedy could be mitigated with the harvested materials. Not that money solved all problems. Especially for those who hadn't survived. But it was something.

While she waited for the engineers to confirm that the Convoy was operational, she stood on the central carriage and kept watch over the adventurers dashing from corpse to corpse to loot the sea of bodies. Golden spears impaled any monster that came so much as two thousand paces from the Convoy. Even as bloodthirsty and half-mad as the creatures were, they eventually learned their lesson when faced with a battlefield strewn with corpses.

In the meantime, Saffra sat next to her, legs dangling off the ledge of the Convoy's hull. The girl's brow was furrowed as she worked through her next attempt at [Scorchlance]. She was a surprisingly diligent student, using her downtime even after an event like this to study. And she was making good progress. Vivi thought. It wasn't like she had a standard to go off of.

Jasper jogged up once the engineers had finished. "Didn't find anything wrong," he called. "Just waiting for you to get inside and we'll be off."

She nodded and followed him back to the Lounge.

Striding in, she was met with something she'd forgotten about: Lord Caldimore and his entourage. A petty nobleman was hardly important on the scale of the catastrophe she'd been dealing with, so he had passed out of her mind entirely.

Not she from his, though. He seemed to be quite aware of what had transpired. That she had been the one to pick up the Convoy—with them inside—and repair the vehicle. As well as kill a Titled-rank monster. And all other monsters for thousands of meters.

His eyes didn't meet hers, nor did the eyes of the other noblemen. They stalwartly pretended she didn't exist, and not as a snub, but in the way a mouse might freeze underneath a cat, not sure what else to do besides remain small and quiet and hope the beast's attention passed over it. Vivi liked to imagine they were sweating underneath their fancy coats. Lord Caldimore had certainly realized the magnitude of his mistake.

She snorted. Saffra also seemed pleased by the development, though she didn't let herself make a show of it. The catgirl shot a number of smug looks toward the men, though—especially the pushy Caldimore brat, who was palest of the bunch.

Vivi and Saffra took their seats secluded from the rest, and just like that, they were back on track. Literally and figuratively. The Convoy glided forward, with Vivi barely noticing the jerk of its launch thanks to the dampening enchantments.

She didn't have such terrible luck that monsters attacked the Convoy twice. The rest of the trip—around nine hours—passed without issue.

Vivi spent that time mentoring her apprentice, sorting through her massive spell list, ruminating over the residual signature of the dimensional anomaly and other various problems—like what to do when they reached Meridian—and idly watching scenery fly by with an empty mind. She was only human, and this new world's charm would take a while to wear off.

Er, demonic. She was only demonic. *I'm going to mess that up aloud someday, aren't I?*

Evening had come and passed by the time the Convoy rolled into the station. The blanket of night had fallen over the city of Siroc. Vivi sent out a [Farsight] and saw a commotion developing outside—no doubt thanks to the delay created by the Convoy's derailment. A smaller one-carriage car, filled with a rescue crew, had intercepted them an hour outside the city, then escorted them back. The City Guard, or some other authorities, had ventured out to no doubt interrogate everyone aboard and form an understanding of what had happened.

In short, a complete kerfuffle was brewing, one she would be dragged into if she didn't excuse herself. She would not be repeating Prismarche.

"We'll be taking our leave," Vivi told Saffra, holding her hand out. "The next few hours will be extremely annoying otherwise."

Visibly confused, Saffra put her hand in Vivi's. She [Blinked] them onto a rooftop a safe distance away. Saffra staggered, but found her footing a few seconds later.

"W-whoa. That felt weird."

Spatial transportation wasn't pleasant, even for Vivi, so she sympathized. Not everyone could be like Prismarche's Guard Captain, who had handled it easily.

"Let's find an inn for the night," Vivi said. "You know these cities better than I do. Lead?"

Saffra perked up, happy to be given a task she could help with. She stood on her toes to get an extra inch of perspective, gaze sweeping out across the city.

She pointed. "That way."

Vivi [Blinked] them onto a new roof, and that process continued as Saffra took the lead in setting their path.

The night closed after a quick search for a tavern and a resulting meal. Vivi woke the next morning, pleased that the City Guard hadn't tracked her down and demanded a report. Safe for now, but maybe not for long, so she wouldn't idle.

She met Saffra at the tavern bar, where the catgirl was already scarfing down her breakfast. Eggs, bread, ham, and a mug of the weak ale that served as a water replacement for this world. Vivi was still getting used to the taste of it all.

“We’ll be skipping the Convoy,” Vivi told Saffra, sliding into the seat next to her.

Saffra paused with her fork half-raised. Bits of egg clung to the side of her mouth, and Vivi repressed the urge to brush it away.

“Skipping?” Saffra asked through a mouthful of food.

Her manners, Vivi had noticed, weren’t the best. And not even because she didn’t know better—Saffra realized her breach of etiquette a second later and swallowed, blushing. The egg remained, however, and Vivi’s hand twitched, but she fought the urge. She didn’t think Saffra was the kind of person who liked being touched without warning. Vivi sympathized. She was the same way.

“What do you mean skipping?” Saffra asked. “We’re not going to Meridian?”

Saffra clearly didn’t want to head back to the city that hosted the Institute she’d been expelled from, but it was a necessity. “We are. Just more directly,” Vivi said, crushing the hopeful look in her eyes.

“Oh.” Saffra deflated, but shook it away. “Directly? What does that mean?”

“The Convoy is slower than I thought, and I don’t want another incident. I’ll bring us there with flight and acceleration spells.”

She had considered doing that from the start, but had wanted to explore, to take a leisurely trip through the world of Seven Cataclysms. However, she reluctantly had to admit that she needed to get a move on. Not only was there the dimensional anomaly to worry about, but dawdling by taking another Convoy ride might invite a second accident.

“Flight and acceleration spells,” Saffra repeated slowly. “Won’t that take even longer? The Convoy is *really* fast.” After a second, she grimaced. “Who am I kidding? It’s you. Okay. That’s fine. Is there anything you need from me?”

Vivi shook her head. “I was just letting you know.”

The tavern keeper slid a plate of food in front of her. The meal had been included in the coins she’d handed over last night, so she took her breakfast with a thank you and dug in.

Thirty minutes later, she [Blinked] herself and Saffra past the city walls and next to the Convoy track. While she’d memorized Seven Cataclysms’ map, without obvious indicators she could easily get lost in the wilderness.

Following the rail fixed that, at the small cost of not making a straight line for Meridian. Hardly a major issue.

Vivi had mulled over the best combination of spells to use. Out of paranoia, she didn't want to go at maximum speed—she had a passenger, and should something go wrong, slamming into the ground at whatever monstrous velocity her full effort would create might be bad even for Vivi, much less Saffra.

While Vivi wouldn't be taking a sedate pace, a speed five or ten times the Convoy would serve them well.

She pointed her staff at Saffra. She had gotten in the habit of masking her spell casting, but for her apprentice's sake, she let the circle form without interference, runes etching in the air. Saffra's wide eyes followed the developing design with fascination—she was a genuine appreciator of the arcane, which Vivi respected. Magic was amazing, and anyone who thought otherwise didn't have their head screwed on straight.

This spell was outrageously complex, and she doubted many mages even at the appropriate level could cast it. Tier ten. A Titled-rank spell.

"[Fly]."

Gravity lost its hold on Saffra. Disoriented despite having prepared herself, the girl started cartwheeling her arms, and she fell backwards—then kept falling backwards, and kept falling, doing a full head-over-heels in midair. Her arms, legs, and most amusingly her tail, flailed around wildly as she tumbled in zero gravity.

"W-wait!" Saffra cried. "You didn't tell me it'd be like this!"

For the first time, Vivi felt even the stoic lips of this new body twitch with amusement. She covered her mouth with a hand, reflexively hiding the shameful display. Thankfully, the disoriented, spinning Saffra was too occupied with wrangling the mechanics of [Fly] to notice Vivi's dramatic response.

A minute later, they'd both gotten themselves under control.

"Okay. I guess it isn't *that* bad." Saffra leaned forward and, floating six feet above the grass, traveled in a straight line. She did the same backwards, then side to side, gliding effortlessly. "Just took a second to get the hang of. You—you didn't see anything." She glared at Vivi, daring her to contradict her.

"I saw nothing," Vivi agreed.

Saffra eyed her for a second longer, still embarrassed, then huffed. The girl then dove forward, darting past Vivi in a blur that made her start in surprise.

But of course Saffra was fast. This was Vivi's own [Fly], so max speed even before haste modifiers would match the Convoy.

Saffra already had defensive spells on her, so she was in no danger of getting hurt at this speed, though Vivi's protective instincts flared before she remembered that fact.

Saffra came zooming back, then started doing flips, followed by cartwheels and even-less-sensical maneuvers. She laughed, and there was a childish quality to her voice as she yelled, "This is so *awesome*!"

For a second time, Vivi hid a smile behind her hand.

Saffra indulged in the wonders of flight for a full minute before realizing she was acting her age. She stiffened, straightened out, and floated over to Vivi, plastering on an expression that tried too hard to be professional. She cleared her throat. "You can really maintain two uses of [Fly]? I thought it's super mana intensive, even for a tier-ten spell."

"It won't be a problem."

Casting [Fly] on herself, Vivi joined Saffra in the air and floated high enough that she had a vantage point looking out at the railway snaking into the distance.

"We'll start slow. I'll apply a haste spell when you're more comfortable moving around."

"I'm good. You can do it now."

Vivi considered her. "Prove it." She zipped off without warning to test the girl, but Saffra was quick on her feet—off her feet?—because she matched Vivi with less than a second's delay. The girl *was* an adventurer, Vivi reminded herself, no matter her age. Hard to catch those off guard.

When Saffra demonstrated that she really did have solid control of [Fly], Vivi slowed and pointed her staff at her.

"Take it easy to start with," Vivi warned. "This is going to be a big increase."

Saffra bobbed her head rapidly, excited to test out super-velocity flight. Vivi couldn't blame her.

"[Stride to the Horizon]."

"[Slipstream]."

"[Perfect Form]."

The last, a massive dexterity boost, should help Saffra with the mental processing needed for making adjustments while moving so fast. Not that Saffra would need fine control, seeing how they would be going in a mostly straight line, but better to give it to her than not.

Saffra would need one last ability of Vivi's for comfortable flight. "[Light Barrier]." A transparent, conical shield of white shimmered into existence in front of the girl. It would help part the air and keep wind from slapping into her face, throwing her hair around and blinding her.

Vivi cast the same spells on herself, then took off.

She moved… fast. *Really* fast. She hadn't been going remotely close to max speed when taking her casual stroll back to the Convoy, since she hadn't known Saffra was in danger, and had been enjoying the scenery. Now that she had decided to prioritize crossing an enormous amount of distance quickly, she pushed [Stride to the Horizon] and [Slipstream] to their near-maximum, and thus tore across the ground so fast it shocked even her.

She came to a stop, and a quarter-second later, Saffra slammed to a halt as well, arms cartwheeling.

"Whoa," Saffra said. "That's, um. Something."

Vivi didn't disagree. "It should be sufficient. You ready?"

"Ready."

Blasting forward in a rush of wind, their trip to Meridian began in earnest.

At this pace, they would be there just after noon. *I wonder what's in store for us.*

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THE BRIAR AND THE BRAMBLE

Continuous casting grated at Vivi. Although the siphoning of mana didn't nauseate her like repeatedly casting [Blink], maintaining two [Fly] spells along with other effects did create a constant drain. A leak could never deplete an ocean, but she likened the experience to solving simple math problems for hours on end. Not difficult, but irritating regardless of the complexity.

She pushed through. While this hadn't been her preferred method of travel, she could suffer mild agitation if it meant a fast trip to Meridian—and more importantly, one without further incidents.

It almost surprised her when they weren't interrupted by some level 2000 beast along the way. Her standards were low; she had genuinely expected another unreasonable complication to intercept their flight. But no such thing happened.

They passed city after city, forests and swamps and plains and plateaus. Vivi recognized most, but not all, of the scenery. She'd spent hundreds of hours in these various low-level zones, but Seven Cataclysms was huge, and she could hardly remember every square mile across the continent.

For the parts she did recognize, she found herself fascinated by seeing those hunting grounds translated into reality. Despite the discomfort of maintaining her various spells, she found herself enjoying the trip.

Finally, Meridian crested the horizon.

The capital of the human kingdoms possessed no towering walls to rival Prismarche's—only a squat perimeter maybe twelve feet high. Firstly

because the metropolis sprawled too many miles to encircle with titanic walls of enchanted stone, and secondly because there were few places safer than the southern lands of the Central Kingdom. Guard patrols and rookie adventurers culled the magical threats that spawned in this environment of stiflingly low passive mana. Even the wall that did exist was for peace of mind more than anything. *Or maybe just ingress and egress control?*

Vivi touched down half a mile outside of the city. Saffra joined her, wobbling on unsteady legs as Vivi dispelled the various buffs affecting them.

"[Fly] legs," Saffra commented, taking tentative steps around. Vivi raised an eyebrow, and Saffra's cheeks colored when she seemed to realize the statement didn't make much sense. "Like sea legs. [Fly] legs. The ground feels weird."

Vivi took a few steps and agreed. After hours of near-supersonic air travel, walking on solid ground felt strange.

"Why didn't we fly all the way in?" Saffra asked.

"To avoid attention."

Maybe that was paranoia, but the city might have detection spells to alert the City Guard about invisible flying archmages. She could probably detect and circumvent any such defenses, but better to be safe. Though if not a detection spell, perhaps a resident would notice. As the capital city, Meridian hosted a number of extremely powerful individuals, the archmages at the Thaumaturgical Institute to name the obvious.

She *could* go a full day without being the cause of some debacle, and she would prove it. *I'm just a normal person, surveying the city, my home, and guild, seeing how it's all changed.*

No more incidents.

They had set down on a hill, and Saffra gazed at Meridian with a complicated expression. "Why here, by the way?" she asked. "Just wondering. It's okay if you don't want to answer."

Vivi considered. "I need to contact someone. Several someones."

"Oh?"

"But it's been a while. They might not live here anymore."

"Old friends?"

She mulled that over. "Of a sort."

Saffra looked like she wanted to ask more, but she didn't press. Vivi wasn't sure what she would have said if the girl had.

They trekked down the hill and onto the road. They received a few curious looks from the wagon drivers and foot travelers on the way, but nothing that stuck. Traffic was heavy on a road leading to the capital city, especially at this time of day in bright, dry weather. But not enough they couldn't find a pocket of space to walk without being bothered.

The gate guards seemed to be inspecting wagons but letting foot traffic pass through unimpeded. No wars embroiled the human kingdoms, and a peacetime Meridian had far too many daily visitors to vet each and every person who came through.

Past the walls, chaos met them. Inns, stables, stalls, general stores, wagon-repair shops—everything needed to cheaply host a traveler stepping foot into the city for the first time. Though frantically busy, loud, and smelly, as expected of a city, the streets were cobblestone and relatively clean despite the traffic. While not the modern concrete sidewalks and roads Vivi was used to, the infrastructure, upkeep, and general cleanliness were better than she had expected. *They've got magic to thank for that, I assume.* [Tidy] was a tier-two spell, for example, and there were surely other useful cleaning spells and civil innovations the locals put to use. This world was technologically behind hers, but likely also ahead in some ways.

As a fortress-city tucked to the far north of the continent, Prismarche served as a home to far more adventurers and other high-level folk than Meridian. While Meridian, a capital city, hosted powerful organizations like the Thaumaturgical Institute—and the High King and other noble houses—the masses were predominantly commoners. Vivi saw few men or women walking around in armor or wearing the colorful metal badges of an adventurer, as had been frequent in Prismarche.

"Where to?" Saffra asked.

Vivi paused. Great question. She wanted to access her personal stash first, but that would be in her manor in the Noble's District. Gut instinct told her that, much as she'd promised herself there would be no incidents, trying to access Vivisari Vexaria's opulent, famous, and perhaps abandoned estate in the heart of the Noble's District would come with… complications.

Meaning Saffra should stay behind. Especially since Vivi's next stop would be the guild, which might be even more of a debacle.

"I'll be dealing with personal business," Vivi told Saffra. "Is there somewhere you'd like to stay? You lived here for… how long?"

Saffra grimaced and looked away. "A few years."

“I see. Does that mean—” Vivi cut herself off and revised her wording. “Is there anyone you want to see?”

Saffra was quiet for a while. Pressing harder on that topic might not be wise. But eventually the girl replied, “There’s an inn called the Briar and the Bramble. It’s a little expensive, but I figure that doesn’t mean much to you?”

“That’s fine.”

“It’s a bit of a walk.”

A forty-minute trip later, which passed quickly with how enthralled Vivi was by the vibrant and hectic sights of the city, Saffra had guided them to the inn. The girl looked at the cozy, rustic building with apprehension mixed with hopefulness. Vivi waited patiently, watching Saffra steel herself—she clearly didn’t realize she was hesitating.

Finally, she squared her shoulders, nodded, and went for the entrance.

The door swung open on quiet hinges, revealing a common room that smelled of woodsmoke and stew. A low-burning fire crackled in a hearth against the far wall. The space was tidy and arranged with a half-dozen dark-wood tables with matching chairs. Most seats were empty, but those that weren’t held adventurers—in their plain clothes, but easily recognizable.

They were inside for a total of two seconds before a gasp ripped through the air, followed by a rattling of a bowl as a plump, older woman hastily dropped a tray to a table. She apologized to the man, who seemed bewildered but not upset, and rushed over with a cry of “Saffra! Darling! Where have you *been?*”

Vivi would’ve reflexively defended the catgirl, who was rooted to the spot with an expression close to panic, but obviously Saffra had chosen to come here, and likely this woman was why.

Seizing her in an enormous hug, the plump, matronly woman lifted Saffra off the ground, pressing the girl’s face directly into her bosom. Saffra remained stiff as a board for a moment, then, tentatively, her arms quested up to return the hug.

Vivi relaxed—and also found herself immensely relieved. Saffra *did* have people who cared about her. She wasn’t completely on her own.

But then what happened to her? Vivi wondered. *Why was she expelled, and how did she end up in a frontier city like Prismarche? In an entirely different kingdom on the other side of the continent?*

“Hi, Missus Tilly. It’s been a while.” The words came out muffled, seeing how her face was buried in the older woman’s chest.

“Almost a year!” Tilly cried. “I went and asked about you, and I heard the strangest things! I didn’t believe any of it, mind you, but dear, what *happened?”*

Tilly, though caught up in the moment, could read cues: she felt Saffra stiffen in her arms and start to wiggle away. Tilly’s attention flicked to Vivi, accurately guessing the reason for Saffra’s discomfort.

Surprisingly cold eyes analyzed Vivi, determining whether she was a threat. Since it was born out of purely protective instinct for Saffra, Vivi approved. The woman’s smile—the warmth in it—returned quickly.

“Well, never mind that,” Tilly announced, keeping a hand on Saffra’s shoulder. “Who’s this? You made a friend?”

Saffra’s expression turned to utter mortification, obviously reading the implication in the woman’s tone. “S-she’s my teacher! An *extremely* experienced mage, Missus Tilly! Not a friend.” Saffra turned a distressed look to Vivi to see how she would receive the woman’s words.

Vivi barely reacted, resigned to her fate by now. Of course when she walked in with a teenage girl, people would think they were a similar age. That misunderstanding happened even in contexts it shouldn’t, much less ones where it was reasonable.

It was her own fault for designing her in-game character to look so much like her real-life self. She could’ve been free from the assumptions her stature and build created. *Then again, I wouldn’t have changed myself if I could*, she thought indignantly. *I am who I am.*

Tilly paused at Saffra’s clarification, then with her previous good-naturedness, laughed. “Oh, dear, I know better than to assume.” She tutted. “It was envy speaking, I think. What I wouldn’t do for skin like yours! Elves and demons, they don’t know their luck. I had wrinkles at twenty-five!” The woman laughed again, gregariously. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, miss.”

As far as recoveries went, it was a good one. And since anyone who watched over Saffra with such concern was an instant ally, Vivi brushed past the bit of awkwardness.

“You as well. Saffra and I met in Prismarche, and I agreed to teach her a few things.”

“Prismarche?” Tilly turned to gawk at Saffra. “Prismarche, in the *Northern Kingdom?* That… must be a story and a half.”

Saffra looked extremely uncomfortable at the implied question, so Vivi said, “I’m afraid I have urgent business I need to attend to—you two should catch up. I’ll be back by evening, I suspect.”

The discomfort in Saffra’s posture turned to relief, and Vivi didn’t take it personally. Saffra clearly wanted her past, whatever it was, kept a secret for now, and having Vivi and Tilly in the same room threatened that.

Tilly seemed to recognize Vivi’s play, because she nodded subtly at her in acknowledgement. For once in her life, Vivi had managed some level of social deftness. *That probably won’t happen again for a while*, she mentally snorted.

“I would stay and introduce myself, but there’s a lot I need to handle,” Vivi said. “Take care of her, please.”

“No need to ask, dear. Of course. I’d love to get to know you too though—will you be staying the night? On the house, for bringing her back.”

Vivi took a second to respond. “Maybe. I don’t know what today will look like.”

“Alright, then.” Tilly squeezed Saffra’s shoulder. “Best of luck with whatever it is.”

Vivi nodded, shared a look with Saffra—who seemed both embarrassed and relieved—and left with a parting wave.

Though deeply curious, she temporarily put Saffra’s situation out of mind.

It was time to see if her manor was still standing.

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HOME

While Vivi had spent years familiarizing herself with Meridian, she'd done most of her exploration with a map overlaid across her vision. So she hardly knew all the city's streets and districts by heart, especially now, with the changes a century had brought.

She wanted to minimize the risks she took, so flying invisible through the air seemed unwise. Powerful mages resided in this city, and while she should be able to hide herself from even them, she chose caution. She *would* make it one full day without an unintended debacle.

That said, she would hardly swear off magic entirely. A [Farsight] high in the sky gave her a bird's-eye view of the city. She took in the sight of Meridian through a more familiar lens: ironically, a minimap of sorts.

The main artery of the city, the River Chalis, cut through the urban sprawl and divided Meridian into two halves. Along the river's shores, industry bustled, well-developed banks crowded with docks and warehouses. Boats flowed up and down the murky water; interestingly, most used sails but some were of newer designs, with no obvious method of propulsion—clearly powered by that same 'artificing' the Convoy used.

Downriver and downwind resided the industrial district. Huge brick buildings released smoke and steam from their roofs, and not far from that a Convoy rail snaked through, delivering goods from and to Meridian in enormous quantities. In the northeast near the dense center of the city sat the High King's Palace—white marble and blue roofs—joined by an

opulent courtyard and a sprawling garden. A bit south and west was the Noble's District. Today's goal.

Casting a spell to amplify her eyesight, she began searching. She found the estate in short order. It was nearly the largest in the city and, to her relief, exactly where she'd left it.

A glance showed that the expansive grounds had been immaculately kept over the years, and nothing seemed out of place. She dismissed [Farsight] without examining it too closely; she wanted to experience her old home in person, not look down at it with magic.

Maybe that was unwise, since she could do some scouting and draw conclusions, but a level two thousand mage was allowed to indulge in whimsy. She'd already chosen pragmatism by skipping her leisurely trip across the continent. When it came to her old home, however, she would experience things like an actual person.

A nervous energy filled her as she crossed the city. It was time to find out what had happened to her home, personal stash, and most importantly, Winston. She honestly wasn't sure what she would find. Any number of things could've taken place in a century's time.

She accelerated the trip with [Invisibility] and a movement spell, since those were only mithril-rank abilities. Nothing to draw attention if detected, not in Meridian. [Fly] was only off the table because it was tier ten—a Titled spell, and a difficult one at that.

Soon, she arrived at the Noble's District and slowed her pace.

Real estate in the capital city wasn't cheap. Even in the Noble's District, the buildings—while grand—were packed without much space between them. Only as she reached the wealthiest sections did the buildings start elbowing out some breathing room.

Vivisari's manor had enough space to practically be considered a country estate. There hadn't been many people as rich as her, both among players and NPCs, and her home reflected that, claiming a large chunk of isolated land even in the middle of the Noble's District.

She reached the ornate iron gate, which was already open. A long, paved path led to the huge building in the distance. A vast lawn of luscious green filled the grounds, trimmed hedges and vivid flower beds kept pristine. Tall, mature trees dotted the grass, bearing fruit of many colors.

The manor was enormous, constructed of pale white stone four stories tall, wide enough for twelve large rooms abreast—gigantic even by the

standards of a mansion. The windows, stone, and roof were all spotless as well, not a blemish in sight.

She observed all of that passively. Her real interest was in something else. Because there was an oddity in the scene.

A *lot* of maids and butlers were bustling around.

This clearly wasn't an abandoned or minimally unkept property. Someone lived here—many someones. But even then, there were a strangely high number of service staff members going about their duties.

…not even 'going about their duties,' on closer inspection. Sparring together. Drinking tea on the balcony. Conversing. She didn't see any hint of a noble family, or an ongoing social event that would account for such a large staff. Even to upkeep grounds and a manor of this size, surely this was overkill. Then again, *she* hardly had a good frame of reference.

Confused, she walked through the open gate.

As she passed, magic brushed against her senses. She paused and examined the enchantments, vision burrowing into the metal plates beneath the gate. To her surprise, she recognized the enchantments as being engraved by her own hand. All spells had a certain flavor to them—more painting than mathematical formula—and the personal touch here was definitely her own.

They were the standard defensive arrays, so she put them out of mind. The magic had simply evaluated whether she was a threat. She was no invader, so it let her pass through uncontested.

She strolled down the paved path large enough to fit three carriages side by side and examined the grounds with fascination.

Unlike all other places she'd visited in Seven Cataclysms, her home hadn't changed over the years. The building was identical, the layout of the grounds, the exact arrangement of hedges and flower beds—though the trees were larger, and some had surely been replaced over the years. So not fully identical. But faithfully maintained, as close as could be expected.

That alone gave her hope that some other noble lineage hadn't appropriated her home. *Surely they'd have changed things, if so?* Vivi thought. *Did Winston manage the manor in my absence? Or arrange for that to happen?* It would explain the enormous service staff… sort of. Then again, not really. *There's way too many of them. What's going on here?*

Barely a few seconds after walking in, she saw heads beginning to turn. One maid immediately darted off for the main building, presumably to alert

whoever was in charge. That was to be expected, and what Vivi wanted, so she didn't stop the young woman. She doubted strangers strolled up to important noble houses often, much less Vivisari Vexaria's.

She was being conspicuous, but she had no choice. She needed to get in contact with whoever was in charge. Winston, hopefully, but she didn't get her hopes up.

Her confusion grew as she approached the manor. The number of maids and butlers really was unusually high, and she couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation. Especially with what they'd been doing: training and using the grounds as if they were… she didn't know what. Like they owned the place?

Something itched in the back of her head, telling her she had failed to draw an obvious conclusion. But she was distracted. Her home, in the flesh… it was an overwhelming image.

Just as she arrived at the huge set of stairs leading up to the palatial manor, a woman strode out. Tall, thin, with gray hair up in a bun and features severe enough to make a nunnery matron look warm and kindly, she radiated an aura of cold command so thick that Vivi felt it dozens of feet away.

"Halt at once and identify yourself," the woman demanded.

The words carried across the distance, and Vivi obeyed by pure instinct. The woman's tone promised Vivi she would regret it if she didn't, and yet it somehow was neither aggressive nor hostile. The authority of a general; she gave orders, and all who listened complied.

Vivi knew that if she hadn't stopped, this woman would have attacked her on the spot.

Really? I guess I am *intruding.*

Never mind that this was her own home. They obviously didn't know or recognize her as Vivisari Vexaria. She still had her [Illusion] on.

The two of them took each other's measure. The woman had gray eyes to match her gray hair, and an undeniable air of grace to mirror that aura of authority. Like every other maid and butler present on these grounds, she carried herself with the dignity of a woman who served royalty.

She was wearing a single gold bar on each of her lapels.

…it looks an awfully lot like those two silver bars the Second Class White Glove was wearing back on the Convoy.

The uniforms were *strikingly* similar too.

Maybe… identical?

A conclusion started to form, but Vivi was busy considering the woman in front of her.

“I need to speak to whoever’s in charge,” she finally said. “The owner of the manor.”

The woman narrowed her eyes. Several long seconds passed before she replied.

“The Headmaster is indisposed and will not be interrupted. If you have business with him, you will make arrangements through appropriate channels. Identify yourself, explain how you entered, and leave immediately. We will consider this matter settled—for now.” She was tense as she delivered her commands, eyes locked on Vivi with startling intensity.

Vivi paused.

Headmaster? And, how did I get in? The gate was open. I just walked through.

Vivi realized she was being silly. She hadn’t even thought about it: those defenses back at the gate repelled intruders. She should’ve counted as one without explicit permission to enter, even if she’d arrived without malicious intent.

Seeing how she didn’t have an invitation—and they clearly hadn’t come to the conclusion she was Vivisari Vexaria and thus had an automatic way in—they thought she had bypassed the wards somehow. Not an easy task, tricking the defenses the Sorceress herself had laid on her manor. That alone had made her an extremely credible threat in the woman’s eyes, hence the wariness.

Vivi’s attention flicked to a maid seated on a balcony nearby, a teacup in her hand, watching them with calm interest. Her blue eyes were analyzing and unconcerned. She wore two silver pieces of metal on her lapel, identical to those the White Glove on the Convoy had displayed.

Three other maids sat at the table with her, though they didn’t wear any identifiers of rank. Their aura of refinement was cruder too, now that she paid attention, like many of the younger maids and butlers on the grounds. Still elegant, but less so. They were young—sixteen at a guess.

Student age. Their wide eyes signaled surprise, lacking the graceful, statue-like composure of the older women.

Students.

As in, not yet graduated.

Attending a class hosted by a teacher—who was undoubtedly a White Glove of the Second Class.

“Headmaster… *Winston*?” Vivi breathed, finally putting the pieces together and feeling monumentally stupid for taking so long.

The woman didn’t pause at the words, which confirmed the suspicion. She did, however, ignore Vivi.

“I have warned you twice. There will not be a third.”

Her stance shifted, losing her elegant poise for a more stable positioning of her feet.

Vivi couldn’t believe it.

In her absence, Winston had repurposed Vivi’s manor into a training academy for the world’s most elite bodyguarding service. An organization of unparalleled service staff who could fight on equal footing with some of the best adventurers in the world. He had founded the White Gloves.

Vivi’s thoughts raced, but she was forced to focus on the immediate issue: the woman in front of her, clearly readying herself to attack.

The Glove of the First Class, a Titled-rank threat by default, likely over level one thousand. And since she would be acting in defense of the Academy and the students within, she would be given a truly enormous boost from her class.

Now… Vivi *could* deescalate. There was little she couldn’t do, considering her arsenal of supreme magics. She could calm everyone down, reveal herself, and explain the situation.

But what kind of person teleported a bank teller into the wilderness and summoned a miniature sun as a means of proving her identity? When even she had known there were easier, less-conspicuous methods of handling that problem?

What kind of person created their in-game character with blood-trail tattoos running down their eyes, and hadn’t removed them even after they’d grown up?

Vivi had a fatal weakness, and it reared its head now. Not for the first time, and certainly not the last.

A super-elite, Titled-rank combat maid was about to attack her, and Vivi had never been so flustered with excitement in her life.

At Vivi’s continued lack of response, the maid raised an arm to her side, her palm open. A silvery cloud of mist coalesced into a long, ethereal outline. Materializing from nowhere appeared a bulky weapon that even a

Viking should have struggled to wield in two hands: an ornate, polished battle-axe with silver haft and silver blade. It dropped into the maid's hand, and its weight didn't make her arm dip in the slightest. A mere feather in her grip.

With an accompanying gust of wind, she snapped it Vivi's way.

"You refuse?" the maid asked dangerously.

Vivi swooned. Or would have, if not for Vivisari's body thankfully interfering.

She was going to give Winston whatever he wanted for this. A castle made out of starmetal. He was her new favorite person in the world.

"I didn't come to fight," Vivi said, voice bored and red eyes uninterested. "But I will provide one if you demand it."

The maid, as promised, did not offer a third warning.

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BLISS

In the instant before the maid charged her with her enormous battle axe, Vivi incanted two spells.

"[Perfect Form]. [Titanic Might]."

An agility and strength boost respectively. Seeing how this woman was Titled, and her stats were bolstered by defending the academy, even Vivi might not match her in speed and strength. She was a mage, after all. One that dwarfed most Titled in levels, but still a mage.

Vivi wasn't excited by the chance to show off. The opposite. She wanted to see what the *maid* was capable of. Thus, Vivi would fight with only enough power to push her opponent to her limits. To see what Winston's pupil could do.

What kind of talent has he fostered in the century I've been gone?

Nicole watched as, for the first time since its founding, the Academy for the Domestic Arts and Establishment of Excellent Service played host to an uninvited party.

Seated on a second-floor balcony, she—along with three of her classmates—had a premier view of the drama developing down below.

Even Etiquette Instructor Annabelle, a paragon of dignity and decorum even among the White Gloves, had angled her seat to watch.

Though Nicole doubted that constituted a breach of composure so much as common sense. That Deputy Headmistress Constance, a White Glove of the First Class, a *Titled*, might lose in a duel while defending the Academy was ludicrous to even suggest, but that said, neither had anyone ever bypassed the enchantments the Sorceress herself had laid onto her former place of residence. Caution was well-warranted.

“It seems I’ll need to pause our lesson, dears,” Instructor Annabelle mused, daintily sipping from her teacup. “My, I haven’t seen Constance evict an unruly guest in years. What a treat.” Straight-backed and tone mildly amused, their etiquette instructor remained a picture of grace despite the bizarre development. Nicole didn’t think anything in the world could surprise her. “Pay close attention. Insight gleaned from fights like these can guide your progress for years to come. Assuming that our guest doesn’t disappoint, of course.”

Down below, the Deputy Headmistress’s conversation with the demon woman came to a close, and she pointed her enormous battle axe, Patience, toward her soon-to-be enemy.

Patience. The Deputy Headmistress had named her weapon Patience. When Nicole had learned that, she had nearly gone comatose. The Deputy Headmistress had a *sense of humor?*

All White Gloves had their strengths and weaknesses, as any individual would, and Constance most decidedly lacked in her weapon’s eponymous virtue. Indeed, she displayed that deficiency now. It had taken all of a few sentences to decide that attacking the invader was her best course of action.

Even if violence might be deserved, Nicole thought that surely the Deputy Headmistress was being rash. The demonic girl hadn’t seemed hostile so far… though she supposed that mattered little. An invasion was an invasion and should be met appropriately.

Nicole was nearing graduation and had thus passed the line for what adventurers called ‘mithril rank’—level six hundred—months ago. Her key skill, the one she shared with her peers and which defined their classes, had activated thanks to the imminent threat upon the Academy.

[In Active Service].

Which meant in that moment, she possessed the speed, strength, and perception of someone two hundred levels higher. Orichalcum-rank.

Despite that, she barely saw the Deputy Headmistress move.

She all but materialized in front of the demon. The silver of her enormous battleaxe glinted in the sunlight for one long, suspended moment before it fell like an executioner's blade.

The demon turned. The axe missed by millimeters, the invader's robes and hair billowing as the blow carved a huge chunk from the paved path—and far beyond, cleaving dozens of feet forward and ripping up pavement and yard alike.

Constance twisted, her axe cutting toward the woman's new position without so much as a heartbeat to bridge the blows. The demon ducked and the blade sailed overhead, then straightened and retreated two unworried steps as the Deputy Headmistress reset her posture.

Constance had taken the fight seriously from moment one. 'Never underestimate an opponent,' all students were told from day one. Nicole was pleased that her instructors practiced what they preached.

But those dodges! That the demon avoided Constance's attacks at all was nothing short of astounding, but to do so with such economy of motion? She had thought Constance's opponent a mage from the robes and staff, but clearly she'd been wrong about that. The demon moved *far* too fast. *Twelve hundreds at least, no? Maybe thirteen. And some sort of physically oriented class… or maybe a hybrid.*

Nicole wasn't the only one to stir in surprise at the exchange; her peers did as well.

"Your evaluation continues, dears," Instructor Annabelle commented, sipping her tea. "By definition, composure is only composure if it survives the unordinary. I expect more from sixth-years."

Nicole took the harsh rebuke for what it was. She forced her spine to straighten and smoothed the outrageously uncontrolled expression on her face. Her eyebrows had actually lifted, as if she were a first-year. The mortification nearly had her flushing.

She tucked her hands in her lap, calmed herself, and watched the fight as if it were a simple opera play—and not a particularly good one—rather than what would surely be one of the most incredible displays of power she would ever witness.

After several long seconds of the two women appraising each other, Constance said, "You're fast."

The demon looked bored. “No need to hold back. Surely that wasn’t your limit.”

Despite Nicole’s resolution to control herself, she twitched in horror. The Deputy Headmistress was, at least by the standards of the White Gloves, famously hot-headed.

And the demon was *goading* her?

Indeed, Constance’s grip tightened on her axe, and Nicole read fury in how the woman’s posture shifted. A subtle movement, pulling back her shoulders just slightly, but for a White Glove, even the rashest of them, the action all but radiated anger.

“Insolent,” was all Constance gave in response.

Apparently, she *had* been going easy on her opponent, because the following attacks were nothing like the previous. Maybe she hadn’t been trying to kill the invader outright, however justified that would have been. Now, she came for the demon with bloodlust.

Nicole could only catch glimpses. A flash of sunlight across a silver blade—there, then twenty feet away, then across the entire forecourt. Great cleaves of brown appeared as the manicured yard was torn up by residual kinetic impacts, the mere shunted-away energy from her errant attacks ripping huge gashes into the ground. To Nicole’s dismay, she watched the resulting gusts of wind shake fruit and snap branches all around the estate. She liked those apple trees! They reminded her of home!

The demon, it turned out, *was* a mage. Orbs of black flame burst out of her staff and rocketed toward Constance, who twisted away just in time. Where those churning balls of void-fire exploded, the ground simply… vanished. Blinked out of existence for feet in every direction. Physical matter erased.

Nicole started sweating.

What spell *was* that? What *element*? She’d never seen anything like it, and the Academy’s curriculum most *definitely* had included lessons on how to fight mages and deal with their magic.

A pit started to form in her stomach, though she couldn’t place why. This was the Deputy Headmistress. She wouldn’t *lose*. Nicole couldn’t even conceive of such a thing.

Constance blurred forward again and her axe slashed in two parts, so fast they seemed like one: a low sweep aimed for the demon’s legs, followed by a diagonal slash for the torso. The demon sidestepped the first

and deflected the second with her staff; wood met enchanted steel with a shockwave that had trees snapping in half a dozen yards away.

The demon jumped backward, the movement halting mid-air as she cast some flight spell, and a dozen spheres of white-purple fire blinked into existence in a semi-circle around her. Without delay, they shot toward the Deputy Headmistress in a barrage. Constance didn't retreat. Her axe glowed white as she activated a skill and, spinning, she sliced through the spheres of magic, splitting them in half. They rained down around her, pieces flying off to explode with huge, booming impacts that rattled the porcelain in front of Nicole.

Before the last explosion faded, Constance had charged through the dust and smoke. Yet despite her shocking speed, she didn't reach her opponent in time. Leveling her staff, the demon cast a spell, and something—Nicole didn't know what—*hit* Constance. A deafening *crack* echoed across the grounds, and the Deputy Headmistress went flying backward, tearing clean through a tree in an explosion of wood splinters.

Nicole watched, attention locked on the duel. Much of it, to be honest, she was filling in with her imagination based on what few glimpses she could catch, the flashes of Patience, or those bored red eyes and that slightly downturned mouth.

It didn't make sense. How could a mage move so fast? Cast so fast? Trade weapon blows with a Titled Glove?

The idea struck her like a hammer.

A mage this powerful. A *demonic* mage. One who had somehow bypassed the Sorceress's wards.

Could it be—?

No. Surely not.

Yet, despite how many statues depicted the Party of Heroes, Nicole knew better: the stature of history's greatest spellcaster was far more diminutive than most commoners assumed. The Headmaster had been quite vocal about his distaste of that misrepresentation.

The woman's small, petite build fit. Her class fit. Most of all, the sheer *power* on display fit. This woman was easily in the highest echelons of Titled. Thirteen hundreds. Fourteen?

Or perhaps much higher still, and she wasn't fighting seriously.

Is this…?

The idea was too ridiculous to consider. Besides, why would the owner of the estate mask her identity, much less *attack* her own home?

…*the Deputy Headmistress* did *jump straight to evicting her.*

An explosion of white-and-violet lightning blew Constance across the yard and threw up soil in a long streak—the most explosive impact yet. She climbed out of the resulting crater, ripping her axe from the stone it had embedded in. Smoke flowed from the woman in huge billows. Even the Academy's obscenely durable uniform had torn with the force of that magic.

Constance wobbled on her feet as she stabilized. It lasted only a moment: a flicker of weakness. Then she disappeared with a burst of speed, reentering the fray.

But Nicole had seen it. She had seen the Deputy Headmistress falter.

Her stomach sank all the way to her shoes.

This… was no longer the Deputy Headmistress kicking out an unruly guest, was it?

She was actually fighting.

And she wasn't *winning*.

Instructor Annabelle's teacup had frozen halfway to her lips, coming to the same realization. She set the porcelain down with a soft *click*.

"Nicole, dear?"

"Y-yes, Instructor Annabelle?"

The Instructor said nothing about Nicole's mortifying stutter, which drove home how dire the situation was. "Go fetch the Headmaster, please." Annabelle set her plate aside and stood. "My service is needed elsewhere, it seems. Class dismissed. Jessica, Claire—please request the other Instructors join me in the forecourt."

Nicole obeyed instantly, already flying through the doorway and into the halls of the Academy. The possibility hadn't even crossed her mind, not with the Deputy Headmistress having been the one to meet the intruder.

The Academy. Her friends, her Instructors, her home.

They might actually be in danger.

This was the best day of Vivi's life.

Was that dramatic? Having a thought like that just because she was getting to fight a Titled-rank combat maid?

No, definitely not. It was the simple truth.

The maid was fast. *Insanely* fast. She wasn't pushing Vivi to her limits, obviously, but Vivi could recognize the sheer power this woman was wielding. The level this fight was operating on. 1300s? 1400s? The maid was doing her best to avoid damaging the yard and manor, but when the two of them could trade twelve elaborate back-and-forth attacks across a two-second timespan, the sheer *energy* in play meant that even slightly miscalculating resulted in huge amounts of force going astray and demolishing sections of the yard.

Vivi herself wasn't paying much attention to the collateral damage, beyond making sure nobody would get hurt. For now, the only thought in her head was how much fun she was having.

She didn't know exactly how strong this maid was, but even Vivi's tier-twelve spells were merely knocking the woman around, not seriously hurting her.

"[Netherflame Column]."

A molten bar of magma exploded forward, igniting the grass anywhere its brilliant light touched. To Vivi's astonishment, the maid *cut the spell in half*, dispelling it like she had earlier, and immediately appeared in front of Vivi with her axe raised. Her expression was *furious*. Vivi knew that there was nothing in her mind, in that moment, besides delivering the ultimate judgment. The maid's eyes screamed hot and bloody murder.

Again, Vivi almost swooned.

Slipping backward, she avoided the attack by a hair's breadth. She had taken to the air a while ago, not that the aerial advantage posed much problem to the maid, who could jump off solid air and twist around in complete contradiction to physics.

The woman traded another half-dozen attacks with Vivi, each blow carrying enough power to cleave the manor in half, and Vivi ended the exchange by jabbing the butt of her staff forward, catching the woman in the stomach. She blasted backward with enough force to spawn a crater below. Vivi paused in concern, but the maid climbed to her feet, wobbled slightly, and charged right back toward her.

I’ll have to drop an actual meteor on this woman to keep her down, won’t I? she thought in genuine admiration.

She had contingencies in place, naturally; she wouldn’t risk this woman’s life just to indulge in a spar, no matter how much fun she was having. [Elethelea’s Saving Grace]—by far the highest-tier spell Vivi had cast since the fight started, or indeed since arriving in this world. If she went too far by accident, the spell she’d cast on the maid would act as a complete and total save-from-death from all known attacks—though it would leave the woman in bad shape afterward.

More and more of the yard converted to a ruined battlefield as they fought, and Vivi delighted in the process of testing her opponent. To her dismay, though, even this woman had her limits. It wouldn’t be long before Vivi had to stop.

Almost as soon as she had that thought, though, her worry was dispelled: a woman with blonde pigtails wielding twin daggers flew into the fight seemingly from nowhere, two golden crescents shattering impotently—though with enough force to make the ground tremble—against Vivi’s [Prismatic Barrier]. Red eyes flicking in the direction of the arrival, she saw a lapel displaying two silver bars. Then a second opponent entered the fray: a butler, lunging with a black steel rapier. Vivi sidestepped. A *third* Glove flew in. Then a fourth, too.

And so, her bliss ascended to wholly new heights. She fought not one, but *five* White Gloves at the same time, the *weakest* of the newcomers wielding the strength of a Titled.

Truly, she was in heaven.

Constance didn’t understand. What kind of monster borne from the burning hells *was* this?

Nobody climbed to the heights she had without understanding how weak Titled truly were. The mortal races liked to herald the thousand-level mark as the pinnacle of power on this world, and while it did separate a person into an ultra-elite tier less than a hundred across the mortal

kingdoms could claim, the discrepancy between the strongest Titled and the weakest was like that of an orichalcum and a bronze. Never mind the immortal races that lurked: dragons and phoenixes and far worse.

Was something of that ilk what she fought now? What else could be this strong, yet unknown to her by face or reputation?

Perhaps she could have drawn the obvious conclusion—could have realized that a clear explanation existed for a powerful demon-mage appearing at the Academy—if not for the battle-rage pouring through her veins and how every ounce of her consciousness was dedicated to erasing this abomination. This monster that threatened her brothers, sisters, and Academy.

Even five Gloves of the Second Class and higher working in concert, though, couldn't break that impassive, disdainful expression. Where earlier Constance had thought she was at least pressing the demon, she realized, with horror, that the demon had been toying with her from the start.

This monster had never considered this a serious fight. Nor did she now.

Her mouth tasted like ash.

Her goal changed. She couldn't kill this thing, not even with help. Only one person on these grounds was capable of putting the beast down, as much as it stung her pride to admit, and perhaps not even him. All she could hope for was survival. She needed to buy time.

So, she bought it. Over the course of an agonizing forty-five seconds, the longest of her life, struggling like she never had before to keep up, merely to occupy her opponent's attention.

Then, blessedly, a clap rang through the air, and the shockwave of noise seized everyone's attention.

The fight came to an abrupt stop. Dust settled and gusting wind calmed.

"My apologies for the delay. I was requested by name?" Father's voice carried across the forecourt with all the easy authority of one of the most powerful men in the Central Kingdom. There was a dangerous tone there, one Constance hadn't heard in years. "Have no fear. I will *personally* see to your needs, miss."

In the aftermath, the demon was facing away from Father; the five elites of the Academy surrounded her on all sides—not that she seemed concerned by the tactical disadvantage. All five of them, Constance included, were battered and exhausted. The demon was unscathed.

Though none of them had sustained an actual injury, somehow. Even Constance only felt drained, with a few bruises and sore spots adorning her body. This monster really had just been playing with them.

At Father's words, a strange emotion seemed to dawn on the demon's face, the impassive mask breaking for the first time—something five White Gloves trying desperately to kill her hadn't come close to managing.

Constance must surely have misinterpreted what she saw: an impression influenced by her role at the academy, her status as Deputy Headmistress. Because she swore that the expression that flickered across the demon's face was that of a student caught after curfew.

Guilt?

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CAUGHT

Vivi looked around at the pulverized yard, the toppled trees, the gouges in the ground, and the general state of ruin she'd brought to her home—to Winston's academy for White Gloves.

She'd… definitely gotten carried away.

Hearing Winston's voice ring across the yard should have inspired happiness. And it did… but not like it should have, thanks to how incriminating her circumstances were.

Guilt, and embarrassment. That was what rushed through her as she realized what she'd done. This was the first impression she would leave on Winston after a century of separation? Coming in and tearing up the grounds he'd painstakingly, loyally maintained—and far worse, she'd attacked his pupils?

Technically, they had attacked first, but she knew that was a flimsy excuse. Considering the absurd gap in their strength, she could have ended the fight before it began. Or at any point in the ensuing battle. With little effort, much less violence.

She would at least own up to her mistake. The truth was, she hadn't been able to help herself. Getting to fight a Titled-rank combat maid had targeted that vital flaw of hers.

Taking a breath, she braced herself for the well-deserved scolding. She dispelled the [Illusion] concealing her face and turned to Winston.

He had aged. In the game, he had been a refined man in his thirties: tall, broad-shouldered with a neatly trimmed beard and a mane of combed-back

black hair. That black hair was gray now, though the years seemed to have done more good than harm—and he hadn't been unattractive to begin with. He'd turned into quite the silver fox.

That said, a century had certainly left its mark. She wouldn't call him *old*, but his wrinkles were plentiful. Time had worked at a quarter of the speed it should have, she estimated, so he looked to be in his late fifties.

On Vivi turning to him, his green eyes widened, and though she got the sense he was a hard man to surprise, he took a step backward in pure shock.

Vivi felt like she needed to explain herself. She cleared her throat and said, "They weren't in danger. I just… wanted to test their capabilities."

It was the most generous spin she could put on her behavior without outright lying. She hoped Winston wouldn't be too upset, but it would be more than deserved if he were.

With Vivi having peeled back the [Illusion] covering her robes and face, the Gloves surrounding her— finally understanding who their opponent was —reacted with similar displays of astonishment. Which was to say, with widened eyes, a full-body twitch, and other muted reactions. These weren't men and women who would go dropping their jaws at even the most unbelievable developments—which the appearance of Vivisari Vexaria, the long-lost hero of legend, surely counted as.

After a long moment of stunned silence, Winston's expression morphed into something Vivi hadn't expected. His posture stiffened, his mouth pressed into a line, and his eyes took on a flinty look.

"If you wear her face as some ploy," the man said tightly, "then I warn you, miss, you will have gone too far."

Vivi considered him. It wasn't unreasonable, she supposed, that someone might try to steal her identity as part of a plot. Winston didn't seem to *believe* that was the case, but neither was he discounting the possibility.

He wanted proof.

If there was one thing Vivi was good at, it was undeniable demonstrations of her identity.

Fixing the utter destruction she'd brought to Winston's Academy would help make amends, anyway. So, she could kill two birds with one stone.

She raised her staff. The men and women surrounding her tensed, though they didn't move to stop her. They didn't know if she was an impostor, but even if so, she deserved wariness.

“[Mass Greater Restoration].”

A wave of green energy pulsed out, and when the burst of restorative magic passed over the arranged maids and butlers, their bruises disappeared, their cuts sealed, and a second wind seemed to lift their weary postures up.

Far from being assuaged, the White Gloves eyed her with *more* caution.

She turned her attention to the grounds. Spells like [Reconstruct] repaired manmade creations: devices or furniture or buildings, or, as previously used, Convoys. Certain druidic spells could regrow or rejuvenate trees, but that wouldn’t suffice either. A fight between so many Titled-strength combatants had done more than tear up the lawn or toss branches around. It was now a battlefield, filled with toppled trees, huge cuts in the ground, and smoking craters.

At least the manor had survived. Both she and her opponents had taken care to avoid dragging the fight to it. Not for the building’s sake, but the students inside.

There was one way to fix everything, though even for Vivisari it would be mana-intensive. But down to every misplaced pebble, shattered tile, and blade of grass, she would put the Academy grounds back how she had found it.

For the first time since arriving in this world, she began to cast *real* magic.

Mana gushed out from her in waves, in such enormous quantities that the air seemed to physically thicken. All five White Gloves staggered, faces paling as they felt the sheer power being poured into the working. Using no less than sixty simultaneous streams of mana, she painted glowing runes into a spell circle that engulfed a full third of the expansive estate—dwarfing a regular circle by an order of magnitude. Hundreds of arcane symbols took shape, flowing into each other and bleeding power as they took coherence into a diagram of such complexity that even she struggled to keep it fully in her head.

It was a spell diagram that only Vivisari Vexaria could have created, or perhaps one of a handful of others in the world.

There were a number of magics considered taboo. Some for moral reasons: usurping the mind or soul, to name the prominent offenders. Some for the sheer danger they represented; anyone would frown at a mage sticking their hands into the bloody guts of reality. It was simple logic that

one should not, for example, toy with the mechanisms of Fate or breach the dimensional boundary.

Nor should they—and this was the magic she wrought above her estate now—violate that fundamental flow, that mechanism which ushered one minute into the next. The sun across the sky, winter into spring.

Time.

Like necromancy, there was nothing inherently evil about temporal magic. Nor was it inherently dangerous, so long as one didn't try to involve sapient creatures—intelligent minds fundamentally couldn't survive such a violation. It had been those transgressions that had shaped the Shattered Oracle's madness and brought his Cataclysms to the world.

But Vivi's spell was simpler, and she didn't overstep. She targeted only the grounds and surrounding areas subjected to their duel.

Once the last of two thousand and sixty-three runes had formed, completing a grand tapestry that would make even an Institute archmage bleed from his eyes and ears to gaze upon, the spell was finished.

With a long, keening noise that came from nowhere and everywhere, Vivi reached forward and grabbed something that should never be grabbed.

She borrowed the words of a madman.

"**[The Clockwork Unwinds]**."

The machinery that held reality together came to a screeching halt. And, with agonizing slowness, began to tick in reverse.

Clumps of soil and pulverized stone leapt from their surroundings and slammed into ragged gouges. Pulverized turf knitted together. Toppled trees shuddered and wrenched upright, splintered trunks patching as thousands of shards slotted together. In several short moments, through a display that left even Vivi speechless, the manor's grounds were restored to their former glory, the battle's collateral damage playing in reverse for everyone present.

The spell ended. She lowered her staff, link severing and gushing mana conduits closing. Her legs wobbled. Even Vivisari had her limits, and violating one of the fundamental rules of the universe had approached them.

She was a long way from manaburn, but that certainly hadn't been magic she could cast dismissively.

As she came back to awareness, she found an audience staring at her. And in a way wholly unlike before. Not just astonishment, but awe, in the biblical sense. With an equal part horror mixed in.

To be fair, she felt the same.

Winston alone wore a different expression. He was smiling. A reserved, mild quirk of his lips, as befit a butler's composure.

He bowed.

"Welcome home, Mistress Vivisari. I've managed the estate in your absence—I hope you find everything to your satisfaction."

The resulting silence was deafening. The five White Gloves stood mute for obvious reasons. Vivi's lack of response, though, was different.

He's not upset? I tore up the grounds and assaulted his pupils. Even if I fixed most of it, how can he not be angry?

She almost felt worse because of that.

"Of course," Vivi finally said. "Yes. Thank you. Like I said, sorry for the… commotion. We have a lot to talk about."

"Indeed we do, Mistress."

Vivi scanned the dumbfounded maids and butlers who held their weapons halfway at the ready, knowing the fight had ended but not willing to lower their only means of defense against the terrifying monster—however impotent they knew resistance would be.

Her eyes fell on her first and primary victim. "Thank you for the spar. Winston trained you well. You're not hurt?"

A complicated series of expressions flashed across the woman's face, predominant among them incredulity and bewilderment. Getting control of herself, she dispelled her weapon, the enormous battle axe melting into silver smoke. She curtsied stiffly and said, "My deepest apologies, Mistress Vivisari. I should have appraised the situation more carefully. My actions today were unforgivable."

Vivi blinked. What? She herself was *clearly* the one at fault. Maybe the maid had acted rashly too, but leaping to protect the Academy from an invader was far less absurd than Vivi's own reasoning of 'she had really wanted to fight the super cool combat maid.' *This is going to haunt me for years to come,* she mentally groaned in embarrassment.

"You were simply defending your home," Vivi said—her face would have been burning red if not for her body's built-in stoicism.

The woman held the curtsy, not raising her eyes to meet Vivi's. The other four maids and butlers were doing the same, she noticed.

Suddenly, she felt extremely out of place. More than usual for being the center of attention.

What was she supposed to say?

Before the silence could linger, Winston said, “Constance, if you could restore order to the Academy? I will attend to Mistress Vivisari myself.”

The Glove of the First Class—Constance, apparently—rose. She nodded at Winston and, with another curtsy for Vivi, excused herself, hastily taking long, refined strides toward the manor’s open doors. The others did the same, their composure likewise restored, if forced. It was an undeniable retreat.

“I see you’ve changed little over the years, Mistress Vivisari,” Winston finally said when they were alone, amusement coloring his voice.

She paused. “How so?” she asked carefully.

Winston considered her, then gave another small smile. “Merely that you are as full of… vitality and whimsy as always.”

Vitality? *Whimsy?* She stared at him. This man was surely the only person in the world who would refer to Vivisari in that way.

Or maybe others who had known Vivisari would, too? She had assumed that Vivisari’s personality wasn’t the same as her own… but had she been wrong?

“Are you calling me impulsive, Winston?”

“Never, Mistress. That would be unbecoming of a servant to his superior.”

Vivi blinked.

He was sassing her!

Her mood rose, abruptly, all the way to the ceiling. Winston *knew* her. Or knew Vivisari—and Vivisari must be closer to Vivienne in personality than she’d assumed. Because he was clearly aware of that ‘fatal flaw’ of hers.

Were she and Vivisari actually the same person? Or rather, alternate versions of each other, but still closely related? This brief interaction definitely seemed to imply that their cores were the same.

She had wondered earlier how this would work. Meeting people who had known her alternate self. Would they expect a stoic savior of the world, devoid of personality and full of wisdom, or something else entirely? Vivisari’s natural stoicism, the way she never blushed or faltered or jolted in surprise, had made Vivi think that they were different people.

But no. Winston’s first exposure to her after a century had been tolerant exasperation at the totally unnecessary debacle she’d created. He wasn’t surprised in the slightest. Had expected it of her, even.

…unfortunately, that meant she should *really* reflect on her impulsiveness.

“To be fair, I didn’t start it,” Vivi said. “I just… didn’t discourage it, either.”

His lips twitched, and he dipped his head. “Yes, my daughter is also not one for considering her actions, despite my best efforts. I am unsurprised by how this event unfolded.”

“Your *daughter*?”

“Indeed. Constance is my eldest.”

Oh, no. Not only had Vivi attacked his academy and destroyed the estate he’d carefully managed, but she’d thrown spells of mass destruction at his *family*. There had never been any true danger, but they hadn’t known that. It was the principle of the matter.

How was this man not upset with her?

Amused, and once more proving he knew her beyond a superficial manner, Winston predicted what she was thinking and said, "She has seen far more than her fair share of battle, Mistress Vivisari, and she left with no injuries today, merely wounded pride. While perhaps shaken, all five of the men and women you instructed will, upon reflection, appreciate what transpired. There are few experiences so invaluable as a reminder of how far you have left to climb. Indeed, as a father, I thank you for providing her such a lesson. Being humbled in this manner may save her life in the years to come.”

There was wisdom in the words, certainly, but she couldn’t just agree. “That’s quite the spin you’ve put on things, Winston.”

“Such is the role of a diligent servant. In all matters, his lady’s image comes first. But rest assured. I mean what I said.”

She studied him, then relaxed. “I’m glad.”

A second passed, and in the lapse of conversation, her eyes idly flicked over his shoulder, into the manor’s interior.

He read the cue. “May I show you inside, Mistress Vivisari?”

“If you don’t mind. I’d like to see what you’ve done with the place.”

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BUTLER

Winston ushered her into the mansion, and Vivi saw that the opulent foyer had been maintained exactly as she remembered, much like the grounds. Walking through, she drank in the sights. So familiar, and yet not. It was strange being somewhere so familiar—somewhere that she knew should be virtual. It reminded her of waking in the Burial Room of the Ashen Hierophant just a couple days prior. The disconnect jarred her.

A maid and student stood across the room, underneath an archway, and Vivi's eyes fell on them. They froze like deer in headlights, and both hastily curtsied and excused themselves—or, more accurately, fled.

She had thought she had earned a reputation back at Prismarche, but clearly it didn't compete with the legend of Vivisari Vexaria, the woman who had heralded the mortal races out of the Age of Cataclysms. A woman who could, with a thought and a gesture of her staff, scoop up a small town with [Telekinesis] and pulverize it into a ball of earth and stone. Even though the Party of Heroes had possessed a stellar reputation, the red tears on Vivi's face invoked a primordial sort of fear.

And not just because of raw power. For all that the Sorceress had ended the Age of Chaos and saved the world, the common folk *associated* her with those times. She was supposed to be a relic of the past, a figure of a mythical, and perilous, era. What did her return mean? Did her presence promise another Cataclysm? Why else would she have reappeared after so many years?

She wondered that herself. There didn’t *need* to be a greater reason she’d materialized into this world… but surely there was, right? Humans liked to find meaning where none existed. Perhaps she was doing that now.

Winston led her through the estate and to a sitting room, though he stopped briefly to issue commands to a butler, who hurried off down the polished hallway.

The sitting room was paneled in dark, glossy wood, and a large fireplace sat at one end. A collection of deep blue velvet armchairs and a sofa were arranged atop a thick, patterned rug. He bid her to sit, and she did so, sinking into the soft cushions, rich fabric smooth under her fingertips. The wealth on display reminded her of the Lounge. Like then, she felt out of place.

Winston closed the door with a soft *click*. When he remained standing, Vivi hesitated, then gestured at a seat.

“You can join me, if you want.”

“If you demand it, Mistress Vivisari, I shall of course obey. But I would be honored to act my role today. It’s something I’ve waited a century for, after all.”

“Ah. Yes. That’s fine.”

The response had caught her off guard. For all that he seemed to perceive her as an old friend, he also genuinely held to the master-servant dynamic. That shouldn’t have surprised her.

She shifted in place, not knowing what to say. He smiled, his eyes crinkling in an almost fond manner at the awkwardness. Strangely, that relaxed her. She didn’t have to put on airs. This man knew her—or Vivisari, who was apparently much closer in temperament than Vivi had assumed.

“You went and built an academy while I was gone,” she opened with.

“Indeed. It seemed a worthwhile use of my time. I hope the appropriation of your estate was not presumptuous. We will, of course, vacate now that you’ve returned.”

Vivi stirred in surprise. “What? Where would you even go?”

“Plans have been made in advance. I did expect you to return someday, Mistress.”

“But—” She paused. *Did* she want her home emptied out? She didn’t care much about this manor besides how it was comfortable, familiar, and played host to her personal vault—the last of those by far the most important factor. Obviously, she didn’t need to live in a fifty-room-or-

however-ridiculously-big house this was. The only reason she owned it at all was because she'd been filthy rich in Seven Cataclysms, so why not buy the largest, most luxurious manor in the game?

"That's really not necessary," she eventually said. "Continue as you were. These grounds are better defended than anywhere else you can find, and you've already situated yourselves." Honestly, she didn't *want* the miniature army of combat maids and butlers to leave. She wouldn't be staying here often, she figured, but when she did, getting to see them go about their daily lives would be—and she should *really* stop letting this be a major influence on her decisions—way too cool. "I doubt I'll be spending much time here anyway."

Winston considered her, then replied smoothly, "If you insist. Please accept my deepest gratitude for your generosity." A second passed, and he said, "You don't intend to stay. Has urgent business returned you to us?"

It was obviously a polite way of getting to the meat of the matter. Why she'd been missing for a century, and what had brought her back.

How do I even answer?

She was saved from having to respond right away by the butler from earlier returning with a rolling cart. Winston took the cart and began to arrange the porcelain tea set, the other man hurrying away after bowing so deeply it was almost comical. Like many things in this world, it was going to take a while to get used to the sheer respect—and subdued fear—everyone showed her. The [Illusion] she wore around wasn't just a tactical consideration… she wasn't sure she *liked* how people treated her without it.

She used the lull to consider her response. She had obviously thought about how to handle her arrival: what to say and how to act. But meeting Winston—and seeing how his dedication hadn't wavered over the years—encouraged her to be more open than she'd first decided on.

"You've probably made a few incorrect assumptions," Vivi said, reaching for the teacup Winston set in front of her. "Urgent business didn't keep me away. From my perspective, it hasn't been a century. Or even *years*." She hesitated. "I can't explain, fully, Winston, and this will sound strange. But I wasn't present in this world."

Winston reacted merely with a slow raising of his eyebrows. "That," he said after a few seconds, "explains quite a lot, actually."

"It does?"

“We sought you out, of course,” he replied. “Vanguard and I, among other concerned parties. When more reliable methods failed, we turned to divinations. The best oracles in the world. The results were… nonsensical. There was no interference, nothing to indicate that you, or any other, were hindering the readings. Yet the consensus those oracles reached was that you were not dead, but not alive, either. In a state of non-existence.” He hummed. “You were not present in this world? Yes, Mistress Vivisari, that does explain much.”

Vivi absorbed that quietly. Not dead, not alive, and perhaps hadn’t actually existed? It was eerily relevant to her situation.

It brought up a topic she’d been wondering about since the start. Had Vivisari been a real person before Vivi had woken in her body? Were they alternate versions of each other and she’d just… shifted somehow? Traded places? It was too bizarre to think about, and there was no way to draw any definitive conclusions. So, she shook her head to clear it.

“I see,” Vivi said, taking a sip of tea. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you all the details, but yes. I didn’t intentionally disappear without giving you warning. I only got back two days ago. My warp points had reset, but I made straight for Meridian once I got my bearings.”

Winston’s spine straightened at those words, which should have been impossible, seeing how he already stood with the posture of a statue.

But that was why Vivi had cleared up the misunderstanding: she didn’t want him thinking she had abandoned him, or anyone else. He probably would have forgiven it, even without an explanation, but after his dedicated service, he deserved the clarification. Winston was clearly a loyal man, and more importantly, a friend. Of Vivisari’s, at least. Vivienne would have to get to know him better before she could return the sentiment in earnest.

“Of course, Mistress. That you had your reasons was never in doubt.”

She didn’t quite believe him, since a century would put questions into anyone’s mind. But she didn’t say so. “Also, I should tell you that my memory is… somewhat unreliable. It should stabilize over time,” she assured him, since he seemed to grow immediately concerned. “I’m fine. I remember most things. But there are gaps, stemming from the incident. I just felt you should know.”

“Indeed,” he said carefully. He obviously wanted to know more, and probably wished he could ask where she’d been if not ‘in this world’, but he

didn’t, and Vivi internally sighed in relief. She didn’t want to get too wrapped up in this lie.

Not that it was *really* a lie. She’d told mostly the truth, just a misleading version of it.

She didn’t want to elaborate on the full story. The idea made her uneasy. If she were honest, she would rather leave her past life behind and embrace this one. Earth didn’t matter, and trying to explain what it was and how she’d come here would only complicate everything.

“Never mind that. I told you in case I say something strange,” Vivi said. “Please correct me if you think there’s a misunderstanding somewhere.”

Maybe in some other situation Winston would assume she was an impostor spinning a strange tale to sell a lie, but the display on the grounds had dispelled any possibility of that. Only she could cast magic at that level. Well, she and *maybe* a few other individuals. Certain immortal figures from the game’s lore came to mind, like the Dragon King.

But Winston had recognized her by personality, not just appearance. That was what had cleared his doubts as much as her show of strength.

“So. What’s happened while I’ve been gone?”

“That,” Winston said, “is quite the question, Mistress.”

“It’s only been a century. Surely not much.”

It was meant as a joke, but Winston grew contemplative, as if finding wisdom in the words.

“Specifically with you and the guild,” she continued. Obviously, she didn’t expect every social, technological, and political event since the game’s plot ended. “I need to make plans.”

“Indeed.” That put him on more solid ground, and his response came quickly. “I regret to inform you, if you are not already aware, that Vanguard has fractured. With no officers to—” She cut him off with a nod and waved him along, so he skipped forward. “As for the whereabouts and current situation of its members, you would be far better served talking with Rafael.”

Rafael, the Guild Steward. The person she’d interacted with whenever she’d needed to upgrade or manage the guild. It seemed he’d translated over from the game too.

“He’s in Meridian?”

“Indeed. And has grown to prominence over the years, as many of Vanguard’s prior members have.”

The only ‘prior members of Vanguard’ should be Rafael and the eight craftsmen, since the only adventurers had been her and her friends—the Party of Heroes.

It didn’t surprise her that Vanguard’s members had made names for themselves. Winston had too. He was the headmaster of an academy that trained world-elite maids and butlers. And probably had all sorts of claims to fame through his own merit. He was Titled, certainly, and she suspected he’d involved himself in a number of important events over the years.

She wanted to ask him about all of that, but she kept focused on more-important topics.

“What sort of prominence?”

“These days, he acts as the Chief Guildmaster.”

She paused. “For the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“Indeed.”

The *entire* Adventurer’s Guild. Not Meridian’s local branch, which already would have been a significant title, but the whole organization.

“I see.” She found herself frowning. Would that mean he wouldn’t want to rejoin? “Good for him.”

“I expect he’ll be quick to reunite with Vanguard, should you offer,” Winston said, reading the concern on her face. “At least from what I understand of the man. I won’t put words in his mouth.”

“Oh?”

“He’s found the role tedious as of late. Something new—or old, as it were—would be of great interest to him.” He inclined his head. “So far as I know. Again, mere conjecture.”

“You two have kept up?”

“More than superficially, but not as close friends. I was never of Vanguard, so our lives have diverged since those times. It has been a few years since we’ve spoken at length.” He paused as he searched his memory. “A gala thrown by the royal family, if I remember correctly.”

I suppose I’m glad there’s even tentative links left between them. Ten decades is a lot of time for people to drift apart.

“Reestablishing Vanguard will be a priority of yours,” Winston said. “That much is a given. But I must ask, Mistress Vivisari—your reemergence on the centennial Peace Day. The timing is suspect. Is something afoot?”

Vivi frowned. It was a good observation, and something she'd thought about herself. "I'm not sure. Nothing obvious, at least. My entry point was the Northern Kingdom—the Ashen Hierophant's domain." He stirred at that, though he didn't seem too surprised. "I gated to Prismarche, and that same night there was an… incident."

"Incident."

"A massive dimensional breach. Or an attempt at one. It failed."

A long silence. "I hesitate to make assumptions, but that seems more like Fate than something so pedestrian as coincidence."

She couldn't disagree. "So I'll be looking into that," she said with a sigh. Looking down into the amber liquid of her tea, she frowned. "I've heard the Thaumaturgical Institute has a new headmaster," she said. The change in topic probably came out of nowhere for Winston. She'd been thinking about how she needed to make contact with the archmages for dealing with the breach.

"Indeed. Archmage Aeris retired not more than a few months after the Turning. The moment the dust settled enough to excuse it, I believe." He grew solemn. "A well-deserved retirement," he murmured. "Those years were harder on him than most."

Vivi winced. Yes, the game's plot had not been kind to Archmage Aeris. It hadn't to any of the so-called 'good guys.' That Aeris had made it out alive through those brutal campaigns meant he was more fortunate than most.

"I'm aware of Archmage Lysander by reputation," Winston continued, "and have interacted only rarely with him. I'm afraid if you're seeking insight into him as a person or want to learn of the situation at the Institute, I make for a poor source of information." He dipped his head in apology. "That holds true for most topics. I would not overstate my abilities. Rafael will serve you far better than I could." With a wry tone, he added, "I do believe he's put together his own spy network. He's one of the best-informed men in the kingdoms."

"Oh?"

"It seems to be an open secret, that web of his." He paused, and his lips quirked at the edge. "If I were the sort to break propriety and make a request, Mistress Vivisari, I believe I would express how it would amuse me greatly if you made an unannounced visit. It has been many years since that

man has been caught flat-footed. You will need to regale me with his reaction."

She considered him. "I would hardly refuse a request from my loyal butler," she said, her own lips twitching as she saw through his ruse. "Yet I think you're encouraging bad behaviors, Winston. You're giving me an excuse to make another dramatic entrance."

This man really did know her.

"I protest the accusation," Winston said. "I would never scheme against my own Mistress."

"I'll need directions. Also, what's happened to the guildhall? And the vault. Physically, I mean."

"Dormant. Your wards have proved impervious over the years, as expected."

"And when I need to find Rafael?"

"He'll be at the Adventurer's Guild, so far as I know. He leaves the city only rarely. It would be a simple matter to arrange a meeting through official channels, but," his eyes sparkled, "a surprise visit would truly do him good. A reminder that there are some things even he can't predict, and happenings in this world his web cannot ensnare in time."

"I'll keep that in mind."

While information gathering—speaking to Rafael—was a high priority, she had come here with another primary goal.

"My personal vault," she said. "That's also untouched, I hope?"

"Yes, Mistress. Shall I escort you there now?"

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VAULT

Vivi didn’t think Winston harbored any doubts regarding the truth of her identity, but if he did, her unlocking her personal vault dispelled them.

She set a hand against the slab of black metal inlaid into her bedroom wall and complex, interlocking runes activated all across the surface. Power hummed in the air as the symbols glowed dark purple, reached a crescendo, and dimmed.

With a *hiss*, the personal vault of Vivisari Vexaria swung open.

She drank in the sight. There was a lot she’d been looking forward to after arriving, miraculously, in Seven Cataclysms, and appraising the personal hoard she’d accrued over so many thousands of hours sat near the top of the list.

What met her was a long hallway interspersed with black-stone pillars holding a vaulted roof. Between the pillars were armor stands, weapon racks, shelves, pedestals, glass cases—the list went on. Seeing the arrangement, she breathed out a sigh of relief. Her stash lived. It hadn’t vanished into the ether, been ransacked, or experienced any other unfortunate outcome.

She had no clue whether every item had carried over, but clearly a significant amount had. Inside her vault awaited a treasury that all the kings of the world couldn’t match. The value dwarfed that of her bank account many times over. Her *real* wealth was in items.

Stepping into the extra-spatial storage, she felt cool air kiss her skin, the change in temperature stark. She looked over her shoulder and saw that

Winston hadn’t stepped in with her; the butler stayed loyally at the entryway.

“You can join me if you want.”

“Are you certain, Mistress?”

She nodded, and he didn’t need to be convinced. He walked in, polished black shoes clicking against tile. His eyes surveyed the space with naked fascination—his stoic version of that, anyway.

“I forget what I even have in here,” Vivi said. “Cataloging it is going to be a headache.”

“Shall I attend to that on your behalf?”

She hadn’t meant to imply that request, and she opened her mouth to turn him down… then hesitated. He *was* her butler and seemed to find honor in the role. Wasn’t this exactly what she should ask of him?

“If you wouldn’t mind, that would be useful, yes.”

In the game, she’d been able to sort through and access her personal stash using a pop-up screen. That wasn’t the case here. She could only walk around and grab items. Which would make the process tedious. There was a lot to sort through.

While Winston set off to compile a list, Vivi let her gaze run across the stretching hallway filled with artifacts, and her lips tugged into a frown.

What do *I need from here? Anything?*

She hadn’t rushed to her vault with a specific goal in mind. She was here simply because she’d woken with only her challenge-run set: the Vestments of the Voidwalker, her staff, accessories, and some routine consumables. That said, even if there was nothing essential she needed, there were a number of items that would be worth grabbing and keeping on hand.

The more she appraised the vault, the more certain she became it hadn’t carried over one-to-one. Few mechanics or aspects of Seven Cataclysms had. While it was an enormous gallery, when compared to the pages and pages of items that *should* have been stored away, large portions had clearly been culled. *Trimmed down to the best, I hope.*

Most of it had been junk accrued over years, so it didn’t bother her. She’d been overdue for a spring cleaning. Even if some of the good stuff was missing, she wouldn’t be too frustrated. She’d braced herself for the whole vault having been wiped clean or not existing at all. That she had access to even what she could lay eyes on represented a major victory.

There were items here that would give most Titled a heart attack to [Inspect]—if they even could.

With Winston cataloging the right side of the hallway, Vivi started on the left.

Inventory space was limited, so she could hardly scoop up the entire vault. She needed to be judicious with her selection.

Is there a way to get around that? she wondered idly. *An anchored spatial storage? A pocket world I can carry around, with all of my belongings inside?* She *could* craft such an artifact. Had one, somewhere, if it hadn't vanished.

But no. Vivisari's magical knowledge informed her that the interference between items would be problematic. This vault was special; it muted the radiation so many powerful artifacts put out and softened what should have been cataclysmic levels of mana-mingling. If she stacked these items into a pile in the real world, the resulting phenomena would be… interesting, to say the least.

She could perhaps create a pocket world with a similar dampening effect, but that would be a serious undertaking. She filed it away as a possibility. For now, she needed to curate.

The first armor stand on her left held a set of gray robes with gold cuffs. Around the neck hung a ruby necklace, and a stand to the side of that presented two rings, both with fat sapphires. Completing the ensemble was a staff of white polished metal.

This item set, she recognized quickly. The Robes of the Astral Cascade and the Moonbeam Conduit. Drops from the Shattered Oracle. While not best-in-slot, each of the different armor stands and accessories represented a specialization that she could conceivably want on hand. Sustained DPS. AoE and farming. Burst damage. High defense. Mobility and exploration. There were even elemental-specific sets and more niche uses. She'd had plenty of time to accrue anything she might need over the years.

The Robes of the Astral Cascade and the accompanying gear were her general sustained-damage set, hence their closeness to the entrance. She briefly considered putting them on, but when she reached out and felt the rough wool, she wrinkled her nose and decided against it. Her current set was much comfier.

The Vestments of the Voidwalker were probably the better choice from a practical standpoint anyway. They focused on reducing cooldowns and cast

times over boosting firepower, since soloing the Ashen Hierophant had meant she'd needed to respond to any attack in an instant. Squishy mage that she was, evasion and versatility had been by far the most important archetype to build around.

Still, she saw no reason not to store away one or two sets of gear. She deposited the Robes of the Astral Cascade, the accompanying jewelry, and Moonbeam Conduit into her inventory, then walked down the line of other robes and picked two more sets out. Should she come up against an actual threat, she wanted to have appropriate gear ready.

Moving past the armor and weapons that stretched halfway down the hallway, she watched the items on display grow more unique. The first that caught her eye was a pedestal securing a red and orange feather inside a crystalline container. The feather floated in the air, shedding brilliant embers in a constant waterfall, sparking and dying the moment they hit a force field.

Vivi recognized it. She lifted the crystal top and grabbed the huge feather at the hollow base, turning it side to side in fascination. When the feather was in motion, it seemed as if it were on fire.

"[Summon]," she ordered.

The feather combusted. A dense column of red and orange erupted in front of her, washing her face with the dry heat of a desert. From the heart of the flames, a great bird of burning plumage emerged with a cry. A phoenix of crimson and gold lowered bright eyes toward her.

"Nova," Vivi said, pleased. "You're… a lot bigger than I remember."

It wasn't a real phoenix. Those were sapient, immortal creatures, and even standing in the presence of one would probably kill anything below Titled.

No, Nova's just an artificial summon. "A super cute one, too," she muttered, reaching out to scratch his chin. He happily accepted.

She was vaguely aware of Winston staring at her from across the vault. *Did he know about Nova? I don't think he did.*

After getting her fill of petting the bird, she lifted the feather and said, "[Dismiss]."

In another explosion of fire and light, the magical construct disassembled and flew back into the phoenix feather.

"Mistress?" Winston asked, walking up with obvious hesitation.

"Just a construct," Vivi said. "Even I wouldn't keep a phoenix hostage."

A long pause.

“Because it’s probably impossible,” she sighed.

Could she, if she tried hard enough?

Well, no. Again: they were sapient. She wouldn’t from a moral standpoint. Killing phoenixes for alchemy parts was fine; they got better afterward, as phoenixes tended to. And were more monster than human, despite their intelligence.

“…of course, Mistress Vivisari.” He didn’t sound assured, but bowed and returned to his duties.

Vivi examined the feather. How powerful was Nova? In the game, summons were just for aesthetics, meant to be used as pets, not combat. But she’d felt the magic radiating off him, and he’d had a level when she’d used [Inspect]. 1300.

He might make for a useful guardian for Saffra. Vivi would have to run some experiments and make sure he was combat-ready and easy to control, though. Saffra having a Titled-rank defender to call on would bring Vivi peace of mind, so she hoped it worked out.

She tucked the feather into her inventory for later exploration.

Making her way down the line, she evaluated each item and decided whether it was worth filling her limited inventory with. Most didn’t make the cut. The truth was, magic solved most of her own problems. Items that she could give away or lend to another interested her much more than anything she could use herself.

There were some artifacts whose effects even she couldn’t replicate, though. She came to a stop at a glass container, then brightened upon recognizing the item.

Now *that* would be useful. She’d half expected it to not exist in this new reality. It broke fundamental laws even she couldn’t circumvent.

After opening the case and removing a silver bell, she inspected the ornate designs, then faced Winston, who was studiously sorting a shelf of potions.

She rang it.

Winston shot to his feet like someone had stepped on his grave. At the same instant, a black rend sliced the air in a long, vertical slit and expanded into a rectangular door large enough for him to fit through. An identical gateway opened next to Vivi.

Winston spared a look for her from across the hallway, raised an eyebrow, then stepped through the portal. He appeared next to her.

“You called, Mistress Vivisari?”

“Just checking that it still works. Sorry.”

He bowed—somehow this man could make an action polite as that look sarcastic—and stepped back through the gateway, returning to the other side of the vault.

Vivi looked at the item in her hand. The Servant’s Bell violated a law even she couldn’t break: it opened gateways between her and Winston no matter the distance, no [Warp Anchor] required.

Unfortunately, only he could use the gate. She couldn’t send him off to a remote part of the continent and teleport herself to him, using him as a fast-travel method. She also couldn’t hand the bell to Saffra; it was Vivi’s alone. The item facilitated a butler’s ultimate duty to always be available to his mistress, but nothing more.

Still, it was worth keeping. She tucked it into her inventory.

The raid of her vault continued. Over the next half-hour, she stuffed her spatial storage full of all sorts of useful items, several of which deserved further experimentation.

Naturally, she stockpiled a huge quantity of potions, scrolls, and other consumables, nearly clearing out the shelves. Those were some of the most versatile and useful, seeing how she could give Saffra some for her protection.

…though, in the case of scrolls, maybe it wouldn’t be the best idea to let a thirteen-year-old girl carry a nuclear weapon in her back pocket. Saffra had a decent head on her shoulders, but she was also emotionally volatile and undoubtedly rash. The only tier-fifteen and higher spells Vivi would give away would be defensive ones. Ones that couldn’t erase a small town. She had little experience parenting—not that she was a parent to Saffra—but taking that minimal level of precaution seemed wise.

As for creating more of those potions and scrolls… she would have to talk to Rafael. Crafting, as she’d discovered minutes after waking in the Ashen Hierophant’s lair, worked differently from the game she remembered. Brewing more max-level potions like the ones she had woken with should be possible, but there seemed to be some asterisks on that whole process.

Exploring the crafting system was on her to-do list. Her *lengthy* to-do list.

Once she'd made a lap around the vault and possessed a comfortably full inventory, she met with Winston.

"I need to go find Rafael," she said. "We should talk more after, though. I want to see more of what you've done with the academy, and also meet your family." And say sorry to Constance again, Vivi reminded herself. "I'll tell you what I find out, and what my plans are, once I'm done with him."

"You honor me, Mistress."

The words and smile he gave were genuine enough that she was taken aback. She didn't deserve a follower like this. Maybe Vivisari had saved the world, but she, Vivienne, was just some shut-in.

I'll have to do my best to live up to his expectations, she thought soberly.

"Don't take offense," Vivi said, "but I'm keeping a low profile." His eye twitched, and she pretended not to notice. "Your students saw me. They'll stay quiet?"

"Discretion is a fundamental virtue of any servant." He frowned, considering the question more seriously. "I expect news of your presence here will hold indefinitely; I have faith in them. But I would not say there is *zero* chance that one speaks, Mistress, loath as I am to allow even a flicker of doubt into my mind."

"That's more than enough. It's not that serious. Just tell them to keep quiet, please."

"They should have an implicit understanding of such, but I will remind them nonetheless."

She nodded. "I'll be back later. Thank you for the help, Winston. You've been invaluable, as always."

He swelled with pride, and Vivi found herself wondering why her words meant so much to him.

She paused as she realized what her next step entailed.

"Ah. Where's the Guild Headquarters, again?"

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RAFAEL

The world had gone to shit.

And by that, Rafael meant the exact opposite. Nothing ever *happened* anymore.

He'd been spoiled. A hundred years ago, he'd had the privilege of managing chaos incarnate. The Party of Heroes were upheld as champions of virtue—and they had been, in some regards—but he had known the actual men and women who headed Vanguard. Had known how utterly insane each of them was. Barring maybe Orion, and only because Rafael had low standards when comparing him to the likes of Naia and Vivisari.

A single week with them would have turned the hair of even the most veteran Guild Steward gray. A month, and forced early retirement would have been inevitable. He couldn't count the number of massive political kerfuffles he'd needed to smooth over, or impossible logistical requests of every imaginable variety he'd handled.

Or, his personal favorite: how often nervous-looking ambassadors had shown up at his doorstep seeking reassurances because Vivisari had once again been caught with her arms elbow-deep inside the intestines of reality. It had always been amusing, in a not-amusing way, explaining to such men that no, Vivisari would *not* accidentally spawn an eighth cataclysm or end the world, and that yes, she knew what she was doing, even if Rafael himself had never felt fully confident of that.

Indeed, there had not been a span of three full days in his earlier career in which he'd had a moment to rest. And he had thrived in that

environment.

He missed the glory too. For all tasks, big or small, he had been the point of contact for the legendary Party of Heroes. The Steward of Vanguard. He would claim no fragment of honor for slaying the Cataclysms; that had been their feat alone. He had never held a sword against one of those monsters. But where the Heroes had been the grand palace worthy of worship, he had been the foundation at their feet.

These days, he ran the most comprehensive information network in the human kingdoms and captained the Adventurer's Guild. It just wasn't comparable.

Maybe at the start, he'd derived enjoyment from the sheer scale of the project. But the problems that had needed solving, he had solved to the best of his ability. The Adventurer's Guild was an oiled machine. A century was a long time to spend on a single project; he had only needed a decade. The next nine had been sorting out the details. Anyone could have done it.

Which was why he'd put together his web. It would serve him well, someday, he told himself. Information was power, and he'd planted the seeds of that power during his time in Vanguard.

The web had lost its charm too, when he hadn't been able to find a grand task to leverage it toward.

He needed something new. But what was worth his time and effort, compared to the Cataclysms?

He couldn't say what had brought about this malaise. Certainly, he'd known of his discontent for years. Decades. But rarely did it sit at the forefront of his mind. He was not someone to stew in his thoughts.

Perhaps it was Peace Day. The first centennial reminder of the closing of that golden chapter of his life. The memory of Vanguard clung to him. Not just old friends lost, but old purpose too.

If only Vivisari wasn't *missing*. Dead or retired would have been fine. Although he winced at the blasé disregard toward an old friend. But not knowing what had happened to the final officer of Vanguard, the only woman who could swing open those guild doors once more, had driven him half-mad over the century.

He *hated* not knowing. It was anathema to him. He was a fixer, an informant, a steward of projects big and small. He couldn't stand not being certain about something so important.

Sighing, he swung open the double doors leading into the Adventurer's Guild Headquarters. Inside, Allegra shot to her feet.

"Guildmaster."

"*Acting* Guildmaster," he corrected dismissively, the exchange so ingrained he barely registered it. He'd never wanted to lead the Adventurer's Guild permanently—it had been somewhat of an accident he'd accepted the role at all, much less stayed. He just hadn't had anything better to do.

He noticed the look on Allegra's face. "What is it?"

"There's been a dispute with—"

Rafael raised a hand to cut her off. "On second thought, I don't want to hear it. You can handle it, yes?"

She hesitated, but apparently the disaster—as if anything that happened these days could qualify as such—wasn't important enough to warrant her insistence.

"Excellent. I have the utmost faith in you." He headed for his personal office. "I'll be taking my leave early today. No interruptions, please. I don't care if it's the High King himself." He paused with his hand on the door handle. "Well… maybe him." That would be interesting, at least. The senile old man hadn't left the palace in years.

"Has something happened, sir?" Allegra asked, obviously sensing his mood.

"No. Nothing." Under his breath, he muttered, "Which is exactly the problem."

Retreating into the enchantment-cooled interior of his office, he released a long sigh.

Oh, yes, he was definitely in a rare mood today.

Something needed to change. It was terrifying that Winston's suggestion from several years ago of *travel* was starting to sound appealing. He couldn't care less about seeing the world, about long voyages into uncharted territories; he was no adventurer. And yet the idea was mulling around in the back of his head, if simply to introduce a change of pace. What had he become?

Distracted, he didn't notice how his tall-backed office chair was facing the wrong way. The only reason the discrepancy hadn't jumped out—since Rafael was *very* good at paying attention to details—was because he was heavily occupied by his thoughts.

After rummaging around inside the side table, he pulled out a crystal cup and a bottle of whiskey expensive enough to bankrupt a minor noble house. He kept it there for when he needed to flaunt wealth—in other words, as a weapon. He disapproved of decadence, generally speaking, but he would use all tools available.

He popped out the cork and poured himself a glass. He rarely drank, and only alone. Purposefully clouding his mind and judgment while with company was such a baffling choice that he fundamentally struggled to understand why so many people did it. Especially during important social outings. Then again, not everyone was him, treating every conversation as a duel.

Only when he was walking over to his desk, cup of amber liquid in hand, did the chair finally swivel to face him.

To reveal the unmistakable form of Vivisari Vexaria, the lost Sorceress of the Party of Heroes.

Her legs were crossed, and she had her grimoire summoned. It was open and spread on an armrest, one small, pale hand resting on its pages. Her red eyes and expression were as perpetually bored and borderline contemptuous as he remembered from a century ago.

He froze, foot half raised into his next step, whiskey glass in hand.

His mind went from idly discontent to blazing at full capacity in less than a quarter second. Not out of intention or long training—it was simply who he was. Some people shut down when they were surprised. That had never once happened to him.

The possibilities branched out in his mind, and he pruned or expanded upon each.

Two core lines to follow: this was her, or it was not. In the first: Imposter? If so, why? Malicious deceit, some ploy? If non-malicious, then a prank or joke made in poor humor? He doubted that, so he discarded it. If it *was* deceit, who had something to gain? And what methods had been employed? The illusion or disguise was startlingly accurate. The details were exactly as he remembered. Her grimoire had changed. As it should have. Attention to detail? Or evidence?

What if it *wasn't* deceit?

Then the Sorceress had returned. Why? There was always a why. Had she ended her retirement for the good of the world? Did an eighth Cataclysm loom? The proximity to the one hundredth Peace Day brushed

his mind and was added to the rapidly developing mountain of evidence, theories, and surrounding context.

No matter what the situation was—and he truly could not begin to guess—Rafael wasn't a man to let himself appear like he'd been caught off guard. Even if he genuinely, truly had been.

Information was power. The illusion of power was also power; that made for the foundation of politics, what kept kings on their thrones. Therefore, the *illusion* of information? Logically, then, that was power too.

Naia had once called him a 'very good bullshitter.' It was time to see how true that was.

"Lady Vivisari," Rafael said smoothly, no more than a full second having passed since the earth-shattering revelation that the Sorceress herself was sitting in his office. "How wonderful to see you. I've been expecting a visit."

Vivisari paused, clearly surprised. "You have?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "After the incident up north? Naturally."

The trick to bluffing was staying general while being specific. A contradiction, yes, but *too* vague an accusation would never land, yet fishing for information *required* generalities.

He knew Vivisari. If she hadn't changed over the years, there was one safe assumption he could always make—and that applied to the rest of the Party of Heroes, may they rest in peace.

Wherever she went, *incidents* followed.

The comment on 'to the north'? Well, that encompassed the vast majority of high-level territory in the human kingdoms, and the demon continent in a roundabout manner too.

Vivisari shifted in her seat. He hated to rain on her parade, since she'd clearly wanted to surprise him—the woman was quite fond of her dramatics, something not many people knew—but in the arena of information, he would never cede, not even for an old friend.

"You heard about the Convoy?" she asked.

And there it was. Rafael could spin tapestries of deceit out of thin air, much less with the golden silk he'd been handed.

Though… Convoy? There'd been a Convoy incident? If his web had failed to inform him in a timely manner about an event notable enough that the *Sorceress herself* had been involved, heads would roll.

What else could he glean? Notable events up north—what came to mind? He imagined and discarded a number of items, focusing on what seemed most relevant. The captured Morningstars? Prismarche? There'd been something about a Titled-rank firework spell, which stuck out for sheer novelty. It fit in a thematic sense, Vivisari having been at the city nearest the final Cataclysm.

"Did you think I wouldn't?" Rafael asked. He dragged a chair forward and sat, setting his glass of whiskey aside. It was no longer necessary. "I'm afraid subtlety isn't your strong suit, my lady. I heard the first day of celebrations in Prismarche was something to behold. Did you enjoy yourself?"

She twitched, and he knew he'd gotten something right.

He didn't know if this was actually Vivisari, but in his initial appraisal he had weighed the pros and cons. It didn't matter if he came off as a fool to someone who had broken into his office and found him defenseless. He was at their mercy, since he was no adventurer. Having them underestimate him would play to his benefit.

Alternatively, if it *was* Vivisari, then he wanted to impress with an illusion of prescience. Which was vanity speaking. He knew his flaws. Reputation was not his primary motivator, but he did appreciate the renown he'd built.

She closed her grimoire, lips tugging into a small frown. "Winston thought I'd catch you off-balance if I showed up without warning."

So she'd visited her manor and manservant first. That didn't surprise him. "Winston is an honorable man, and wise in certain domains," he said amenably. "But in that of gathering information and politicking, he lacks a certain grace. I am not so easy to catch off-balance as he would assume."

Although he certainly had been, in this instance.

She shook her head. "I'm glad you've kept sharp. You don't need proof it's me?"

Mildly, he said, "I would not decline such. I've been expecting you, but I'm not so incautious to deny a guarantee."

"I don't think the method I used for Winston is appropriate," Vivisari said, dispelling her grimoire. Rafael didn't want to imagine what *that* meant. "To the guild, then? Unlocking it should be proof enough."

His heart skipped a beat. He forced himself to not let his excitement show. The guild. Vanguard, reopening its doors. How many years had he

waited for that?

“Indeed.” He rose. Then, his curiosity got the better of him. He knew he would regret this, but asked anyway: “What method with Winston, might I ask, were you referring to?”

Vivisari hesitated. “I got in a fight with his daughter. And tore up the estate in the process. Then fixed it all with a temporal spell.”

The explanation was so utterly *Vivisari* that he almost accepted it as proof of identity alone.

Few people knew the men and women behind the exaggerated veneer of heroism—not that the depiction was undeserved—but, like any individual would, each of them had their quirks and flaws. Vivisari’s judgment in particular had always been… questionable.

To be frank, Rafael thought *all* mages were a little off. He had been terrified to learn she was the only member who had survived the Cataclysms. With Orion and Rorik gone, the only partial voices of reason, who would keep her in check?

“I see,” Rafael said. He tried not to be disturbed by the casual mention of a ‘temporal spell.’ Despite his reminiscing, he’d forgotten how existentially horrifying the Party of Heroes could be. Vivisari in particular. She could usurp and violate the fundamental laws of the universe yet had never seemed to make much of it. Certainly not as much as she *should*. “Accessing the guild would definitely be a more levelheaded course of action.”

“I’m temporarily keeping a low profile,” Vivisari said, “so I’ll be wearing an illusion on the way.”

Rafael nodded. It was wise to avoid revealing herself. Vivisari’s return would be impossible to hide in the long term, but it needed to be handled carefully, not announced by openly walking through the street. The political implications alone could destabilize the increasingly tense peace between kingdoms.

Magic shimmered over her, erasing the red tear-trails going down her cheeks. Facial tattoos were common for demons, though Rafael lacked any. He’d always been more human than demon, culturally speaking. Vivisari was similar, having spent much of her life in the human kingdoms, though unlike her, Rafael had been born and raised here. Vivisari at least *hailed* from their homeland. “I would [Blink] us there, but again, I’m avoiding attention. I don’t know who’s in the city. Who might take notice.”

“And your temporal spell?” He didn’t know what tier time magic began at, but he figured at least eighteenth.

She cleared her throat. “The privacy wards should have masked its signature. And that was an… extenuating circumstance.”

Somehow he doubted whether it really qualified as such, but he didn’t say so. Vivisari would be Vivisari.

“[Invisibility],” she incanted, disappearing. “I’ll drop it once we’re past your… assistant?”

He could see why she thought that. “Allegra is the Vice Guildmaster. I’ve been grooming her as a replacement.”

A pause. “I see. She’s young.”

“She’s competent,” he said dismissively. “That’s a quality wholly disconnected from age.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

However, Vivisari was correct. Allegra’s relative youth would pose problems when he tried to turn over the reins to her. Not that twenty-one was especially young for humans, though it certainly was for massively important political roles. He ought to have enough sway to make it happen. He didn’t want to leave the Adventurer’s Guild in incompetent hands.

Only then did he realize that he had already mentally retired. After all, Vivisari was back. Vanguard was back. Of course his other responsibilities were moot. He’d spent decades arranging things such that he could shed all other titles the instant he needed to.

He was Vanguard’s Steward, first and foremost.

“To the guildhall, then?” he asked.

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GUILD

Unlike Winston, a century hadn't taken a toll on Rafael, just as it wouldn't for any demon in adulthood. Maybe there was a slight maturation of his features, but Vivi couldn't spot any meaningful differences.

He had slicked-back hair, keen red eyes, and skin as pale as hers. He was dressed like a nobleman, wearing sharp, tailored clothes that spoke of high status, and he walked with confidence and purpose. Two black horns jutted from the top of his forehead—straight, not the curved horns of high-blooded demons.

She revised her initial plan and cast [Invisibility] on him too before setting out, since while he didn't have the same notoriety as the Sorceress, his was a face people would recognize. More than hers, even. The Chief Guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild would be identified faster than the oft-misrepresented hero of a century past.

Meridian was home base to a good portion of the world's guilds, and since it was best to contain the chaos so many adventurers brought rather than letting them run free, a district had been cordoned off. The trip to Vanguard's guildhall lasted all of a few minutes traversing the Adventurer's District.

The badges of mithrils and orichalcums flashed without much rarity in this part of the city, but Vivi had reinforced her spells with that in mind. Barring a dragon in disguise—which wasn't impossible—nobody should see them.

In less than two minutes, they stood in front of Vanguard's guildhall. Along with a small crowd.

To her horror, it had become a *tourist destination*.

Obviously there were no flashing cameras and obnoxious poses being struck, but a thick rope hung around the front perimeter, keeping away the dozen people or so who had stopped to admire the historical landmark. A commemorative plaque was posted in front. *At least there aren't statues.*

Finding the whole thing strangely embarrassing, Vivi slipped underneath the barrier and walked to the front door. While it was large and well-built, with wood and stone and brick and glass, nothing screamed the importance of the guild. It looked not dissimilar from the others around it, and was actually *less* gaudy than the two adjacent buildings. Both of which she suspected had vied furiously for ownership of real estate in such close proximity to Vanguard's esteemed hall.

She read *the Wardens* on the one to the left, and people were streaming in and out of the swung-open double doors. She wrinkled her nose. *Great. Our neighbors are the Caldimores. How serendipitous.*

Maybe the main family isn't as annoying and spineless as the branch. I shouldn't judge them all by Count Barnaby's behavior. The Wardens didn't seem to have a bad reputation. Saffra hadn't seemed to indicate such, at least.

Arriving at the door, Rafael raised an eyebrow in silent questioning. Vivi waved her staff, casting an illusion to block anyone from seeing the door be pulled open, then grabbed the handle and tugged.

The guildhall yielded.

Behind her, Rafael sucked a breath in. Vivi suspected he had known it was her, that she wasn't some illusionist disguising herself as the Sorceress, but nevertheless, opening the guildhall that had been closed for a century was a momentous event for him. For her too. She felt her pulse pick up in excitement.

The guildhall was bigger inside than out, which for once wasn't thanks to her personal wards. Guilds were a natural feature of Seven Cataclysms, and upgrading the tier of a guild expanded its interior while keeping the exterior building—and the plot of land it sat on—reasonably sized. A gameplay necessity for cramming hundreds of player guilds into the same district. The poorest guilds had needed to use instanced versions; only the

richest were given permanent real estate, and inactivity quickly led to eviction.

All of that seemed to have translated via the System, if no doubt in its own unique ways.

A short foyer led into the common room.

Vanguard, both in the game and in this world, had been a small, private group comprised of her and her friends, so despite their relative influence—all five of them being some of the top players of Seven Cataclysms—they had designed the interior of the guildhall to be small and cozy.

Even more than her estate, the space had been immaculately preserved. Magically, rather than through a butler's diligent efforts. There was no dust, decaying wood, or old smell pervading the air despite the years. The common room was tidy and clean. A collection of comfortable chairs surrounded a fireplace, the Vanguard insignia—a torch burning gold fire—hanging above the mantel. She swept her gaze around the room, taking it all in.

Rafael did the same, a hint of reverence in his eyes.

"I wondered if I would ever set foot inside this building again," he murmured. "It hasn't changed at all."

As interested as she was, she couldn't match Rafael's nostalgia. It hadn't been a century for her. That usual disconnect of standing in a place that she'd only ever known virtually had hit her too. That sense of surrealism.

Her [Guild Status] command hadn't magically repaired itself upon entering, and she debated asking Rafael. She didn't know if that was a normal screen, though, and had yet to broach the topic of her 'memory problems' with him.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Rafael saying, "There's a quest on the board."

Vivi's eyes turned that way. Sure enough, a tan parchment was pinned into the cork. Intrigued, she walked over.

She pulled the paper off and read it, Rafael looking over her shoulder.

~ Mythic Quest ~

The Restoration of Vanguard, Stage One

For nigh one hundred years, the guild that shepherded the world through seven earth-rending Cataclysms has lain dormant—its treasures lost with it. Now, the last of that noble organization returns. What was lost cannot always be reclaimed, but what has been broken may yet be forged anew.

Though nightmares linger behind, more may lie ahead. There will always be need for a Vanguard.

Task:

- Locate one prior craftsman of Vanguard and induct them once again into its ranks. {0/1}

Rewards:

- Progress Guild Tier from zero to one.
- Regain access to the Craftsmen Quarters.
- One item harvested from the Umbral Regent will be reforged into a Lv.2000 relic with no level requirement.

They stood in silence as they digested the words.

“A System-granted quest,” Rafael finally said. “Rated mythic.”

“The task doesn’t seem especially difficult,” Vivi said slowly. “Just one craftsman?”

“Indeed. And the reward is…” He paused. “Significant.” His brow furrowed. “The implication that the Craftsmen Quarters are locked, though, is concerning. As is the way the guild’s tier has been reset to zero.”

“The vault,” Vivi said in sudden realization. “Is the guild vault gone?”

She’d been delighted to find her personal storage intact. But would that luck hold for this vault too? She knew the answer before she made her way across the common room, down a staircase, and to the end of the cellar. The thick metal door remained where it should have been; the vault hadn’t simply been erased. But when she tried turning the handle, it didn’t budge.

“That’s unfortunate,” Rafael said.

Vivi stepped back and considered the heavily defended vault entrance.

“Please don’t forcefully remove the door, Lady Vivisari,” Rafael said dryly. “This vulnerable steward of yours is made of mere flesh and bone.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Vivi said, embarrassed that the idea had, indeed, crossed her mind. *I would’ve protected him if I did do anything, obviously*. “What does this mean?”

“The vault is inaccessible. Which is not ideal. I would be more displeased if not for the extremely generous quest reward. Likely to become quest *rewards*, since it spoke of ‘stage one.’ And if the recompense is similar between each…” He trailed off, giving her a meaningful look.

He had a point. Though she was upset that the immense store of valuables hidden in the guild’s vaults was barred from her, she acknowledged that the benefits the quest provided might outshine the detriments. *As long as the vault does reopen when we reach the right tier. We don’t know that’s the case though, not for sure.*

“A level-two-thousand relic from the first Cataclysm, with its level requirement removed,” Vivi said.

“That would all but transform a person into an upper-ranked Titled, regardless of who they are. To say nothing of granting it to an already powerful individual.” Rafael frowned at the vault door, red eyes sharp and excited. Vivi could *see* the calculations happening inside his head. “I hesitate to make assumptions, but if the first quest empowers a relic of the first Cataclysm, then…”

“The second might empower something from the Reaper of the Lost Harvest,” Vivi said.

“And so on. A series of quests meant to help restore Vanguard, and even empower it, by the end. This is troubling though.”

The words caught her by surprise. “Troubling?”

“For the gods to favor us, there must be need.”

That sobered her.

Rafael gave her a look out of the corner of his eye. “And I suspect you have an inkling of what need that may be, Lady Vivisari. More than I, at least.”

“I might. We do need to talk.”

“Now that your identity is proven, I am your loyal steward as always,” he said, flourishing a slightly sarcastic bow. When he straightened out, he seemed alive, energetic. Vibrating with excitement at this development. “Shall we convene in the steward’s office? The charter there, perhaps, will illuminate what has happened. It is a good starting point, in any case.”

She followed him out of the cellar, into the common room, and through a door attached to a corner of the large main space. Inside was a prototypical office: bookshelves, filing cabinets, and a chair situated behind a desk. Rafael walked around, scooted the chair out, and knelt down to rummage through the desk's drawers.

He pulled out a clipboard with a pinned stack of papers and scanned the first page. After a moment, he flipped it up and perused the next. He dropped the clipboard and looked at Vivi, wearing a small frown.

"You're the registered guildmaster, and I the steward. That hasn't changed. Everyone else has been removed, though. There is no mention of any of the craftsmen, and the guild has indeed reverted to tier zero."

"Is that normal?"

"Nothing about this is normal. Nothing about *Vanguard* is normal." He walked over and opened a filing cabinet. Then another, and several more. "My records have vanished. The guild has been reset almost back to its beginning. Or, rather… restricted. Since the Craftsmen Quarters will open as soon as we bring one of our members back, and the structure itself seems unchanged. Regardless of the temporary setback, I do think this is a boon."

A level 2000 relic forged from a Cataclysm would, indeed, probably outweigh the delay of not being able to immediately access the guild's storage. Even she couldn't remove an item's level requirement.

"And the contents of the vault?" she asked.

"Locked away until the proper tier has been reached, is my best guess." He shrugged, slipping into his chair. "At the same time, perhaps everything is gone. That would be a disappointment. There's no way of saying." Vivi dragged over the spare seat and sat too. Rafael drummed his fingers against his desk. "While discussing how the guild's renewal might function is interesting, there are far more pressing topics, Lady Vivisari. Let us set that aside. Where have you *been* all these years?"

She considered him, then decided to give a purposefully blunt response. Mostly to see how he would react. She was still disappointed he hadn't so much as twitched at her dramatic reveal back at his office.

"An alternate reality."

To her extremely begrudging admiration, she once again failed to faze Vanguard's steward. He asked smoothly, "What sort?" After a second, he added, "That does neatly explain the divination results."

“Winston said the same thing. And I’m sorry, Rafael, but the details of that are private.”

“Oh? Far be it from me to pry into a woman’s personal matters, but this seems relevant on a grander scale. Might I insist?”

She frowned. He had a point. But she didn’t want to explain Earth… or that she wasn’t really Vivisari, just an alternate version of her, or however it worked.

“The details don’t matter. Just know I wasn’t present in this world for the past century. I returned two days ago in the Burial Room of the Ashen Hierophant, and gated immediately to Prismarche. Afterward, I was involved with… some minor incidents…”

“As one does,” Rafael said, and she heard subdued amusement in his voice.

“And that same night—”

“The Centennial Peace Day,” he said, more to himself.

“—a massive dimensional spell, beyond tier twenty, tried to puncture a gateway into this world. Or that’s what I think happened. The Institute should be studying it as we speak.”

He leaned back in his chair, considering. Even the ridiculous nature of what she’d said hadn’t shocked him in any visible way. His composure wasn’t the same stony sort as the White Gloves; the man’s mind clearly worked differently than most. He had digested the absurd news and begun analyzing it without a moment of disbelief.

This is a terrifyingly competent man, Vivi told herself, *and I need to remember that.* She had no reason to think his loyalties had shifted, and if she were to pick someone to rely on, it would be her old steward. But still. With Rafael, caution was warranted. He could run circles around her when it came to plotting; she knew that without a shred of doubt.

“That also explains the information I’ve been receiving,” he said. “Something has the grand magi and archmagi in an uproar. My informants failed to work out what yet. A massive dimensional spell at Prismarche? Yes, that fits.” He studied her. “Why didn’t you warp to Meridian?”

“My anchors were gone.”

“Send a message?”

“I had no contacts in Prismarche.”

“You could have circumvented these limitations, and all others. Not to state the obvious, but you *are* the Sorceress of the Party of Heroes.”

She pursed her lips. “I was in no rush,” she finally admitted. He raised his eyebrows, and she added, “There’s nothing that makes me think a disaster is imminent. Even the dimensional anomaly could be a coincidence. Only timing suggests otherwise.”

He gave her a dubious look.

“Though… timing is evidence in itself,” she sighed. “And if I’m right about it being a gateway, we need to worry who made it, and why. It’s worth researching, though I barely know where to begin. That’s why I contacted the Institute, and also why I mentioned it to you. I’ll be looking into it on my own time, unless you have something meaningful to add.”

He spread his hands, seeming regretful. “Alas, there are some rooms into which even I cannot slip an informant, and a meeting of sitting archmagi is one. That I discovered a meaningful disruption in their activities at all is more than nearly any other individual in the city would have been capable of.”

“Don’t be *too* humble, now.”

He smiled. “I would never. I know my worth and will state it.”

On most people, it would seem like arrogance. But she found his self-assuredness comforting. She needed someone competent on her side—especially when he was competent in the exact ways she wasn’t.

“Well, I’ll keep you up to date on what’s happening there,” she said. “But I don’t have anything to say until I visit the Institute. Never mind that for now. I want to know what happened to Vanguard. Not the guild, but our members. Where are they?”

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VANGUARD'S FUTURE

"The answer, naturally, varies," Rafael said.

"Summarize?"

As always, he replied without needing to organize his thoughts. "Three with whereabouts known. Two alive but difficult to contact. One missing. And two, regretfully, have passed away."

She'd been excited to learn what had happened to her prior guild members, but at that, she stilled.

Even though these people were real *now*, they'd been NPCs in the game, so she didn't have close emotional bonds with them. Still, hearing two had died was a jolt to her system.

She was silent for a moment. "What happened?"

"Bram passed in his sleep, surrounded by family. He was in his elder years even before your disappearance, Lady Vivisari. You know how humans are. Here and gone." He sighed. "As far as circumstances of death can go, his was how anyone would want it."

That made her feel somewhat better. "And the other?"

He grimaced. "Rowena. Not nearly as pleasant, I'm afraid. An adventuring incident. She wasn't the only one to turn to that after Vanguard's disbandment."

Vivi's brow furrowed. "Some of them became adventurers? Why?"

"To fill a void? Because living under the great shadow cast by Vanguard inspired a need for greatness beyond their craftsman careers? Why does anyone turn to adventuring?" He shrugged. "I cannot fathom. I've never

once considered that illustrious career." He snorted, then cleared his throat and straightened out, putting on a serious expression. "That was inappropriate. This happened eight decades ago, and Rowena was a good woman. I grieved her in her time. But this is news to you, so I shouldn't be flippant about it."

Vivi nodded slowly. She didn't feel grief, exactly, but… she didn't know *what* she felt, hearing about their passing.

"Her family was taken care of?"

"She never settled down, but I would have made arrangements had there been a need." A beat of silence passed before Rafael continued. "Now. Of those still alive, or possibly alive. Eshara has started a guild of her own, though she doesn't call it such. In many ways, it's the spiritual successor of Vanguard. She tours the continent with her band of heroes, slaughtering great foes wherever she finds them." There was a sardonic tinge to Rafael's tone, and Vivi didn't know why. "You know how Eshara is. Very… principled. And unyielding. She has picked up your party's fallen swords and gone to war against all evil. Hmph. She'll be difficult to contact; even I am not certain of her whereabouts, for she often obscures her intentions. Not all monsters lack intelligence, as you know, and indeed the ones that wear the faces of men are the most dangerous of all. We are not on bad terms. She hides herself out of necessity. The Roving Justicar must lurk in the underbrush, a predator's predator." He worked his jaw side to side. "Eshara is likely the most accomplished of us, if considered by sheer merit of levels."

Vivi digested that. Eshara had been Vanguard's elvish blacksmith. "She's Titled, I take it?"

"Indeed. And not freshly minted. In the thirteen hundreds, I believe. She is one of the Kingdoms' most revered knights."

"Will she rejoin us?"

He raised an eyebrow. "It is *Eshara* we are talking about."

"I… see." *I assume that means yes?*

She knew the personality of each of her guild's prior NPCs, since Vivi had definitely been nerdy enough to read their generated backstories. But that only gave her a general idea, and those histories could easily have translated across worlds in strange ways, or simply not be applicable.

"Ulden returned to his dwarven enclave in the Western Kingdom," Rafael continued, "which means he'll be difficult to contact as well, though

less so than Eshara. Laelith is missing."

"Missing?"

He spread his hands. "I wish I could offer more, but I sadly cannot."

"When?"

"Even that is vague. Within the past decade? She was reclusive *before* her disappearance. I've kept tabs on Vanguard's craftsmen, but only so many resources can be allocated, and Laelith was deliberately avoiding attention. I would not spy on my allies. I respected her wishes."

Vivi could hardly fault him for that.

"Now. On to those who will be simple to contact. Petra lives in the Eastern Kingdom. She runs a ludicrously successful restaurant that nobles from all over the Kingdoms make the trip for. She is quite satisfied with her life, last I inquired, and I'm unsure how she'll receive the news that Vanguard has returned."

"It's her prerogative," Vivi said. "I won't uproot her life. Just extend an invitation to speak. Or maybe I'll go and see her myself." Traveling across the Kingdoms would be an annoying chore, but she wanted to spread [Warp Anchors] anyway.

"Malach lives in the Central Kingdom, though not in Meridian. Solace. He runs a thriving trade, naturally, and in a similar vein, I'm unsure how he'll receive the news."

Solace would be a short trip. Tracking him down might be annoying, though. *Maybe it's better to let Rafael handle the logistics? I have other things to worry about in the short term.*

"And finally, Miraelle. Like Eshara, she's spent her time refining her craft *and* advancing her class. To much less success, admittedly. Orichalcum, not Titled. She's on an adventuring team these days: the Iron Vipers. Poison specialists."

Poison? A natural fit, when the team revolved around one of the world's most skilled alchemists. "Where is she?"

"Away, but returning to Meridian soon, so far as I know. She lives here."

"Out on business?"

"I'm not sure. Routine adventuring? Again, I've merely kept tabs on them. I don't track their every movement. They are allies."

She nodded. "Regarding completing the Quest, who's our best choice?"

"Ease of contact? Malach or Miraelle. Undoubted loyalty? Eshara."

“We’ll want to speak with each of them eventually.” She was quiet for a moment, thoughts churning. “What do you think of the Quest, anyway? What’s the best way to restore Vanguard?”

He considered the question, for once not responding near-instantaneously. “It depends,” he said finally, “on what you mean by restore.”

She tilted her head in silent question.

“You seek to rebuild the Party of Heroes? Or merely collect craftsmen to the guild? What will Vanguard’s purpose be? Will you tour the continent, seeking out threats as Eshara does? Or shall Vanguard grow in a different manner—more politically involved, perhaps? Do you wish to be more than a band of elites held up by craftsmen, as you once were?”

Those were great questions. She took a moment to think about it, brow furrowed. “I… want to reach out to our previous members, of course. But I don’t think it’s *possible* to restore my previous party, so Vanguard can’t be as it was.”

“No,” Rafael said with a snort. “The confluence of five once-in-a-millennium, once-in-*ten-millennia* talent. That will not happen again.”

Vivi looked down at her lap, mulling the topic over. “We should open Vanguard’s doors, shouldn’t we? To the public. Bring it to prominence and use what influence and resources we have for good.”

“Oh?” Rafael asked calmly, though with a hint of hidden excitement. “The choice is yours, my lady. I am simply your steward. I carry out the tasks set upon me, whatever they may be.”

“There’s a lot we can do with Vanguard. Especially its treasures. I won’t hoard those like a dragon.”

“Even from a mercenary standpoint, assets are best leveraged, not locked away.” He drummed his fingers on his desk before sitting up abruptly. “So. You wish for Vanguard to rise from its ashes like a phoenix. To spread its influence far and wide and reclaim its glory, if not in the same manner as before. To become a shining beacon of virtue the world over: a proper guild, as Eshara always imagined. She’ll be pleased.”

“You dramatize,” she replied, “but yes, fundamentally that’s what I want.”

“Then shall we discuss the Eighth Cataclysm?”

She frowned at him. “I already told you, there’s nothing suggesting the dimensional anomaly is any such thing.”

“That’s not what I’m referring to.”

“Then what?”

“You, Lady Vivisari.”

A heavy silence filled the air. Vivi stared at him, stunned. Where had that come from?

“You think *I* might be the Eighth Cataclysm?”

Or become it? she thought grimly.

“Of course not,” Rafael dismissed. “I know you, Lady Vivisari. But will the leaders of the modern world perceive the strongest known mortal, returned after nigh a hundred years, a danger on that scale? Yes. You were always the most elusive of your party, my lady, and thus the least known and most feared. Even in Meridian, your figure is so poorly known that many invent the details of your appearance.”

…*Vivisari was a shut-in too?*

That was hilarious, if also depressing. It explained the statues being so wildly off, despite her gargantuan levels of fame. Vivisari had hardly ever been seen in public.

That at least confirmed she and Vivisari truly had been two sides of the same coin.

Embarrassed, she ignored that revelation. “Which makes me even more of a threat in their eyes. My private nature.”

“There is nothing so terrifying as the unknown,” he agreed.

“I have no intentions of setting myself up as ruler of the world.”

“But you could. You are a level *eighteen hundred*. You could duel every human Titled at once and come out the victor.”

Vivi paused. *Eighteen hundred?* she thought, confused. It sparked a sudden realization.

“What level was the Ashen Hierophant, Rafael?”

The question caught the man off guard for once. “You ask rhetorically?”

She realized she still hadn’t explained the ‘memory issues.’ She grimaced. “My time away left some… gaps in what I can remember.”

“As frolicking through an alternate reality might,” he said carefully, interest glinting in his eyes. “Hm. The Seventh and Final Cataclysm, the Monarch among Monarchs, was power incarnate. He had attained that which could not be surpassed, fundamentally. The pinnacle of the Grand System. Level two thousand.”

The answer was what Vivi had been afraid of. She closed her eyes.

“I see.”

Rafael was quiet as he considered her. “Your reaction is difficult to interpret.”

She didn’t respond.

She had, for some reason, assumed the world knew of Vivisari as her character had existed at the end of her playthrough—a mage who had gone well beyond the soft maximum of level two thousand. Instead, they knew Vivisari as the character had existed when she and her friends had taken down the Ashen Hierophant for the *first* time, on *regular* difficulty. They’d been around level eighteen hundred then. A difficult fight, considering the level disadvantage, but they’d had best-in-slot gear and consumables, and the encounter had been five against one.

Vivi had arrived in this world as her maxed-out character, though. She was three hundred levels higher than the world-renowned Sorceress of that time. Two hundred levels generally represented a full tier’s worth of power, worth separating as a different classification altogether. Three hundred levels, thus, meant the current Vivisari dwarfed the Sorceress the world knew like a low-mithril might a high-silver.

And this world was terrified of the *weak* Vivisari.

A normal-difficulty Ashen Hierophant she could probably kill with her eyes closed now. And he’d terrorized the world and scoured with flame entire sections of the continent, nobody capable of challenging him for millennia. Even the Dragon King had nearly died merely turning him away.

This felt like something she should keep under very, very careful wraps.

“Never mind that,” Vivi finally said. “What were you saying?”

Rafael studied her for several long moments, but in the end he didn’t press. “That you will need to tread carefully, my lady, if you don’t want the mortal kingdoms uniting against a perceived world-ending threat. An Eighth Cataclysm, as they might present it.”

Maybe he’d made some accurate assumptions, despite Vivi not explaining herself. *This man is scarily perceptive*. “I agree. I have no intentions of flagrantly ignoring laws and doing whatever I please. I just want to restore Vanguard and do what good I can.”

“And the world is blessed for it. But there are political considerations.”

“Which is where you come in.”

He seemed pleased by the response. “Indeed, my lady. But keep in mind that as you are one of the most—if not the most—powerful existences in the

world, every action you take has consequences. You cannot act with impunity and disregard for such things."

He clearly didn't think she had the best judgment, or at least the best impulse control. She remembered her visit to the manor, and reluctantly admitted he was correct.

She should be more discerning with tier-twenty and higher magic.

That rule will definitely survive the week, she thought sarcastically.

"Should I even announce my return?" Vivi asked. "Maybe it's best if I don't."

Rafael, to her embarrassment, barked out a laugh, then cleared his throat and forced a serious expression. It hadn't been intentional. "Have you maintained a reasonable cover thus far, and are you capable of indefinite, believable subterfuge?"

"…maybe."

He waited patiently.

"People will… probably figure it out," she muttered.

"Then it's best your reemergence is handled with grace, not left to spread like wildfire through rumor and supposition. And regardless, the reestablishment of Vanguard will signal the return of its final surviving officer."

"That's true." She'd just been thinking about how dangerous her reputation was. Plus, she didn't like how people treated her when she wore her true face. But it was just something she would have to deal with.

"As for actually finding new members. How do you wish to proceed?" After a moment, he added, "I expect future Quests will involve membership beyond enrolling craftsmen, likely acquiring adventurers too. Logically speaking. But perhaps logic can't be applied here."

"Do you have any ideas?" she asked. Some names came to mind from the game's plot who had seemed like genuinely virtuous people, but who knew how they'd changed after a century, whether they were *actually* good people, and whether they'd be interested?

Rafael considered the question briefly, then shook his head. "I will think on it. Answering hastily is in neither of our interests."

"Okay. My immediate goal is contact with the Institute anyway, then the craftsmen." That first stage of the Quest should be easy to complete. "We'll decide on other members after that. And the rest of Vanguard's future."

"I agree. This is nothing to rush."

Vivi nodded. “There’s one more thing I need your help with, then. I’ve taken an apprentice.”

Rafael digested that announcement, folding his hands onto his desk. “You have, have you? They must be an impressive talent indeed to have drawn the Sorceress’s gaze.”

“She’s silver rank and talented, but not especially. Or so she says. I can’t tell the difference with other mages, to be honest.”

He found that remark amusing, which was fair. “Indeed.” Though he’d made an incorrect first assumption, he was quick to make an accurate second. “Then a particularly *deserving* disciple, I take it?”

“Yes. I’m bringing it up because I want to arrange gear for her. The best I can find. Or rather, make. Handcrafted will be better than anything I can buy.”

“So you need arrangements made with local craftsmen.”

“Something sturdier than cloth. So a leatherworker, not a tailor. A woodworker for her staff. And a jewelcrafter. I’ll be adding enchantments into each item, and co-crafting the items with them.”

Rafael leaned back in his seat, amused. “You’re the type to spoil an apprentice? I can’t say I’m surprised.”

She shrugged. “She gets into trouble a lot. I’ll be giving her more items than just gear, should she need to draw on them. Ones from my personal vault.”

He raised both eyebrows. “You are being judicious with your scrolls, I hope? Sixteenth-tier offensive magic is dangerous to simply… hand out.”

“I know that.” She *totally* hadn’t considered giving portable nuclear weapons to a thirteen-year-old girl. “Defensive spells only.”

He almost seemed like he would press that topic, but perhaps decided he would be overstepping. So he nodded and forced himself to relax. “I’ll make those arrangements as quickly as I can.”

“Also, I need my bank account unlocked. Apparently they did something to it.”

His eye twitched. “You… tried to access your bank account? And you suggested earlier you wanted to ‘keep quiet’ about your return?”

“How would I know it’d be locked?” she asked defensively. “The teller I spoke to said I’d need to contact the Chief Banker. Can you organize that?”

“In all matters, I am Vanguard’s loyal steward. It will be handled at once, Lady Vivisari.”

Coin wasn’t a big problem, but having healthy spending money was always useful.

“Before I visit the Institute”—which would probably wait until tomorrow, since the day was growing late—“you should catch me up on anything else I might need to know. Especially Archmage Aeris—he might make a useful ally. Is he the same man I remember?”

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A CANDID CONVERSATION

Her conversation with Rafael carried on for a while. There was a lot to discuss. Not just about Archmage Aeris, the Institute, and her immediate goals, but the world in general.

Honestly, by the end of the discussion she'd forgotten at least half of what Rafael lectured her about, and she was pretty sure he knew it. Still, he informed her of the major political and social happenings of the past century. Regardless of whether she would make good use of that knowledge —or keep it in her head at all—the man clearly believed that giving her a full debriefing was a matter of stewardly principle.

On a more immediately useful note, he provided her with an alternate identity: one that would hold up to scrutiny. 'Nysari Keresi,' a powerful demonic mage. Until they decided how to handle the full reveal that the Sorceress and thus Vanguard had returned, she would be using that name to accomplish tasks in the city, such as visiting the Institute without needing to sneak in.

He also further elaborated on several of the craftsmen and their situations, which she paid closer attention to. Reuniting Vanguard was her major goal, taking second priority only to her visit of the Institute to suss out more about the dimensional anomaly and perhaps help in their research.

Both would happen tomorrow. Evening dragged on, with nightfall imminent, and she had a trouble-magnet apprentice to check on.

Surprisingly, the Briar and the Bramble hadn't been torn into a separate dimension, nor was it being assailed by a back-from-the-dead Ashen

Hierophant. Even Saffra had limits on how much misfortune she could call down. Or hurl herself into.

Inside, Missus Tilly bustled between tables. The cozy inn's activity had picked up for the dinner rush, though not too much so. It served a scarcer, more elite clientele than commoners, though Vivi could tell it wasn't a place nobility frequented. Simply a higher-rank adventurers' inn.

Vivi wondered whether Tilly was the owner of the establishment or a simple barmaid. She intuited the former solely from the aura Tilly carried. Something about the matronly woman suggested she ruled this domain. But that might just be her personality.

Spotting Vivi entering, Tilly swiftly finished what she'd been doing. "I put her up in a room," she said, wiping her hands on her apron as she walked over. "Started practicing and wiped herself out, poor girl. Always been too hard a worker. Come now, kitchen's winding down, but I've got a pot of slow-braised mutton simmering. On the house."

Vivi hadn't eaten since breakfast that morning, and the smell pervading the inn was heavenly. She let herself be led to a table by Tilly. "Thank you," she said, "but I can pay."

"I'm sure you can, dear. With the way Saffra talked about you, I bet you see more coin in a hunt than my inn does each year. But we're not struggling, and it's not about the coin. You dragged that troublesome girl back, safe and sound, and I might finally get answers. For that I'll be forever grateful. So I insist—it's on the house." The warm smile, while kind, held not a shred of yielding in it.

Vivi knew to pick her battles. "Then thank you again."

She slipped into her seat, and Tilly disappeared. The woman returned a few minutes later with two trays of food. "Mind if I join you?" she asked. "Haven't eaten myself, and there's no getting to know another person like over a meal."

"Of course."

Vivi could feel awkward meeting new people under any circumstance, and the fact that this would be an interrogation didn't help. Tilly clearly viewed herself as Saffra's protector—or at least had some sort of motherly mindset toward the girl—and she would no doubt be evaluating this strange demon-woman who had randomly appeared in Saffra's life.

But since Vivisari's body was immune to fidgeting and outward displays of awkwardness, she felt far more comfortable by default. She really did

appreciate the enforced stoicism.

“We’ve got a few things to talk about, you and I,” Tilly said, happily digging into her meal and prompting Vivi to do the same. “But my rudeness has limits. Proper introductions are in order. Tilly Tanswell. My husband and I run this establishment and have for thirty-two years. Before that, it was my father’s, and my father’s father’s. This building is all but part of the family, it’s been with us for so long. Burnt down twice over and rebuilt better than before each time. You’d think we’d have learned with the first though, eh?”

“It’s lovely,” Vivi offered.

Tilly bobbed her head in agreement. “That it is.”

It was clearly Vivi’s turn to introduce herself. But what did she say? For all that subterfuge would be impossible long-term, claiming Vivisari’s name would be… too much. The entire interaction would be colored by that. Never mind how Tilly wouldn’t believe her.

“Vivi,” she finally said. “Mage.”

Tilly hesitated at the sparse words, but if she was offended she showed no signs of it. “Adventurer?”

“Not exactly.”

“Retired?”

“…partially.”

“Personally, I don’t think there’s such a thing as *partially* retired,” Tilly replied with a laugh. “But all right, I won’t pry. Might in another situation, but Saffra isn’t the sort to go gallivanting off with someone she doesn’t trust, and that says mountains for your character.” The smile faded, a frown slowly replacing it. “That girl knows how to pick out the bad sorts better than anyone her age should. Which is what I wanted to talk to you about. As I’m sure you guessed.”

Vivi nodded.

“Since you want to keep your business your own—and that’s no problem—I’ll get straight to it. You’ve taken her as an apprentice?”

“I have.”

“Why?”

“Because she seems like someone worth teaching.”

“How did you two meet?”

Vivi paused.

“She was awfully vague,” Tilly said in the silence, shaking her head. “Like squeezing blood from stone when that girl doesn’t want to share. I hope *you* can put me at ease, at least.”

Vivi hesitated, then grimaced slightly. “We didn’t meet under pleasant circumstances.”

When Tilly insisted that she explain, Vivi gave a summary of events. Tilly seemed disgusted, as appropriate, then angry, and finally resigned. She shook her head. “I don’t know how she’s always getting into these situations,” she muttered. “Thank the heavens you were there. I don’t want to imagine.”

Vivi didn’t either. Thinking about what would have happened if she hadn’t listened to Saffra’s paranoia made her skin crawl.

“I’m glad she’s found someone to rely on, at least,” Tilly said. “From the way she talks about it, though, she doesn’t think this arrangement with you is going to last.”

“She doesn’t? Why?”

“*Will* it last?”

“I told her I’d be busy, and that it’s not a standard apprenticeship. But I intend to make time to teach her, and barring that, I’ll arrange other tutors to fill the gaps.”

Archmage Aeris came to mind, though she didn’t know how amenable to the idea he would be. She probably shouldn’t assume him an ally without meeting him first.

“It’s not temporary,” Vivi finally said, deciding to answer the question directly. “What did she say?”

“Nothing specific. I just got that feeling from how she talked about it. About you.”

Vivi internally frowned. She accepted blame by default. When it came to dealing with people, much less a troubled teenager suddenly reliant on her, she had no doubt she’d done something wrong. If not everything wrong.

Tilly’s gaze grew more focused, and her tone was deliberately reserved as she asked, “If you’re serious about taking her as a student, how much trouble are you willing to go through? I couldn’t get real answers out of her, but I know some of what happened, and she left this city in a hurry for good reasons. Has she told you about it?”

“She’s… been cagey. I didn’t want to press. It doesn’t matter, in the end.”

“It *does* matter,” Tilly disagreed firmly. “If you’ve decided to watch over her, you can’t ignore her problems. Saffra is more mature than any kid her age should be, but she’s still a girl, and one with… issues. I shudder to think how she’d react to me saying this, but I’ll say it anyway; as an adult taking responsibility for a child, you have an obligation to be aware of her problems and help her through them where you can. Respecting her privacy is fine, but not if it’s detrimental to her wellbeing. You’re not her parent, but you *are* responsible if you’re going to call her your apprentice.” Tilly took a breath in, leaned back, and made a face. “Sorry, dear, I don’t mean to lecture. Please forgive me. This comes from a good place.”

Vivi shifted in her seat. “No, you’re right. She asked for help, and I wanted to give it, but I’ve never had an apprentice. To be honest, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

She’d never dealt with children much at all. She was in over her head when it came to caring for a young teenager, however independent that teenager might be. In some senses, Saffra was more worldly than Vivi herself, which made the situation especially strange.

Tilly seemed surprised by her response. She had been speaking cautiously and watching Vivi, as if expecting a hostile reaction to her well-meaning advice. Vivi could see how some people might not want the lecture. She did, though. She would always take advice about things she knew she was bad at.

“You think I should insist, then?” Vivi asked. “She seems… flighty. I didn’t think doing so would be smart.”

Tilly’s tension eased, and she considered the question. “No. You’re right about that. I couldn’t get anything out of her either. I doubt she’d answer you, or anyone. But you should find out what happened anyway, if you can.” She hesitated. “You… seem accomplished, from the way you carry yourself, and what Saffra said. But I only have an outsider’s view, and what I did hear when I looked into it is troubling. She’s made powerful enemies. I’m worried for you, too, if you’ll be standing up for her.”

Vivi frowned. “Powerful? Who?”

Tilly covertly swept her gaze over the inn, then leaned forward and murmured, “The Caldimores.”

She couldn’t find it in herself to be surprised. Saffra had reacted strangely to the name back on the Convoy, and had sent the nobleman more worried looks than made sense for him simply being a powerful noble. There had been that one mood swing too, when Saffra had looked over at him in the middle of the magic lesson. Vivi wasn’t the most observant person, but even she couldn’t miss that.

“I’ll look into it,” she promised. “And handle the problem, one way or another.”

Tilly’s expression grew curious. “You don’t seem worried. Not even of the Caldimores?”

Her attitude probably revealed a lot about her status, she knew. But it was fine. “I’ll handle it,” she repeated.

Tilly was quiet for a minute longer as they worked through their meals. Vivi ruminated on Tilly’s advice and found herself more curious than ever what Saffra had gotten herself into.

This situation was especially problematic because Rafael had just finished telling her to measure her actions when it came to the nobility. The Caldimores were an extremely prominent house. The only way this could be worse was if Saffra had somehow gotten into trouble with the royal family itself.

Vivi couldn’t afford to make world leaders panic by throwing her weight around. The Caldimores weren’t people she could bully without repercussions. Thus, as much as she’d dismissed Tilly’s worry, this might not be the simplest thing to fix. But neither of them was in any *real* danger, at least. Saffra was under Vivi’s protection.

“I hate to bring the mood down again,” Tilly said, “but if you’re going to be her teacher, you should know her history too. For her sake… but also because I have a favor to ask afterward. It’s relevant.”

Vivi nodded, hesitant on the idea, but Tilly seemed to have a much better grasp on… well… life, than her. Saffra was due her privacy, but as the girl’s caretaker, Vivi needed to be aware of what was going on, especially if it might be dangerous.

Plus, Vivi doubted Saffra wanted to discuss her past anyway—even if she might not object to it being known. Saffra could have held off from naming this inn earlier today. She could have come and visited Tilly on her own time. But she’d led Vivi here as soon as they had arrived in Meridian.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, Saffra had likely *wanted* her and Missus Tilly to meet and talk.

Tilly sighed. “This is going to be an even less pleasant story than the one you told me, dear.”

That didn’t bode well.

Over the following minutes, Tilly explained what she knew about Saffra’s history. It wasn’t a complicated tale, but it was every bit as awful as Vivi had expected. The village Saffra grew up in had been destroyed by a monster attack when she was eight. In the aftermath, she’d been caught by roaming slave traders. Vivi felt immediately nauseous hearing that, but Saffra had been rescued before the worst could happen… though not before weeks of captivity.

A gold-rank adventurer had saved her, yet it hadn’t been a clean rescue. Tilly had never been able to get him, or Saffra, to talk about it, but the woman could put two and two together. That adventurer had brought Saffra back to Meridian and encouraged her to take the Institute Qualification Exams. She’d passed with flying colors, her results impressive enough the administrators had waived her fees and given her a stipend.

That gold-rank was a regular at Tilly’s inn. Or rather—

“He used to be?” Vivi asked.

“That’s the favor I mentioned,” Tilly said, grimacing. “Why this is relevant. When Saffra stopped showing up every other week, he went to find what had happened. But William, bless his heart, has… *opinions*, and will speak them loudly and without hesitation, no matter who it is. I don’t know what exactly happened, but I don’t have to. I can guess half of it just by knowing that boy. It’s only because of his reputation at the Adventurer’s Guild that he was thrown in a cell instead of carted off for the gallows.”

“He was imprisoned?”

“Has been, for the past six months. Don’t tell Saffra. I can’t imagine how she’ll react. Even worse, she’ll blame herself.”

She totally would. Vivi closed her eyes and reminded herself that Rafael had said not to go starting wars with the nobility, the crown, and the law itself.

But he was delusional if he thought that meant she wouldn’t act on this.

“I’ll deal with that too,” Vivi said flatly. “Once I find out what’s going on.”

Tilly studied her. “You really can?”

“I can. And don’t think of it as a favor. Thank you for telling me all of this.”

Tilly hesitated, and a slow smile spread on her face. “It seems the heavens aren’t completely unjust. That girl deserves a break for once in her life. I’m glad she found you.”

Vivi had never been quite sure how to handle earnestness like that, so she ended up nodding awkwardly. Tilly’s smile widened.

“I’ll stop hogging your attention. Eat! You’ve barely touched your food.”

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REVELATIONS

Jasper, naturally, caught the first greateagle out of Siroc he could find. The dragon in disguise had the right of it: only suckers hung around to speak with the authorities.

He didn't have any teleportation spells to get away, but nobody was willing to chase down the orichalcum-rank 'excusing himself' from a situation. Besides, that Caldimore worm could make himself useful and deal with the logistics. What else was the nobility good for?

The greateagle took him to Tilden, where he caught a conveniently timed Convoy to Meridian with only one interrupting stop, which meant he'd be there by the next morning. He didn't buy a Lounge ticket, not now that he had escaped the nightmarish deep north. He had coin to spare, but not so much he would throw it away.

The next twenty hours he spent making a nuisance of himself in a range from tipsy to drunk, internally excusing the binge on how Mae had sent him out during the *Peace Day Festival*, of all things. He was due celebration throughout the dull ride back.

Especially since he couldn't indulge around her. For an alchemist, she sure had strong opinions on substances and how they were used. Or maybe because of that. He supposed it made sense.

After sipping on a health potion to clear the remnants of a hangover, sniffing his shirt, and finding the smell acceptable enough, he stepped out into the faint gray light of pre-dawn, stretching his arms wide and gazing around at Meridian's busy Convoy Station.

“Wonder if she beat me back,” he mused.

The Iron Vipers had their own sort-of guildhall, which was more an alchemy lab in the crafting district with living spaces thrown in as an afterthought. The place belonged to Mae, but she let her teammates stay there when they wanted.

Swinging the door open, he yelled out in announcement, “I’m home, sweetheart!”

“In here,” Mae called from, unsurprisingly, the lab. “And don’t call me that, you idiot.”

He wouldn’t be surprised if she hadn’t slept yet. And if she’d had time to start experimenting, it meant she’d gotten back *much* earlier than him.

He walked up and leaned against the doorway, crossing his arms and studying the elf. She wore thick, protective clothing, gloves, and eyewear, and held two glass vials, pouring one into another with a steady hand.

“You’ve been drinking,” she said, not glancing over.

He paused. There shouldn’t have been any giveaways, but he hesitated to lie outright.

“Informed guess,” she said, stealing a look out of the corner of her eye. “You really shouldn’t do that. Your brain barely functions when sober. Don’t inflict yourself on the world when you’re drunk. And that says nothing of how bad it is for you.”

“Eh, that’s what health potions are for.”

“Health potions aren’t a panacea and you know that. Not even at our level. They don’t prevent the long-term organ deterioration associated with substance abuse. They don’t even fix immediate trauma with complete consistency.”

His shoulder still twinged from a hunting incident a few years back, so he understood that firsthand. He had considered sneaking a sip of that potion the dragon had given him to be rid of it.

“And it’s a compounding issue,” Mae said. “Especially important for the long-lived. Humans can get away with abusing their bodies, because they’re here and gone. Live more than a few centuries and habits catch up. Your health matters. Take it seriously.”

They both quieted at that. For good reason. It was a major source of tension between them.

It was reasonable for an elf to refuse to romantically involve herself with a human due to the simple matter of mismatching longevity. That

didn’t mean it wasn’t frustrating when he knew they both wanted it. She had literally admitted as much. But Mae had a stubborn streak to rival a mule, and she didn’t do ‘flings.’ Early on, she’d told him that she would only consider it if he reached Titled, so that *if* they became serious, she wouldn’t ‘blink and lose him.’ She was probably speaking from experience, so again, he couldn’t blame her.

There were easier ways to get laid than earning a Title, but it turned out he was equally stubborn. And, to his utter mortification, helpless when it came to this woman. She’d turned him into a damn celibate. His father would disown him if he found out.

“Welcome back though,” she said. “I expected you to take longer. You have it?”

“I do.” He pulled the item out: the one that had sent him to the far reaches of the Northern Kingdom to begin with.

The [Arctic Essence Gland].

Mae accepted it, peeked into the wrapping paper, then tucked it into her inventory, since she had skills that prevented the spoiling of alchemical reagents.

“Excellent. How many did it take?”

“I killed five.”

“Five?” Her eyebrows shot up. “Lucky you. It’s a rare drop. Normally you’d need to work through dozens.”

He snorted. “Nah, I bought it. Came back to town after the first useless expedition and one of the consortiums had gotten its hands on some. *Multiple*. Apparently there was a big influx of parts. Someone went out and slaughtered a damn battalion of those things.”

Mae paused. “That doesn’t make any sense. The environment… the scarcity… the Hoarfrost Plains are over the Granite Spines, they’re incredibly difficult to get to. And even for level eight hundreds, Frostmaw Titans are ridiculously durable. They’re terrible hunting targets, both for experience and coin.”

“I’m aware,” Jasper said dryly. “I suffered three days of that frozen hell just for the five I put down.” He’d have killed for a tracking skill. “Thought I’d have to go out again, spend a full week or more there, but thankfully that wasn’t the case.”

“But who?” Mae asked, her brow furrowing. “The Hoarfrost Plains are *awful* hunting grounds, and hardly a place a stray Titled might pass through

when coming from another city. That's why I couldn't get my hands on any to begin with. The entire market has been dry for decades."

Jasper rolled his eyes. Mae was obsessed with answers. She had that sort of mind that refused to see something strange and accept it for what it was. "Some Titled or immortal passing through Prismarche for the festival, I'm sure," he said. "Flew over and—"

His teeth clicked shut.

Wait. A passing-through immortal? Cleaning up a bunch of Frostmaw Titans just because they'd been there?

He started laughing.

"Oh, fuck me. There's no way. Right?"

"What? What is it?"

"I'm in her debt twice over."

"Her?"

He shook his head in amusement. "Surely a coincidence. Either way, thank the gods I didn't have to hunt those bastards myself. You owe me a huge favor. Nearly froze my balls off."

"The potions I make go to the team, not just me, so that's your reward." She eyed him, inordinately caught up on a minor detail. "Her? What 'her'? Who are you talking about?"

He waved a hand. "Nothing. Just a dragon I met."

Mae paused, her burgeoning jealousy morphing to interest. And it *had* been jealousy. Her interest in him but refusal to act on it was the whole damn problem. He could have moved on if she wasn't always giving off obvious, accidental hints.

"A dragon," she said. "Outside the Sky-Pillar Range?"

"Yeah."

"Are you certain? She'll be executed for that. And she just *told* you she was one, or transformed in front of you?"

"Of course not."

Mae's curious-yet-disbelieving expression flattened. "It wasn't a dragon, then. Ugh. I don't know why I trusted you."

"It totally was. I'd bet my boots on it."

She squinted. "Why?"

"Had to have been there. Just acted… dragony. Had horns too. Well, actually that's because she was shifted as a demon, but it didn't help the

impression.” A pause. “Also, she was throwing around tier-fourteen spells like they were [Magic Missiles].”

That brought Mae’s curiosity back. “You’re exaggerating.”

“For once, no. Might’ve been higher. Heavens, Mae, I don’t even know how to describe it. Disintegrated a level twelve hundred just like *that*.” He snapped his fingers. “Then she picked up the Convoy.”

“What?”

“Half of it, anyway.”

“Jasper! Start from the beginning.”

“So, the Convoy derailed, and then she picked it up.”

She growled in frustration and stamped her foot. “The one you were *on?* How did you get back so fast, then?”

“The dragon put it back on its tracks. I just told you that. You’re a bad listener, Mae. It makes me think you don’t care.”

“I am *not* in the mood for this inanity,” she threatened, shaking a fist at him, trying to seem intimidating in that way that was very compromising to his resolve.

“Well, from my perspective I’ve explained everything clearly. And that reminds me. I brought back a gift for you.”

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. “You did?”

“Irresistible to centuries-old crones that I am”—he gave her a meaningful look, making it clear he was lumping her into that category even though Mae’s expression promised murder—“and incredibly talented with my tongue that I am”—the phrasing was accidental, but he wiggled his eyebrows to capitalize, and Mae’s face turned red—“I convinced the dragon to bestow upon me, for my heroic actions, a boon. After proposing marriage—which I humbly declined, as my chivalrous heart belongs to another—she gave me one of her potions in reward.”

Mae was so instantly intrigued that she forgot to glare at the ridiculous pageantry, or poorly ignore the reminder that yes, he *was* still interested, and that wasn’t going to change.

“A potion from a dragon? That does sound interesting. Let me see it.”

“Alas, I couldn’t identify it, so I sold it to the first alchemist in—”

“I will kill you on *principle*, Jasper. Stop with the idiocy and pull it out already!”

He pressed a hand to his chest, expression affronted. “For a woman as old as you to proposition a virtuous young man so directly… have you no

shame?”

To his immense amusement, Mae’s brow furrowed, and it took her a full two seconds to understand the joke.

Unfortunately, while she did immediately turn bright red, she withdrew a potion from her belt and began unscrewing the cap.

Hastily, Jasper said, “I’ll forgive the brashness just this once.” He knew when to retreat, and the crazy grandmaster-tier alchemist opening up a revenge concoction was most certainly the time. “Check it out: dragon potion!”

He presented the strongest healing potion he’d ever seen in his life—ever *heard* of in his life.

The distraction, thankfully, worked. Mae slowly screwed the cap of her own potion back on, peering at the object of her sudden fascination. He wondered if she would be able to inspect it, or if it would be too high a level for even her. Which would be insane, considering she was one of the highest-ranked mortal alchemists in the world.

The alchemist who had literally brewed potions for the Party of Heroes.

Every emotion save shock melted off Mae’s face so fast that Jasper immediately had his answer.

“What level is it?” he asked.

Mae staggered a step backward, and Jasper’s amusement drained. Her shock had turned into something else; she’d gone pale as a sheet, and her eyes locked to his with some mix of emotions he couldn’t identify.

“Jasper,” she said, voice hoarse. “Where did you get that potion?”

He sensed that now wasn’t the time for jokes. “I told you. A dragon.”

“What did she look like?”

He hesitated. “Demon. Pale, red eyes, white hair, curled horns.”

“How tall was she?”

There was no way the question had come out of nowhere. “Little pipsqueak. Seemed annoyed when the Caldimore mistook her for a kid. Which, fair enough.” He spoke the words automatically, thoughts sprinting forward, trying to make sense of Mae’s reaction. “Why? You know of her?”

Mae leaned heavily against a table, seeming like she couldn’t support her own weight anymore. She started laughing, and there was a hysterical quality to the sound. She wasn’t the type of person to lose composure like this, even for good reason.

He didn’t like this interaction anymore. “What?” he demanded. “What is it?”

“Jasper. *I* made that potion.”

He digested the announcement.

Looked at the glass container in his hand.

Considered the memory of a short demon waving her staff and lifting half a Convoy with no apparent effort.

And finally, he understood.

“Oh,” he said. “Oh, fuck me.”

Saffra woke feeling unusually well-rested. Stretching her arms wide and yawning, she kicked the blanket off and sat up, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

No nightmares. Always a blessing.

She sat there for a minute, slumped over and desperately wanting to lie back down and sleep an hour longer. Finally, she cracked an eye open against the harsh light.

A screen hovered in front of her.

She was awake in an instant, excitement and anxiety flooding her.

An unprompted screen? That could only mean one thing. But already?

Her heart beat so fast in her chest that her eyes skipped across the words several times before she’d calmed herself enough to understand the mystery of language again.

Status Gained! [Exclusive Apprenticeship XII]

[Exclusive Apprenticeship XII]: You are the sole apprentice of an individual closely aligned in Class who exceeds your level by more than 1500. {Receive 1000% Experience Gain.}

Saffra had been through a lot these past couple days. But that… that was too much. She sat on her bed, frozen, as she read the status five, six, seven times, and failed to comprehend it.

She'd known Lady Vivi was strong. Easily on the level of the Institute Archmages, probably even stronger than Archmage Aeris himself, a veteran of the Age of Cataclysms.

But this?

Fifteen hundred levels higher?

Saffra was on the cusp of 400. That put Lady Vivi at 1900. Which… wasn't possible. That was higher than the Party of Heroes. On the same footing as truly legendary immortals, and stronger than some of the Cataclysms. Even dragons weren't that powerful on average. Not even close. Only the Dragon King himself and *maybe*—a big maybe—some of his direct progeny.

Those thoughts going through her head, she finally understood.

A pit opened in her stomach. She came to the only conclusion that made sense. She could only ignore reality for so long; there was no choice but to face the truth when it was so glaringly obvious.

Saffra wasn't just apprenticed to a dragon.

She was apprenticed to draconic *royalty*.

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THE THAUMATURGICAL INSTITUTE

The moment Saffra slunk down the stairs the next morning, she began sneaking strange looks at Vivi. A few minutes into their breakfast, Vivi decided she had to ask. She put her fork down.

"Okay. What is it?"

Saffra jumped. "What? What is what?"

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Me? I'm not looking at you like anything. Um." She squirmed with her gaze flitting shiftily around, before finally blurting out, "So, what's the plan today?"

Vivi wasn't sure what had prompted the behavior, but she set her curiosity aside. Her discussion with Tilly had made it clear that trying to pry something out of Saffra would be counterproductive at best, and harmful at worst.

"The Institute, primarily," Vivi said. "I need to meet someone there. You can join me, or not. It's your choice."

Saffra stiffened, then forced herself to relax. "I might be recognized by someone."

"That won't be a problem. I'll use an [Illusion]."

After a long moment, Saffra mumbled, "I think I'd rather just not."

A short silence. "That's fine too. But just so you know, I'll be busy today."

She had a laundry list of tasks, the prioritized order being: visiting the Institute, addressing William's imprisonment, contacting one of Vanguard's

prior craftsmen to complete the Quest, and putting together a set of gear for Saffra. She wanted to take Saffra hunting afterward, since hands-on practice was as important to progress as academic study. Levels were nothing to scoff at, even if fundamental skill mattered too.

"How's [Scorchlance] coming?"

Saffra happily accepted the change in topic. "Getting close to invocation, I think. It's a tricky spell."

"Certainly more complex than the ones I saw in your grimoire," Vivi agreed. "Many times more efficient too. You'll be pleased by the result."

Saffra perked up further. "I bet." Her voice grew excited. "It's tier four *and* one of your spells. It'll totally be worth the headache."

Vivi smiled—internally, at least. Her body was ever reluctant to show such emotions. "I'll continue to set aside a few hours each day to continue your lessons." While busy, she'd been serious about her promise to train Saffra, even if she had bigger-picture goals that demanded her attention. "This evening, probably. Is there anything you need from me before I go?"

Saffra shook her head.

"You'll be staying here?" Vivi asked.

"No plans," she responded with a one-shoulder shrug. "I'll just keep practicing."

"Once you reach invocation, I'll take you hunting." Scraping the last of her food into her mouth, Vivi finished her plate, set her fork down, and stood. "Try not to get into trouble."

Saffra gave her a dubious look, and she didn't need to voice her thoughts aloud for Vivi to know what she meant.

"And I'll try to do the same," Vivi replied dryly.

How much of a debacle could she *really* get into, visiting one of the world's strongest archmages?

The Thaumaturgical Institute towered over Meridian from the far south of the city, visible at every street corner. A titanic slab composed of polished white bricks speared upward, at least a hundred stories tall. Suspended walkways fanned out from the central tower, elegant sky-bridges connecting it to dozens of annexes and observatories. The structure was a

miracle of magical engineering defying at least a dozen natural laws of architecture.

But the building's impressive construction took second place to the greatest achievement of the campus. The Institute featured a true crowning jewel that made it a wonder the world over. The tower rested on a floating chunk of earth a quarter-mile in diameter, the monolith of dirt and stone straining to break free from the gargantuan taut-drawn chains securing it to the ground. It floated fifty feet up—not far, hardly a true sky island like those found in the Sky-Pillar Range, yet a miracle of magic nonetheless.

There didn't seem to be a practical purpose for the enchantment and barely-airborne chunk of land besides, undoubtedly, the collective instinct of mages everywhere to show off. Which Vivi of course approved of.

The game's lore had never explained who had created the anti-gravity enchantment, or how. As she took a magical elevator upward, she found her thoughts churning, developing a solution of her own if she wanted to make something similar. It would be an undertaking indeed, crafting an enchantment on that level that could hold for centuries. Even she wouldn't have the requisite mana… would she?

While she was perhaps the world's strongest individual mage, there was a quality in quantity, and the alumni of the Institute—which represented near all of humanity by proxy—could work miracles through the wonder of collaboration. Which was why she'd outsourced the dimensional anomaly to those men and women. They would be far more capable of deciphering its secrets than she.

The elevator slowed and shuddered to a stop. The attendant lifted the rope from its brass hook to let her pass. She stepped onto the Institute's campus and her eyes drifted upward, neck craning to see the top. The tower was even more impressive up close.

Saffra would have made a useful guide here, but Vivi wasn't going to insist she join and potentially run into old friends and enemies for something so trivial. Vivi could find her own way around. It was probably for the best Saffra had declined the offer anyway, since Vivi intended to investigate Saffra's expulsion, and speaking with Archmage Aeris would require privacy.

Rafael had arranged the meeting under the fake identity of Nysari Keresi, a visiting demonic noblewoman of the First Blood. A much more

inconspicuous name for a demon than ‘Vivienne,’ she had to admit. Unsurprisingly, he had a better instinct for subterfuge than she.

So far as demonic social structure went, belonging to the First Blood made Nysari someone the Institute couldn’t ignore—even with so little notice and for a person as prominent as Archmage Aeris. The First Blood was equivalent to, if not acting as the head of, at least being *from* a ducal family. Rafael would have sought a higher title, if not for how impossible arranging an identity of even the First Blood had been. He’d had many years to plant and foster those seeds and had secured permission from the Keresi family themselves.

Rafael had informed her during discussions yesterday that Vivisari had been elevated from Second Blood to honorary Primogenitor’s Blood in acknowledgement of her accomplishments during the Cataclysm Campaigns. Which made her, unfortunately, a demonic princess by title. She was still coming to terms with that. Taking on the mantle of Vivisari was going to be a serious headache when she emerged publicly.

She had debated how to approach Aeris. Whether she should visit without a disguise. But interestingly, Rafael had advised against that. He’d told her that catching someone by surprise gave invaluable insight into their character. Aeris’s reaction might be revealing. Rafael didn’t seem to mistrust him, but neither did the opposite appear true. Vivi suspected there was *no one* Rafael trusted implicitly. Maybe not even her. She’d certainly gotten the impression that even the craftsmen weren’t free from his scrutiny.

That said, he hadn’t wanted her to show up unannounced in Aeris’s office. ‘He may have grown rusty in his years of retirement,’ Rafael had said dryly, ‘but he is one of the most formidable casters of the modern age nevertheless. Please don’t force a fight, Lady Vivisari. I shudder to imagine the ensuing fallout.’

Personally, Vivi wanted to see what spells an archmage war veteran used when startled by a surprise visit, but recognized that was an inappropriate way to deal with a potential ally.

The layout of the Institute was simple enough that she easily found a reception building. She explained herself to an impatient-sounding woman whose attitude flipped the moment the words ‘meeting with Archmage Aeris’ had left her mouth. Vivi was pretty sure the woman had, unfortunately, assumed her a lost student. And not one from the upper years.

Why, exactly, did I make my avatar so short?

A handful of minutes later, she was taking a magical elevator up to Archmage Aeris's office on the sixty-fifth floor.

Tatiana's outstretched arm trembled, channeling mana from her palm, into her staff, and out into the air. She sucked in quick breaths through clenched teeth, her attention razor-focused on the developing spell diagram. This time, she would get it. This would not be her thousandth failure; it would be her first success. One had to *visualize* to achieve.

She painstakingly painted the last shaky rune into the air, and—

The spell collapsed in on itself. She flinched as the mana imploded into a hyper-dense, marble-sized singularity of pure energy, then exploded outward, twisting, warping, taking on a life of its own, gleefully pursuing the most violent and chaotic interpretation of the ordered design she had dared to impose upon it—dared impose upon *magic*, a primordial force of nature, a force that loved above all else inspiring awe.

At least, that mutation was what *would* have happened if Master Aeris hadn't dismissively waved a wrinkled hand the moment her spell destabilized.

"[Dispel]," he said, an afterthought.

The mana dispersed, breaking apart and fading from her magical senses into the inert background glow of atmospheric mana.

Tatiana would never get used to that. How quickly Master Aeris could cast even high-tier magic like [Dispel]. Tier seven, invoked like it was a tier zero. Tatiana had barely caught the spell circle's formation, a dozen streams of mana snapping out and painting the twenty-eight complex runes so fast she could've blinked and missed it.

But that was humanity's most powerful archmage. For all the opportunity it presented, it was immensely demoralizing having a master so far ahead of her. She'd reached level seven hundred and thirty just two days ago… yet Master Aeris *doubled* her in levels. Which was absurd to even consider.

"Excellent try," Master Aeris said, stroking his long, pointed white beard. "I do believe, if not for the mangling of *Thruraz*, you would've

succeeded. Alas, *almost* only matters for our friends down in the evocation hall." He chuckled. "Spatial magics are not so forgiving."

Master Aeris wasn't one to mince words. He was never unkind with his insights, but neither did he ever fail to call out mistakes. Often without regard for tact.

Mangling. She hadn't *mangled* it. Maybe that rune had been rough around the edges, a little sloppy by her standards, but… okay, fine. Did he need to phrase it like that, though? She was already frustrated.

Taking a deep breath, she lowered her staff and wiped her forehead of sweat. Her eyes flicked to the timekeeper on the wall.

"Your appointment is coming up."

"Appointment?" Master Aeris's bushy white eyebrows furrowed. "I have an appointment?"

"Yes, Master Aeris. I mentioned it this morning."

And the night prior, for that matter.

Despite what some people at the Institute liked to imply, Tatiana's master was far from senile. He had simply stopped caring about 'trivialities,' as he put it, long ago. She sympathized. There was only so much space in a person's head, and Master Aeris's had surely been crammed to the brim with spell designs a full century ago.

Certainly, minutiae like *meetings* and where he'd left his inscription tools the other day were evicted without second thought. Hence she was as much a secretary for this man as an apprentice. Not that she minded.

"What for?" he asked, caterpillar-like brow staying furrowed as he searched his memory but failed to locate what he was seeking. "When? Is it important?"

"A visiting ambassador from the demons. First Blood. No reason provided, just that it's urgent."

"First Blood?" he asked, starting in surprise. "Which family?"

"Keresi. Nysari."

Tatiana was only vaguely aware of demonic social structure. She knew Third Bloods made up the commoner class, and that unlike the human kingdoms, demonic nobility was expected to vigilantly advance their classes. An insufficient level was a mark of extreme disgrace. That meant very few adult First Bloods would be anything less than orichalcum-rank—and combining that amount of personal power with significant political influence made demonic nobles people you treated *very* carefully.

Those of the Primogenitor’s Blood were all Titled, in the process of becoming so, or had died trying. Mostly the last.

“Keresi? Ah… yes. I taught one of their family some decades back. Talented boy, if a bit bloodthirsty.” His expression darkened. “Not a bad trait in a mage, mind you. However we dress it up these days, magic is a tool for killing.” He locked serious eyes to her. “We coddle your generation too much, Tatiana. We value strength too little. There is a time for a gentle hand and a time for a firm one, and I fear we may have lost the latter.”

He said such things often, though more as idle commentary. Aeris attempted to change very little about the Institute or the world; he had pursued his retirement in all aspects, focusing only on his love for magic and teaching. But in the end, he was a war veteran of a dark and violent age. He had seen more blood than a slaughterhouse. It was difficult to reconcile that knowledge with his kind, grandfatherly behavior sometimes.

“Never mind that, though,” he said, brightening as he dispelled the thoughts. Mood swings were not uncommon for him. “Keresi. Didn’t say why? Should be interesting. I believe that’s her coming up the stairs now. She must be early.”

Tatiana paused, confused, as Master Aeris headed for the door. Then she remembered that, for all he was a mage, he had reached an absurd level, so his physical abilities were far from insignificant despite his mage-type class. He probably heard the woman’s shoes clicking up the stone stairs, or something of that sort.

He tottered over to the door with a bent back, relying heavily on his cane, though there was a firmness and surety in his movements nevertheless. An interesting contradiction, his level vying with his sheer age. Aeris was ancient by human standards. He’d been old *before* the Party of Heroes had conquered the Cataclysms. He was a relic from another era.

Tatiana hurried to shadow him. It wasn't every day she met a demonic foreigner of the First Blood. An orichalcum-rank mage would be interesting by default. The apparently urgent nature of the meeting made her doubly curious. Not many people could force an audience with an archmage on so little notice.

Master Aeris swung open the door. There, on the other side, fist raised midair to knock, stood a short demonic woman.

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ARCHMAGE AERIS

Nysari Keresi was a small woman that Tatiana might have mistaken for a fourth-year student if she hadn't known better. She had pale skin and red eyes, as any demon, and straight white hair that fell to her mid-back. Her robes were gray and unadorned. Notably, she had no crimson facial tattoos, which Tatiana thought odd for a demon of the First Blood, a rank that adhered to cultural norms much more rigidly than commoners.

There was something just barely familiar about her, but she couldn't place why, so she dismissed the feeling.

"You must be the Keresi—" Master Aeris had begun saying even as he opened the door, but he cut off with a strangled noise. He stood frozen for a moment, then staggered backward, his face losing all color in an instant.

The development was so jarring that it took Tatiana a second to react. Master Aeris looked like he'd seen a ghost—or something far, *far* worse. Her skin went cold in confusion, and her entire body tensed. What could *possibly* have provoked that reaction in humanity's strongest spellcaster?

"Ah," the woman said. "You recognize me."

Before Tatiana could think better of it—her feet moving entirely on their own—she found herself standing in front of Archmage Aeris, blocking the demon. It was utterly ridiculous, *her* jumping to protect *Master Aeris*. But the expression on his face had made her move instinctively. She discovered that her staff was pointing toward the intruder, and she forced herself to withdraw the weapon. She had no clue what was going on, but hostility wasn't necessarily warranted.

“Who are you?” she demanded of the woman, tone harsher than she’d intended. But the expression on Master Aeris’s face continued to make her skin crawl from toes to scalp.

He looked *afraid*.

And… resigned?

“It’s time, then?” he rasped. “I knew this day would come. Though so soon?”

Tatiana’s heart pounded in her ears. What *was* this? The shift in atmosphere was so jarring as to make her nauseous. Anything that scared Master Aeris should terrify her—and it did, by mere implication.

“Who are you?” Tatiana repeated, forcing her voice steady with all the willpower she had. It shook anyway. “What is this, Master Aeris? What’s happening?”

The demon woman pursed her lips. Her red eyes were unconcerned. Bored, even. She walked in, ignoring how Tatiana’s staff jerked toward her. Tatiana knew she had been dismissed as inconsequential. She wouldn’t have stood a chance against this woman even if she’d just been a foreign demonic mage of the First Blood. Not… whoever she *actually* was, to make Master Aeris react like this.

“I didn’t mean to startle,” Nysari said, closing the door behind her. The only thing keeping Tatiana from full-blown panic was how calm she sounded, and how nonthreatening. “I didn’t want to announce this meeting under my real name.”

“Lower your staff, Tatiana,” Master Aeris said, and for the first time ever, he sounded his age. Exhausted, ancient, the full weight of his six hundred years bearing down on him. “You don’t know who you disrespect, child.”

“It’s noble to jump to the defense of someone so readily,” the demon said. “I take no offense. I would praise her, actually.”

That brought some of the life back to Master Aeris, but only a small, sad smile. “She’s a good one, yes. A bit rash, but one needs fire in their heart to survive this world.”

The woman considered him, then nodded slowly. “I can tell you aren’t pleased to see me,” she said, “but unlike what so many people are assuming, I have no reason to believe an Eighth Cataclysm looms.”

…*what?*

The words didn’t make sense in Tatiana’s head. An Eighth Cataclysm? Where had *that* come from?

It didn’t seem to confuse Master Aeris. Instead, the old man hesitated, hope dawning in his eyes and some of that immense weight seeming to lift off his shoulders.

“Truly?” he asked.

“The Dragon King could fly down from the Sky-Pillar Range and raze the mortal lands whenever he pleases. An unknown horror might wake from a millennium-old crypt tomorrow. A second Shattered Oracle is perpetually one over-ambitious glimpse away. There’s always an Eighth Cataclysm on the horizon, but I see no promise of one this instant.”

Tatiana didn’t know why this topic had been brought up, but she didn’t find those words reassuring in the slightest. Strangely, Master Aeris did. He pulled himself back together, straightening his posture and regaining some of the color in his face.

“I see,” he said, relief palpable. “I… apologize for that unseemly reaction. Your presence is… a shock to the system, Lady Vivisari. I assumed too much. I’m glad to find you alive and healthy after all these years.”

Tatiana *heard* the words, but they didn’t fit in her head.

Vivisari?

Did he… mean a different one? Who shared the name?

Or maybe she’d misheard?

The demon’s eyes flicked to Tatiana, and she said to Master Aeris, “I’m keeping to myself for now, so I would prefer my presence here kept a secret.”

Master Aeris glanced at Tatiana, blinked in surprise, and said dismissively, “Oh, yes, of course. She can be trusted. My word on it.”

It was flattering that Master Aeris would vouch for her without hesitation, but Tatiana couldn’t register that, because she remained frozen as her brain tried to process what was happening.

Vivisari.

Surely not *that* one?

Not the Sorceress from the Party of Heroes?

But what else would have caused Master Aeris to react as he had?

“Even if the situation is not so dire as I assumed, you surely have a purpose,” Master Aeris said. “Of course, these old bones are yours to use,

for whatever task, big or small. Ask and it shall be done."

The demon considered him. "Two days ago, I was in Prismarche and witnessed a major dimensional anomaly. I helped the local guard send a report to the Institute."

He blinked. "Those… diagrams were yours? But of course!" He seemed immensely pleased by the realization. "I *knew* I saw something familiar! But I couldn't put my finger on it." He stroked his beard, deep in thought, then jolted. He had returned to his usual self, the 'unseemly' terror on his face now only a memory that would disturb Tatiana for years to come. "I forget myself. Please, come in. Tatiana, fetch our guest some tea. I think this conversation will not be short."

Tatiana jolted, snapping her hanging-open jaw closed. "Y-yes, Master Aeris," she stammered out. Her gaze shifted between him and the demon woman—*Vivisari?*—before, golem-like, she jerked and walked stiffly to the kitchenette. While she prepared two cups as requested, a whirlwind of thoughts assaulted her.

Vivisari. *The Sorceress* was standing twenty feet away?

Her own master's fame had sometimes provoked discordant moments of surrealism when she remembered she was being taught by the most powerful human mage in the world. And indeed, perhaps one of the ten strongest mortals in general.

But that didn't compare to the *Sorceress.* Vivisari wasn't just a myth—the world had plenty of those, stories told around the hearth of archmages wielding power that eclipsed even Master Aeris. Stories of magic that rewrote the laws of the universe and vaporized forests. Like those of Archmage Osmian, the man who had founded the Institute and laid the enchantments that held its grounds aloft so many centuries later.

Even he hadn't been able to face down the Cataclysms. The greatest of Osmian's feats had involved merely *rebuffing* the Colossus: diverting that walking mountain to save a city. He had sacrificed decades of his life, rendering himself a magical cripple, and in return had left nothing but a small scorch mark on the beast's titanic leg.

The Party of Heroes had killed the Colossus.

In a mere ten years, they had reshaped the world. Purged monsters of incomprehensible power. There was a not insignificant number of people who viewed those five individuals as gods and goddesses descended into

familiar forms, violating heavenly laws to correct the injustice the mere existence of the Cataclysms had represented.

Tatiana didn't believe that. But to some extent, it was the only reasonable explanation. Vivisari Vexaria had been rumored to be above level *eighteen hundred*. Such power was inconceivable in such a short life. Even the direct descendants of the Dragon King couldn't claim that height of power, so far as Tatiana knew, only he alone. And it had taken millennia upon millennia for that most ancient of immortals to accrue his strength. He ruled over all of dragonkind for it.

And this small demon woman was his equal?

Whether or not the Party of Heroes were divinities masquerading as mortals, they had been blessed by the heavens. Nobody would call Archmage Aeris untalented, but in his six centuries he had come nowhere *near* the stories told about the Sorceress.

Head spinning, Tatiana finished up the tea and carried a tray over. Two living legends were in conversation, and they barely noticed her as she slid the tray onto the low table. She hovered on the outskirts, listening. Curious. How could she help herself?

"The timing is suspicious, is all," Vivisari was saying. "A dimensional fracture *might* stem from a natural phenomenon, but its proximity to my return is coincidental enough to warrant extra attention."

"I will not disagree," Master Aeris said, a frown on his lips. "Fate so does love to weave her tangled tapestries. Never trust a coincidence. That advice has done me well in this life."

"Unfortunately, I'm no researcher. My specialty lies in practical applications. That's why I had Marcus reach out to the Institute—and also why I'm here speaking with you. Of those I knew I could trust, even after a century without contact, you were my first choice."

Amazingly, Master Aeris's cheeks went pink at that. "You flatter me, Vivisari."

"It's true. You were every bit a hero during those campaigns as I. Many men and women were. I was merely the strongest."

He waved a hand, now red rather than pink. Tatiana would've been immensely amused, if not for the fact she still felt like she was in a dream. "Please, Vivisari, this old man will not hear such praise. But I thank you nonetheless."

“Regardless, I’ve been making theories and experimenting with designs.” Master Aeris accepted a notebook withdrawn from Vivisari’s inventory. “Please look through what I have and tell me if they help. I can say with certainty dimensional magic *does* exist; with that in mind, it would be wise to study it and… prepare. Just in case. That’s the favor I came to ask.”

Master Aeris had immediately gotten lost in whatever was inside the notebook, and he had to visibly shake himself out of his fascination. “It would be no favor, Vivisari, when we both know you seek the prevention of another calamity. Of course I will help.” He sighed. “I just fear what use I will be. Those diagrams you sent us have set the *elites*”—he snorted at the term—“of the Institute abuzz. Even I was confounded by them at first, though I do believe I have grasped the concepts you were conveying.”

“Any help is useful,” Vivisari said. “Even if you’re just someone I can discuss ideas with. I placed a [Warp Anchor] outside your door. I hope future visits won’t be a bother?”

He seemed surprised at that, and Tatiana was as well. Because when, exactly, had Vivisari had the opportunity to cast magic that complex? After a moment, Aeris replied, “Yes, of course. I will aid you in whatever manner I can, Lady Vivisari.”

“I’m glad. There was a second reason I came here, though this is a personal request, one you may or may not be able to help with.”

“Oh?”

“A young woman was expelled from the Institute eight months ago. Do you know anything of it?”

The words caught Tatiana so off guard she couldn’t help but blurt out, “Wait. *Saffra?”*

Red eyes drifted her way, and she froze like a rabbit before a wolf. There was no ill intent in that gaze, and indeed this woman had proven time and time again she fought for virtuous ends. Nevertheless, something about those crimson eyes seized her. Was it just Vivisari’s reputation? That was certainly the lion’s share of the effect, since Tatiana’s first thoughts seeing her had been how small and unintimidating a demon of the First Blood looked. How ironic, in retrospect.

“You know her?” Vivisari asked.

Tatiana briefly panicked at the fact that the Sorceress had *addressed* her. She had barely come to terms with how a thought-dead myth had walked

into Master Aeris's office. But that at least made some sense. Master Aeris was a veteran of the Cataclysm Campaigns. He was a legend in his own right. Vivisari visiting him seemed appropriate.

But talking to *her?* No, something about that did not fit inside her brain. It shut down entirely as she stared wide-eyed at the woman.

Master Aeris, to her mortification, seemed amused as he said, "It's rude to leave a guest's question unanswered, Tatiana."

"Y-yes! Yes, I know her. *Of* her. I know of her. Saffra, that is."

Vivisari's face betrayed no amusement. Nothing besides that same cool impassivity. After the horrors she'd seen, and the wonders too, of course nothing fazed her. What was a bumbling apprentice compared to ripping open space and time, or dueling the worst monsters the world had seen, ones that could flatten villages with a step or lay waste to entire kingdoms —and *triumphing* over them?

"I would answer myself, but I don't recognize the name," Master Aeris said. "I believe I heard something about an expulsion, but I didn't look into it. It is not an admirable path I've chosen, my recusal from responsibility. But if I do anything except separate myself, I will be dragged inexorably back into the Institute's bickering—or worse, politics at large."

"By all means, enjoy your retirement," Vivisari said. "I would have gone to Archmage Lysander if you weren't aware of the situation. You're simply a friendlier face, so I was hoping you would be." Red eyes locked back onto Tatiana, dispelling her brief respite. "But it seems instead, your apprentice has answers. Might I ask for them?"

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EXPULSION

Tatiana swallowed, but forced herself not to freeze up. Once had been embarrassing enough.

"I know *of* her. That's it, my lady. Expulsions don't happen often—you really have to do something horrible. Usually there's a whole list of punishments they go through first. So when it does happen, people talk."

"I see. And in this instance?"

Tatiana hesitated. "My little brother is a third-year, and he was talking about it, so this is secondhand information at best."

"That's fine. The public view is what I want."

Why? Why had *Vivisari Vexaria* gone from talking about dimensional anomalies and potential Eighth Cataclysms to… Saffra, that beastkin second-year who'd been expelled a while ago? How could they possibly be related?

Tatiana was obviously in no position to question the likes of Vivisari, though, and Master Aeris was looking at her with curiosity, so she answered after a moment of dubious hesitation, "From how Xavier described it, the whole thing blew up because of Isabella Caldimore. She assaulted her."

"She attacked Saffra?"

Tatiana blinked. "What? Um, no. The other way around. Isabella showed up to class one day with… bruises. Apparently it was pretty bad. She accused Saffra."

Vivisari studied her, demeanor cold. "Is that it?"

Tatiana swallowed, nervous even though the undercurrent of anger wasn't targeted at her. "They were… friends, before? Sort of? Xavier said they had a frenemy thing going."

Both Vivisari and Master Aeris stared at her, and Tatiana realized she had just used the word 'frenemy' in front of two living legends. Two individuals who had reached the pinnacle of magehood, people who were known the world over as heroes of their Ages. In Vivisari's case, a hero of *all* Ages.

A flush seared up her neck and onto her cheeks, the tips of her ears turning red. Why, again, was she explaining Institute drama to a woman who could erase cities with a wave of her staff?

"W-which is to say, they had a rivalry going on, definitely, but despite all the bickering, they were always eating together, walking the halls, studying… everything. Everyone knew they were friends, just a weird sort. That's what Xavier said, at least." Tatiana bit her tongue, wondering whether she should elaborate. Finally, she decided she would. "He was there. Apparently Saffra was super caught off guard by the accusation. He didn't think she was acting. And afterward, a bunch of other allegations came out."

Isabella hesitated a second time. Her voice dropped in volume instinctively. "Again, this is just what I heard, but all of them came from nobles. Mostly from people close to the Caldimores. Xavier thought there was something fishy about the whole thing, and it didn't sit right with him, but what could he do? Or anyone? He said Saffra was a bit aggressive and opinionated, but the only times she got into real fights were against bullies. She had a reputation for that. Maybe that's why it wasn't questioned when she attacked Isabella? *If* she did," she hastily corrected. "It wasn't her first time getting in trouble, even if the previous times were usually justified."

"Lysander didn't look into this?" Master Aeris asked, a deep frown pulling on his beard and mustache.

Tatiana shrugged helplessly. "It was twenty people's word against one. Nobles against a commoner. And all hearsay, none in her favor. Duke Caldimore himself stepped in to insist on her expulsion. Said even that was letting her off light." She glanced at Vivisari. The demon's face remained calm, but there was a dangerous hint of anger on her smooth features that even Tatiana could read. Tatiana couldn't help but ask, "Why? You know Saffra?"

“I met her in Prismarche.”

Prismarche?! The girl had fled across the continent! Tatiana guessed that was reasonable, considering Saffra had drawn the ire of one of the five most important noble families in the Kingdoms, but still.

“And took her as my apprentice,” Vivisari finished.

Tatiana failed to parse the words.

Vivisari had taken… that random second-year… as her *apprentice*?

“Did you, now?” Master Aeris asked, turning in surprise to Vivisari.

“She demonstrated an exceptional strength of character, and she asked for help with her spellwork. I can’t offer a true apprenticeship, but I’ve been providing lessons and insight where I can.”

Master Aeris seemed strangely delighted. “It’s wonderfully fulfilling, fostering the youth, isn’t it? How amazing you’ve finally taken that step! My, though. This is concerning.” The pleasure turned to a grimace. “That you’ve come here asking after the event surely means something, and perhaps I’m jumping to assumptions… but if there was a gross injustice in this tower, I’m ashamed for not having prevented it, Vivisari. I dare not make assumptions, but the Caldimores are a respectable family—why would they arrange such a thing? What has the girl herself said about it?”

“Nothing,” Vivisari said with a sigh. “She clearly wants to leave the debacle behind her, whatever it was. Which I would be fine with, but I’m looking into it in case it’s something I can’t ignore.”

“I see,” Master Aeris said slowly, seeming unhappy—probably at himself as much as the situation. “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, that is true.”

“Is that all you know?” Vivisari asked.

Tatiana tried to dig through her memory for any more details, but couldn’t find any. “It was second-year drama. It made waves because expulsions are rare, and it was a commoner attacking a Caldimore, but no, everyone forgot about it a month later. I only know this much because of Xavier. He was one of their classmates and felt bad about it.”

“Lysander will have the details, surely,” Master Aeris said. “I would like to imagine that something more is going on, that a family like the Caldimores wouldn’t throw a promising young student from the Institute for… pettiness? Mere dislike?” He shook his head. “But still, this is not something I can discard out of hand. I’ve seen far worse behavior from far better people.”

With that statement hanging in the air, Vivisari frowned at him.

“I see,” she said, turning to Tatiana. “That’s it?”

“That’s all I know.”

“I might need to speak with Lysander, then,” Vivisari said. “Though I’d rather put that off. What do you know of him?”

“The Headmaster?” Master Aeris asked. “Quite a lot. He was there during much of the Campaigns, though not Titled yet. He rose to true prominence over the decades succeeding the Turning. Those monsters left scars on the world, lingering ghouls of the Regent, naga-hordes supping on the sunken corpse of the Kraken, a menagerie of other nightmares. I dealt with some of them, yes, but so did he. A gifted boy, with a truly staggering talent for the arcane. He surpasses even me, relative to his age.”

He stroked his beard, thoughtful.

“I hope this description stays between us, Vivisari,” Aeris continued, “but he is vain and arrogant to a fault. Many men of explosive success and undeniable talent are. He is not, however, a villain. Merely a difficult person to work with. I have excused myself from politics, but I would not have seen him named Headmaster if I thought him wicked or self-serving.”

Tatiana stirred in surprise. Master Aeris was *always* grumbling about Headmaster Lysander. She hadn’t known he thought highly of him, even with those condemning clarifiers.

Vivisari mulled over his response. “Perhaps I’ll visit him. I’ll decide later.” She faced Tatiana. “Thank you for the information.”

“O-of course, Lady Vivisari.” She still found it surreal that she was even being addressed by this woman.

To Master Aeris, she said, “I have other tasks I need to see to, so I can’t stay. I wanted to give you that notebook, primarily, and ask about Saffra.” She made to stand, then paused. “Ah. Would you like to see the anomaly before I go? That might help your understanding, as a reference for what I have inside my notes.”

Master Aeris seemed confused for a moment—as was Tatiana—before understanding dawned, and he laughed.

“Ah, Vivisari. I forgot how humbling your mere existence is,” he said wryly. “Yes, please. That would indeed be helpful. You can make the return trip as well?”

Vivisari’s brow furrowed a fraction, not quite understanding, but she answered the question. “Yes. It’s only eighteenth-tier magic.”

Tatiana probably needed to clean out her ears, because surely the phrase ‘*only* eighteenth-tier’ hadn’t been uttered.

“Indeed,” Master Aeris said, amusement plain. “Might I invite Tatiana? We’re working on manifesting [Blink], and experiencing a warp might contextualize the process for her. Or would that be too much strain?”

“Strain?” Vivisari asked, brow furrowing for a second time. It clearly wasn’t that she found the question amusing, nor was she flaunting her power—she seemed to actually not understand for a second. “Oh, no. The spell is only unwieldy with crowds.”

…crowds?

A person couldn’t cast spatial magic on *crowds*.

Vivisari stood and held a hand out. Master Aeris grabbed his cane and pushed himself to his feet so he could lay a wrinkled hand in Vivisari’s. When he gestured for Tatiana to come over, she hurried to do the same, moving by instinct more than intent. Because she didn’t really believe what she was hearing.

Even Vivisari surely can’t—?

“[Greater Warp].”

The world folded in on itself. Blackness crushed her from all directions and her senses fled. Sight. Hearing. Smell. For an infinitesimal, infinite moment, she stopped existing. She floated in inky darkness, her arms and legs gone, *everything* gone. Total disembodiment. Then there was a sensation low in her stomach, a perception of movement, though that didn’t remotely describe it. Like she’d been launched by a catapult, multiplied a million times over.

Tatiana slammed back into reality with a gasp, space unfolding and vomiting her out into cold, bright sunlight. She staggered and might have lost her footing if not for a surprisingly steady hand that dropped onto her shoulder to stabilize her.

“It’s an experience, the first time,” Master Aeris said, eyes wrinkling at the corners. “Like almost all things, you adjust.”

Tatiana couldn’t believe it. It had taken all of a second for Vivisari to cast the spell. How was that possible, even for the Sorceress? Without her staff, for *three people*, and without seeming fatigued in the slightest?

As shocking as that was, she shoved the wonder away and focused instead on the sensation of having been swallowed by space. While [Greater Warp] wasn’t [Blink], they were closely aligned. She locked the sensations

into her memory and felt a thrill of inspiration go through her. She'd been so close even just last attempt… invocation might genuinely be within reach now!

"Oh, dear. That's far worse than I imagined," Master Aeris said.

Tatiana's eyes popped open. The tone in her master's voice had broken her concentration. He didn't sound afraid; the only time she had *ever* heard him sound like that, ironically, was earlier. At Vivisari's arrival.

Yet he was awed. And deeply concerned. His eyes were locked on the sky above Prismarche. She failed to see whatever it was that he clearly could. She thought she noticed a disturbance in the mana currents, though no matter how hard she concentrated, she was unable to identify the source of whatever tickled her brain.

"It looks worse than it is," Vivisari said. "And it's repairing itself over time. You would have gleaned more if you saw the fractures as they appeared."

"Mm. And you did?"

"I was here for the festival, yes."

"It must have been a sight indeed."

Vivisari nodded.

Tatiana redoubled her efforts to identify the magical phenomenon, and once again failed. Her frustration grew.

"[Aura of the Ember Giant]," Vivisari's voice murmured from Tatiana's side.

She jumped in surprise as a blanket of warmth enveloped her. She realized only then she'd been shivering. The Northern Kingdom was violently cold, and they were standing on the city's wall, wind gusting through her robes like the thick cloth didn't exist. She didn't have the monstrous stats the other two members of this party did to fend away mortal concerns—she'd only been ignoring the cold thanks to how utterly absorbed she was with more important things.

Vivisari Vexaria had seen her shivering and… had cast a spell to warm her up? Something about that broke her brain for the tenth time that day.

"It looks like this," Vivisari told Tatiana before she could even thank the other woman. She held a hand out and extruded mana into the air. She twisted that magical essence around, shaping it in ways Tatiana hadn't known were possible. What Vivisari tried to show her was far too complex

for Tatiana to comprehend even a hundredth of, but when she looked back at the sky, it was enough for her to understand—or at least perceive.

The sky wobbled, then shattered into ten million shards. She blanched and jolted a step back. The effect was most pronounced in the center of the city, where only a mess of tangled fragments huddled. Near the outskirts, the pieces of broken sky were the size of buildings.

Tatiana was too shocked to even curse. She instead gaped like a fish, words failing her.

Vivisari didn't think this implied a possible Eighth Cataclysm? The boundary between worlds had *shattered*. The destruction was profane. Tatiana wanted to retch just looking at it, and she didn't even understand what had happened, really.

"Could you hasten its repair?" Master Aeris asked. "The barrier is weakened, surely, which means a second similar spell—or phenomenon, if it wasn't deliberate—might succeed in breaking through."

"I considered it," Vivisari said. "But I believe it's sturdier than it seems. And I hesitate to simply experiment, considering the potential repercussions. I did theorize an approach in the notebook I gave you. Look it over and tell me what you think, when you can."

"It seems I have required reading I must do before I can speak intelligently on the matter," he said amusedly. He glanced up at the sky, naked fascination on his face. "I dare not use the Sorceress as a ferry," he said wryly, "but could you retrieve me tomorrow, rather than sending me back now? I would like to take my own notes. Studying this phenomenon in the flesh will do wonders for my understanding."

"Of course," Vivisari said. "You're the one helping me, it's the least I could do. I do have other tasks to handle though. Is there anything you need before I go?"

He considered for a moment, then shook his head.

"Tomorrow, then. And thank you again." She inclined her head at the two of them, and disappeared.

Silence filled the air. Master Aeris continued studying the dimensional fracturing, paying no attention to Tatiana. She was pretty sure she'd been forgotten, or at least overlooked. Considering the sheer wonder of the magical phenomenon overhead, she didn't blame him.

But still.

"Master Aeris?"

He twitched, then glanced at her as if surprised she was there. Which definitely confirmed her theory.

“Yes, dear?”

She looked around at the pine forest on one end of the wall and Prismarche’s sprawling urban landscape on the other. The Northern Kingdom. She had really traveled thousands of miles in the blink of an eye.

“I… still had classes today, sir…”

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WILLIAM

Six months. Six months was a long time to spend in a cage.

And a long time to go without a shave, Will thought, scratching the thicket on his chin. Gods, but he would kill for a razor.

George, one of the guardsmen watching the gold-rank cells, had bent over backward to accommodate him, which already made this heaven compared to a real imprisonment. But he obviously couldn't sneak Will anything that stopped him from looking the part of a prisoner. If someone important came down and found him clean-shaven and smelling of soap, there would be hell to pay.

He had it better than he had any right to, and he was still miserable. Maybe that was why Rose's words were sounding more reasonable than usual. Not enough to change his mind, but definitely more reasonable.

"You're an *idiot*, Will," his sister growled, the iron bars rattling with her frustration as she shook them with both hands. George had posted himself outside to give them privacy, once again being unnecessarily accommodating. "This is the best you're gonna get! More than you could've hoped for. How can't you see that?"

Lying on his cot with one arm crossed behind his head, he stared at the nauseatingly familiar cracked ceiling. He was pretty sure he could draw the spiderweb formation from memory by now.

"I'm not licking his boots," he said, "and that's the end of the discussion."

"You don't have any choice in the matter!"

“Sure I do.”

“Not if you want out of here! What’s your plan? Stay locked up forever?”

“They can’t justify that.”

“They’re the *Caldimores*. They don’t have to *justify* anything. They can do whatever they want, however long they want, for any reason they want. Maybe if you were important, Will, but you *aren’t*. You’ll rot away!”

“With my dignity intact.”

“I’d mistake you for a vagrant if I saw you on the street,” Rose said flatly. “What dignity?”

“Cover me in shit, tar and feather me, that doesn’t change a thing. A man’s dignity is in his actions. Getting down on my knees and kissing the boot of that spineless worm—that’s how I’d throw away my dignity.”

Rose went quiet. “Will, you can’t talk like that,” she said, a note of fear mixing with the anger. “You’ll get me killed too. Who do you think you are, to call Duke Caldimore a worm?”

He grimaced. That… had been too far, yes. To be fair, he wouldn’t have used those words if George hadn’t posted out of earshot, or if there were other prisoners inside the three cells of this block. Still, he grimaced and accepted the point. He could never be sure no one was listening in.

“I did nothing wrong, so I’m not apologizing.”

“You don’t want out?”

Gods, but he did. Badly. He was so desperate to feel the warm glow of sunlight and breathe fresh air that even imagining it brought tears to his eyes.

And again, his imprisonment wasn’t even as bad as most. He had a friendly guard who chatted and played cards and smuggled in entertainment. Without that, he would’ve gone insane. How did real prisoners survive?

“It’s never about where you are,” Will said, “it’s about how you get there. No, I don’t want out. Not if I have to beg and grovel in front of that —” He stopped himself from insulting the man a second time. “In front of Duke Caldimore.”

“And what about Dan and me?”

He winced. That question hit much harder. As the leader of their team, not to mention Rose’s older brother, he felt no small obligation toward them. And his cornerstone position as the team’s captain and defender

meant the past six months had crippled their advancement. They'd been making do with freelancers, but going out on life-or-death missions with someone they didn't know well was questionable in the extreme.

"Should probably just replace me," Will grunted. "Like you said, I might be here a while."

"Don't be an idiot. We're not replacing you." She sighed. "But at a certain point, what choice do we have? It's been six months."

"You're right. Don't let me weigh you down."

Rose scrubbed her face with both hands. "You are *impossible*. I'm not asking you to burn down an orphanage. Say you were wrong, apologize, and eat crow just this once. For the greater good."

"There *is* no greater good. Only how you act, day in and day out."

"I respect you, Will. I really do. But sometimes you're so far up your own ass you should have brought a lantern."

"They're only principles if you don't compromise on them."

Rose threw her hands up in the air, turned around, and took several deep breaths. She faced back a few seconds later, after she'd calmed herself.

"Okay. So that's how it is? Because at a certain point, we really will just need to find a new third."

"Won't blame you in the slightest," Will said, trying not to flinch at the idea.

Rose stood in silence, and though she was only visible in the corner of his eye, he knew she was fuming.

However the exchange might have continued, he wouldn't discover. Because the heavy *clunk* of George turning the block's reinforced handle—Will was in the fortified cells, hence his lack of company—announced an intrusion into their conversation.

Two intrusions. He sat up in surprise.

George looked no different. Portly and red-cheeked, belly squeezed into his uniform. He was a retired mithril rank now collecting the reliable paycheck of acting as guardsman for the gold-rank cells. George's connection to the Guild, since he'd been a dedicated adventurer himself once upon a time, was probably why he treated William so well.

Maybe it was because George was the only person Will had talked with consistently for six months, but he thought George was a swell guy. The man had two kids, one entering the Thaumaturgical Institute. He was always going on about her. Little Maggy.

The newcomer was more interesting. Demons weren't rare in Meridian, but their pale skin and red eyes still drew attention. Not even reaching George's chest, the tiny woman in plain black robes shouldn't have commanded the entire room.

But she did.

As gold ranks, Will and Rose both had better instincts than average—they sensed her importance immediately. Or maybe they fed off George's nervousness, because the man seemed so tense Will was surprised he wasn't trembling.

George bowed at the waist so deeply Will thought he might tip over, and the seriousness of the action contrasted so completely with his normally jovial, inappropriately lax behavior that Will found himself sweating abruptly.

"I present Lady Nysari of House Keresi, of the First Blood, Tenth Elevation, Grand Magus."

Will knew little of demon culture, with those foreign folk being a continent away and separated by a perilous sea, but if anyone knew anything about demons, it was that elevations were their adventuring rank.

First elevation, low bronze. Second, high.

So tenth?

Upper orichalcum. This woman was closing in on a Title.

That alone would make any man stand up straighter. There were maybe a hundred Titled across all the mortal lands: human, demonic, dwarvish, and elvish alike. The long-lived races claimed the lion's share. Each human kingdom had only a handful, though the Central Kingdom championed the most by far.

To even approach a Title put a person on a short list that all of the nobility in the world kept memorized. Not even a duke would carelessly snub an upper-orichalcum—or an orichalcum at all, if they could help it. The power structures of the nobility were fearsome, but a ducal rank bestowed no ability to rip a tree out of the ground with one's bare hands. So they were wary of such people, as they should be.

The terrifying part of demonic nobility, though, was that they were often both nobles *and* powerful adventurers.

First Blood? That was the highest, he believed, besides their royal family, which they called the Progenitor's Blood? Or was it Primogenitor? It was some fancy word like that.

This woman was from the equivalent of a ducal family, nearly Titled, *and* had been recognized by their magical academy as a Grand Magus. If that worked anything like the Thaumaturgical Institute, Grand Magus was a title that held serious weight.

Not all equal-level adventurers were the same. A level four hundred disciple of a Sword Saint was going to wipe the floor with an amateur gold-rank who'd only scrambled his way up the ladder with pluck and earnestness. William knew that firsthand. Had a crooked nose to remember that embarrassing event by.

In short, this woman, while not quite as politically powerful as Duke Caldimore, might stand on the same footing by sheer dint of other factors. Upper orichalcum, a title from the demonic mage academy, and political sway of her own. Hells, for all he knew she was the duchess of her family—or whatever title family heads used in their Blood system. She looked young, but appearance meant little with the long-lived races.

No wonder George was sweating so profusely. Will had no idea why someone so staggeringly important had stridden into his cell. And *foreign* nobility at that, which made everything far more sensitive.

He didn't have a good feeling about this.

Regardless, he scrambled up and bowed. He would have done that even for Duke Caldimore, as much as it would have rankled. Getting down on his knees and begging for forgiveness was out of the question, but he lived in the real world: when nobility appeared, he showed necessary deference. Else he really would find himself at the gallows.

Rose also bowed, keeping her head down.

"William?" the demon asked.

Hearing his own name made him flinch. He hesitantly straightened. "Yes. That's… me." After a beat, he hastily added, "My lady." He wasn't accustomed to interacting with nobility. He also wasn't sure whether demons preferred some other title, 'Your Bloodthirsty Eminence,' perhaps, but he assumed 'my lady' ought to be safe.

Apathetic red eyes swept up and down him, and Will knew he'd been judged as unworthy. Her nose didn't wrinkle and her lip didn't curl back, but the sheer bored disdain in those eyes made him feel like an insect.

"Missus Tilly sent me," she said.

Will almost reached up and cleaned his ears. Because… what? The demon had enunciated the words clearly, yet they didn't make any sense.

He shared a look with his sister, but Rose was looking at him with the same level of bafflement—and underneath that, poorly masked concern.

“The innkeeper?” he asked hesitantly.

“Tilly Tanswell. Yes.”

That erased any ambiguity. But he was no less confused. Tilly did serve a higher-level clientele than most inns, but that meant silvers and golds, with a few mithril-rank regulars that dropped in every once in a while as well—mostly out of nostalgia, having been prior clients. Tilly’s inn was nice, but it didn’t offer the most luxurious experience money could buy, and once a person hit orichalcum, hunts started raking in enough coin it could be difficult to get rid of it all. Only equivalent-level gear, equipment, and consumables put real dents in a team’s finances at that rank.

A nearly Titled First Blood demonic adventurer? One Tilly knew well enough to ask favors of? *I’m pretty sure she would’ve mentioned her at some point.*

“I… see,” Will said. “Can I… ask why, my lady?”

Instead of answering, the demon turned to George. “I wish to speak with the prisoner in private.”

George had already looked uncomfortable. *That* request had him paling. In just about any circumstance, a guard would have bent over backward to accommodate a noble of this rank. Sometimes even if it went against the law. But a demonic foreigner asking to speak privately with a prisoner that Duke Caldimore himself had an interest in?

He bowed several times in a row. “I’m afraid I can’t grant that request, Lady Keresi. I must keep watch over the prisoner at all times when a guest is present.”

The demon looked at him, then at Rose. The question asked itself, but she voiced it aloud anyway. “You were outside while these two were speaking, no?”

George, of course, had no good response to that. He had only been accommodating Will… and not wanting to hear what they were talking about, because then he would have had to overlook insults given to Duke Caldimore.

His mouth opened and closed several times.

Nysari flicked her hand dismissively. “Never mind.” She faced Will. “You’re under my protection now, so speak freely. Please explain what

happened. How you ended up here, what you know of Saffra, and how she was expelled."

For a second time, Will did a mental double-take. *Saffra?* Why was this woman asking about *Saffra?* Sure, the girl's situation had led to all of this in a roundabout way, but only because it had brought him to the Institute and into friction with the staff and instructors there. Ultimately leading to him saying some… unwise things about the Caldimore family.

"I've taken her as my apprentice," she added, reading the confusion on his face.

"Your *apprentice?*" It wasn't Will that blurted that out, but Rose. She reined her astonishment in. "I mean—h-how? Why? *Saffra?* Red hair, cat beastkin?"

Red eyes drifted to the young woman. The demon considered Rose for a moment, then asked, "Who are you?"

Rose swallowed. "Will's sister and teammate, my lady. Rose."

Lady Keresi glanced at Will, and he nodded hesitantly in confirmation.

"I see," the demon said. "Yes. My apprentice. I met her in Prismarche under unfortunate circumstances, and in the course of those events, she displayed considerable integrity. When she asked me to teach her, I agreed. I'm aware that there's been a… situation with you, her, the Institute, and the Caldimore family. Missus Tilly asked me to look into it and help if I can."

That explained the situation in clear, comprehensive terms, yet Will still struggled to wrap his head around it. It was just so *strange*. And sudden.

"Now, if you don't mind," the demon said. "Start from the beginning."

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THE ALCHEMIST

Accessing the gold-rank prisoner cells had posed surprisingly little challenge to Vivi. The false identity Rafael had provided held more than enough social weight for her to stroll up to the guardhouse, make demands, and have them met with utmost haste, even if the officials there weren't quite sure who Vivi was. Still, they weren't going to risk annoying a demonic foreigner of the First Blood.

Vivi had yet to speak with Rafael on the topic of William's incarceration. She'd headed straight for the prisoner in case he was being mistreated. A cell would hardly be a pleasant fate in the best of circumstances, but if she had found a starving, beaten man chained to a wall, she would have immediately broken her promise to Rafael to treat the law with due respect. Or rather, the due respect would have been none.

William didn't look like he was enjoying life, but he was alive, fed, and healthy. He smelled awful and his hair and beard were overgrown, but his cell was clean, he had a sleeping cot with a blanket, and he was apparently even allowed visitors.

She hadn't walked into a nightmare scenario, so she had no justification to break him out. She would, however, formulate a plan with Rafael to force an expedited end to his sentence—she wouldn't leave him to his fate.

"Start from the beginning," William repeated slowly. He glanced at his sister. The dark-haired girl bearing a striking resemblance to him shrugged helplessly, then gestured urgently in a way that obviously said, 'hurry up and answer her, already!'

As useful as Nysari's identity was, her presence clearly put people on edge. More importantly, Vivi knew reports of this visit would spread rapidly. To Duke Caldimore and the Guard Captain, as the most obvious. She wouldn't be surprised if Rafael had a report on his desk before evening.

Her reassurances hadn't put William at ease either. He watched her like he might a poised viper.

"I'm… not sure how much there is to explain," the man said slowly. "I figure you have the gist of it. I said some things about the Caldimores that I shouldn't have, and the pri—" He bit his tongue. "And *Duke Caldimore* took offense."

"I gathered that much. But what did you say, and why? What prompted it? And more importantly, what do you know about the situation at the Institute, and Saffra and Isabella?"

William hesitated. He glanced at the guardsman. "I don't think I should repeat what I said about Duke Caldimore," he replied dubiously.

"You really shouldn't," the guard said, shifting uncomfortably and seeming like he would rather be anywhere else.

Vivi frowned. "I said speak freely. You're under my protection." At the same time, she doubted the exact insults mattered—'*and you shouldn't encourage the slandering of dukes,'* Rafael's distressed voice urged in her head. "More important is why. And what happened with Saffra?"

William stared at her for a long moment, then grimaced and looked away. "You probably know more about that than I do. The whole thing started because of Duke Caldimore's girl, so when I found out she'd been expelled, I… didn't react well."

William's sister snorted at that understatement, then froze when Vivi's attention drifted her way. Vivi didn't even have her red tear-trails to blame this time. Apparently, even Nysari was powerful enough to terrify people, and didn't have the benefit of the Sorceress's positive reputation.

"You have a history with the Caldimores?" Vivi asked, since that seemed to be the implication. Why else would he be so upset a Caldimore's accusations had led to Saffra's expulsion?

William's lip pulled up in distaste. "You could say that."

"How so?"

He seemed reluctant to answer. "I spent six years in the Wardens."

It took her a second to place the name. "Duke Caldimore's guild?"

He looked at her oddly. She supposed it *was* one of the most prominent guilds in the Human Kingdoms. Even demons should be aware of it. Certainly a visiting noble.

“Yes,” he said dubiously. “Duke Caldimore’s guild.”

“Why’d you leave?”

He looked like he was about to say something scathing, glanced at the guardsman, and took a breath to calm himself.

“Disagreements in how the guild was run,” he said sardonically.

“Oh?”

When he didn’t respond right away, Vivi said, “It’s best if I understand the situation before I put myself between you and the Caldimores. The politics are going to be… complicated.”

William stirred in surprise, and so did his sister, which Vivi found rather nonsensical since she’d made it clear from the start that she’d come to help.

“You’re really going to pick a fight with the *Caldimores?* For me?” He shook his head and corrected himself. “For Saffra. You… took her as an apprentice. How is she? That girl is a tough one, so I never *really* worried, but still…”

By the expression on his face, he definitely had worried. “She’s fine,” Vivi replied. She chose not to add ‘Though a little more traumatized than when she left.’ “She attracts as much trouble as always,” she said with a sigh, irritated at the reminder that Fate liked picking on the girl. “She led me to Tilly, who explained your situation. I’m not here for Saffra’s sake alone though. I would have tried to help regardless. Even if they were given from a commoner to a duke, a six-month imprisonment for insults is excessive.”

The whole room stared at her like she’d grown a second head. Vivi internally winced. Maybe she shouldn’t go decrying the political and social norms of the world. That idle comment had been exactly what Rafael had meant when he warned her that her actions would have consequences.

At least she was speaking as Nysari and not Vivisari. Though eventually, those personas would merge; the subterfuge wouldn’t survive indefinitely. It was a temporary arrangement to hold her over until Vanguard announced the Sorceress’s reemergence in an official capacity.

“Never mind that. You were in the Wardens,” Vivi said. “What happened to make you leave?”

William was still giving her a strange look, which she couldn't blame him for.

"It's not a long story," he finally said. "Something about that guild never sat right with me, but I chalked it up to…" He grimaced. "Idealism, I guess. Expecting something that didn't exist. But even then, that place felt… heartless. From the start, always seemed like a means to an end. A way to make coin, maybe. A pet project for the Duke, for the sake of his reputation. I don't know. But not a community for up-and-coming heroes, like guilds ought to be."

He snorted.

"And yes, I know how that sounds. I was fourteen when I joined. Anyway, it wasn't until one of my teammates nearly died that the illusion broke. A guild is supposed to take care of its own. Not just on principle, but what in the hells are the guild dues for, if not that? It's in the damn contract." He was working himself up, his words growing hot. "But they left Abe a cripple instead. Would've been too expensive. Not impossible, mind you. Probably had the damn potions on hand—it's the Wardens we're talking about. But no. Too *expensive* for some no-name low-silver."

He took a breath to calm himself.

"Turned out to be a pretty big deal after the fact," William said flatly. "Didn't sit right with a lot of people, as it shouldn't. As Abe's teammate, I ended up in a meeting with the Duke. Me and him didn't have a productive discussion."

He spat to the side, which made both the guardsman and his sister tense. Rose seemed like she might lurch forward and shut him up. He didn't burst into a vitriolic rant though. Just sighed, the fire sagging out of him.

"So yeah. We had a bit of a history. Somehow kept my mouth shut back then, not that I had much choice, but when I found out his daughter had gotten her fangs into Saffra, had her expelled and run out of the city, I… didn't react like I should. Wasn't having a great day to begin with, but that's no excuse." Exhausted, he waved a hand. "That's the story. The important parts. Like I said, I didn't learn much about Saffra. Got myself into trouble too fast to."

Vivi's frown had tugged down farther and farther throughout the story. "I was told Saffra and Isabella were close before their falling out. Friends, of a sort."

William leaned back in shock. "That can't be right."

He definitely knew less about this situation than she did. That was unfortunate. “According to one of her classmates. At a minimum, they spent a lot of time around each other.”

“I had no idea,” William admitted, seeming frustrated.

His reaction was reasonable, but his imprisonment and his involvement with Saffra had done nothing but complicate things for Vivi. She’d at least hoped he would have insight, but he didn’t—besides the picture he’d painted of the Duke and his guild, she supposed.

“That’s fine,” Vivi said dismissively. “I’ll deal with it. Is there anything else I should know?”

“I… uh. Not that I know of?”

“Then I should go make arrangements. I’ll have this sorted out.”

“Thank you?” the baffled man said.

“Think nothing of it.”

As far as Vivi was concerned, this wouldn’t remotely pay him back for his rescue of Saffra, or all of the other good deeds he’d done. For all that this man was apparently nothing but another headache, from what Tilly had said he seemed like a good person. She would have tried to help regardless.

When she left the cell and the guard closed the door behind her, her enhanced hearing picked up a closing remark:

“For the record, idiot,” Rose said, “just because a miracle fell in your lap doesn’t mean you were in the right. You *really* should have apologized.”

Vivi first [Blinked] to Rafael’s office, but a [Detect Presence] located no mana sources that could be him nearby. Her second stop was the guild. When she popped into existence inside the common room, the thoughts stewing in her head regarding the Caldimore situation vanished. Because while she’d been ready for potentially *one* mana source inside the guild—Rafael’s—there were *three*.

To facilitate others entering the historical landmark without sending the city into a frenzy, she had installed a selective [Invisibility] enchantment that targeted any nearby friendlies holding an intent to enter. So visitors weren’t impossible, just unexpected.

If Rafael had brought others back, that meant the guild's situation had developed. They were almost certainly other members of Vanguard. But who?

Her eyes locked on the nearest.

A man lay atop the sofa, lengthwise on his back, feet kicked up on the armrest. He held a book plucked from a nearby bookshelf above his face and was reading it idly. He sensed her appearance as quickly as she did his and jerked up, blue eyes turning her way.

"Oh," Jasper said. "Vivisari. It's just you."

He plopped back down and returned to his book. Paper shuffled as he flipped a page. Beyond that sparse greeting, he ignored her.

She gawked at him. Or the Vivisari equivalent of a gawk: a blank-faced stare with slightly wider eyes than normal.

It made no sense. She tried to come up with an explanation but found none whatsoever. What was the orichalcum-rank she'd met on the Convoy doing in *Vanguard's guildhall?* The only thread she could *maybe* tug on was that high-level potion she'd given him, but that hardly explained anything. Even creatively, she couldn't invent a theory for how that potion had led him to Vanguard. Not so quickly.

He glanced over at her. "Can I… help you?" he asked, shifting on the couch and giving her a weird look.

Damn him. He was clearly trying to get a rise out of her.

"Rafael," Vivi called to the stairs leading down into the cellar, where she felt the two other mana sources. "Why is there an alcoholic on my couch?"

"Now that's just rude," Jasper protested.

A second passed, and Vivi heard thumping footsteps rushing up the stairs.

A golden-haired elf appeared at the doorway, silver eyes wide and elegant, youthful features painted with shock. Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly.

"Miraelle," Vivi said, surprised. She recognized Vanguard's alchemist easily since, like Rafael, she had barely aged. But why was *she* the third person here? Did she know Jasper? "I see you found your own way back. That's good. I was going to track you down myself."

Miraelle reacted in a way Vivi really hadn't expected: tears welled up in her eyes.

“Oh, no, what am I doing?” the elf said, scrubbing them away and laughing at herself. “That’s ridiculous, I’m not *crying*. I just—it’s really you, Lady Vivisari. Gods above!”

Vivi had absolutely no idea what to say to that. Thankfully, Jasper saved them from an awkward silence, though not out of charity or social deftness, but because he was incapable of keeping his mouth shut.

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t get too excited. Those tears aren’t for you. She just finally gets to brew *real* potions again.” He groaned. “You would not *believe* how high this woman’s standards are. You have any idea how many times she’s sent me halfway across the continent for the perfect reagent? Ugh. You’re the root of half my problems, Vivisari.”

“You’re the root of your own problems, you ass,” Miraelle snapped. The burst of emotion, the tears, had already cleared away. She’d clearly just been overwhelmed. “I’m so sorry about him,” she said profusely, turning back to Vivi. “And… that.” She waved at her own face, looking mortified. “This is just… not what I expected this week. I can’t believe you ran into him in Prismarche! What are the *odds*?”

“You’re the Mae he mentioned,” Vivi surmised, remembering that offhand remark and putting two and two together. “His team’s alchemist?”

Miraelle grimaced. “Unfortunately, yes. And yeah, I’ve been going by Mae for a while now. You can call me whatever you want, of course.” She hesitantly closed the distance. Her hand drifted forward like she wanted to touch Vivi and prove her existence, but she pulled back and folded both hands in her lap to keep them still. “I really can’t believe it. Rafael caught me up, but… I thought I’d never see you again, my lady.”

Rafael had followed a few moments behind Mae, and he watched the interaction from the sideline. He nodded at Vivi when her attention flicked his way.

“I returned as soon as I could,” Vivi said. “If I had retired, I at least would have informed the guild.”

“That’s what everyone thought,” Mae said. “But anything could have happened. No one would even have blamed you if you’d just wanted to… disappear, after everything.”

‘Everything.’ No doubt Mae meant how she had been the only survivor of the Cataclysm Campaigns. The elf shifted awkwardly, understanding that maybe she shouldn’t have alluded to the fate of the Party of Heroes.

But Vivi wasn’t bothered. Her friends were fine—just unreachable, in another reality. *Vivisari’s* friends had died. *Vivienne* didn’t grieve for them… though the whole idea was admittedly very disorienting to think about. Should she be sad that alternate versions of her friends had died? It was too strange a concept to impact her in any visceral way.

“I didn’t leave,” Vivi eventually said. “Or, not intentionally. It’s complicated.”

“I expected as much,” Mae said.

A short pause, with neither of them seeming to know what else to say, where to take the conversation.

Rafael stepped forward and seized control, smoothly as ever. “While I am loath to rush any reunion, of course, completing the first stage of Vanguard’s restoration is as simple as inducting Miraelle. And I find myself more than curious what will happen when the quest requirements are met. So, if I might ask… shall we?”

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REINDUCTION

Vivi appreciated Rafael's interruption—not because she was interested in the quest's payout, but because she had no idea how to deal with a starstruck, emotional old friend who wasn't *really* an old friend at all.

Meeting Winston and Rafael had gone smoothly, but that was because they were social deftness personified. Mae was… not that. She was also clearly far more amazed by Vivi's presence.

She supposed she'd interacted constantly with her butler and the guild's steward. The craftsmen, she hadn't been as close with. The luster of 'hero of the world' still existed in their eyes—if no doubt less than a civilian's. At least, that seemed to be the case for Mae.

And Vivi had never been able to pick up the slack in complicated social situations. She stumbled with normal niceties, much less unprecedented circumstances like reuniting with a guild-NPC-turned-real-person. So yeah. She was glad Rafael had interjected. Seeing how he was more than aware of Vivi's quirks, he'd likely done so on purpose.

Jasper slammed his book closed, tossed it aside, and rolled off the sofa before jumping to his feet in a fluid motion. "The quest *does* sound like fun. Level two thousand artifact with no level cap?" He whistled. "If it's a bow, I call dibs."

"Why would *you* get it?" Mae shot at him. "Just for knowing me?"

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You know, I think I do deserve a reward for putting up with you."

“You! Putting up with me!” the elf sputtered. “You have that backwards!”

Rafael strode over to the quest board. As amusing as watching Jasper score repeated critical strikes on Mae was—he really understood how to get under that woman’s skin—Vivi followed Rafael, far more interested in the quest. Jasper and Mae must have agreed with that sentiment, because after bickering for a few seconds longer, they also glanced over, paused, and hurried to join them.

“Let us head to my office?” Rafael asked, eyes scanning the paper he had unpinned from the cork. They flicked to Mae. “Assuming you do, indeed, wish to rejoin Vanguard?”

Mae sounded almost offended. “It’s not like I avoided every other guild these past hundred years for some *other* reason.” She hesitated as if realizing something, and looked at Vivi with obvious concern. “Assuming I’m still welcome.”

“That goes completely without saying,” Vivi said.

A beaming smile spread across Mae’s face, which she tried to hide immediately in embarrassment. Vivi was struck, again, by how much weight her words held to the people who remembered her.

As a group of four, they walked to Rafael’s office. He pulled out the guild charter and flipped to the induction form. He scribbled out several fields, then paused, pen tip hovering indecisively.

“As a craftsman solely, or an adventurer too?” he asked Mae—though also sent a significant glance at Vivi.

Mae paused. “Oh.” She glanced at Jasper, who quirked an eyebrow, then at Vivi. “Is that… an option?”

“Lady Vivisari did mention opening up the ranks,” Rafael said.

Prior to now, only the Party of Heroes had been adventuring members of Vanguard. But Vivi’s decision to open recruitment hadn’t changed, and who better to be the first new member of Vanguard than a former-craftsman-turned-adventurer?

“If that’s what you want, you’re fully welcome,” Vivi said.

After confirming with Mae that she did desire that, Rafael finished filling out the form, then handed the clipboard to the shocked woman. After a short hesitation, she signed it. The process repeated for Vivi, who also hesitated, though for a different reason. She’d never signed something as Vivisari. Nonsensically, she couldn’t help but wonder whether the anti-

forgery enchantment would flare up. Would her handwriting validate as the Sorceress's?

Whatever the case was, the system recognized her signature as valid, and the quest lying on Rafael's desk ignited in golden fire. Heat and brilliant light filled the room, and once the paper had reduced to nothingness, it left neither ashes nor scorch marks behind.

"I take it that means the quest is complete," Rafael commented with a raised eyebrow. He flipped through pages on the guild charter. "Vanguard is, indeed, a tier-one guild now. The craftsmen's quarters should be accessible, and the vault—or a portion of it?—as well."

"My lab," Mae gasped. "My lab is back?"

She rushed out the door before anyone could get a word in, and Jasper groaned and strode out after her. "An alchemy lab versus a level-two-thousand unbound artifact from a dead Cataclysm, and she goes for the lab. Alchemists."

Vivi and Rafael followed. She found the craftsmen's quarters through a hallway connected to the common room. Walking in, she was met with a familiar sight: a sterile laboratory filled with shining metal tools, devices, and equipment Vivi would struggle to find even a quarter of the names for.

Amusedly watching the golden-haired elf slip here and there, fawning over glassware and gasping at every drawer of alchemical reagents preserved over the century, Vivi found her thoughts drifting to the crafting situation.

In Seven Cataclysms, craftsmen had helped automate processes and boost the final result. Crafting had been heavily gamified, because while complex crafting systems might appeal to *some* people, most regulars of an action-VRMMO wanted to tap through a screen, spend their resources, and get back to the real game as soon as possible. Certainly, most didn't want to go through the rigmarole involved with a crafting system that approached realism.

Like many aspects of this world, that gamified structure had translated into something better suited to real life. Crafting wasn't as simple as clicking through screens and watching materials in her inventory disappear. Mastery in alchemy, or blacksmithing, or any other skill, required years or decades of apprenticeship and study.

The system had changed more fundamentally too, or so she surmised. This was just what she had put together using common sense, poking

through the crafting screen, seeing her ranks, and cataloging what skills she had access to.

Each crafting discipline had two sub-ranks: ‘main’ and ‘collaborative,’ going from zero to ninety-nine. A real alchemist like Mae had ranks in the main discipline. Adventurers typically ranked up *collaborative* crafting, mostly through supplying reagents or acting as an assistant to various tasks.

Vivi was low-rank in almost all of the main crafting skills. Only enchanting had kept its maximum level of ninety-nine. The rest had been pushed down into the single digits, because Vivisari obviously hadn’t done much solo crafting throughout the years.

That said, every skill had *collaborative* ranks in the nineties, no doubt from the sheer amount of resources and joint-crafting she’d done with some of the best crafters in the world. Which she suspected was rather ludicrous.

She still had a lot to learn about the exact details of the system. With Mae’s return, she would be able to confirm her theories soon.

Mae’s enthusiasm for her long-lost lab eventually ebbed enough for her to realize that three people were watching her joyfully scurry around. She froze, her cheeks colored, and she hurried over.

“S-so. We should probably go check the vault first. I can mess with my equipment later.”

Jasper paused, a smirk alighting on his lips, and he opened his mouth to say something. Mae’s hand shot to the potion bandolier on her hip. She gave him a look that promised in no uncertain terms a fate worse than death. His mouth reluctantly shut.

After a moment of confusion, Vivi realized that an innuendo about ‘messing with her equipment’ had most definitely been inbound. She briefly considered setting him on fire for Mae’s sake, but instead shook her head and walked out of the lab.

Once through the common room and down into the cellar, she studied the vault door. A regular tier-zero guild—as Vanguard had reverted to—shouldn’t have had a vault at all. When she’d tried to access it yesterday, the door handle had refused to budge.

This time, the door swung open, revealing the vault storing all the treasures pilfered by the strongest adventuring party in history.

A large, blocky room met her, well-lit with bright silver walls. Shelves, boxes, cabinets, stands, and a dozen other containers packed the spacious interior. There was almost too much to pay attention to; the clutter

overwhelmed her, her eyes flicking all around and trying to identify each marvelous object on display.

A theme she identified rather quickly, to her interest and mild disappointment, was that there were no artifacts or gear. Nor consumables. Midnight-black pelts hung draped over poles; a massive golden scale leaned against a wall; jars of blue-and-green fluid shimmered on a shelf. But they were all crafting materials. The first-tier restoration quest had returned Vanguard's vault, but not everything inside as she'd first assumed. Merely a subset of those treasures.

A no-doubt locked door on the opposite wall told her that future quests—the later stages of Vanguard's restoration—would likely reward them with deeper access into the vault, where they could reach the truly valuable items.

Not that what she saw now *wasn't* valuable. Undoubtedly, the contents of this room rivaled the net worth of a small kingdom. There were materials here that were quite literally priceless. With no others of their kind to be found in the world. At least among mortals, only the Party of Heroes had been capable of harvesting dragon scales, jarring phoenix ashes, or plucking out kraken teeth in quantity.

There was one exception to the crafting materials, and it lay atop a pedestal situated ahead of the door leading deeper into the vault.

That has to be the quest reward, she thought, immediately heading for it. "I recognize that book," she muttered aloud. "The Umbral Regent wore it on his belt. Wasn't his main spell tome though… I never saw him cast with it."

She [Inspected] the item as she neared.

The Codex of the Hollowed Sun

Legendary

Lv. 2000 (Lv. 0)

Description

Consume it all, for come what may.

———

Her stride faltered.

That was… a more dramatic description than usual, even for high-level items.

Reaching the pedestal, she considered the book.

“[Detect Curse].”

“[Analyze].”

“[True Sight].”

“[Soul Sight].”

She went through a few more abilities, suspicious, yet found nothing. Satisfied, she lifted the tome off the pedestal. It was shockingly heavy, as if carved from a block of lead. The cover was smooth and made of cold, polished black stone. Inlaid into the center was a circle of dull silver, with thin, sharp lines flaring out like sun rays.

“That’s a hell of a name,” Jasper said, even his joking demeanor wavering at the legendary artifact. He eyed the book. “And ominous. Sure it’s safe?”

“I sensed nothing,” Vivi said idly, tracing the silver marks with a finger. “And it would be strange if a quest reward was cursed.” Still, it was a relic repurposed from a Cataclysm, which was why she’d been cautious.

She flipped open the cover. Inside were dark gray pages. All blank, she discovered after flipping to the end.

“‘Consume it all, for come what may?’” Rafael quoted. “That’s not descriptive. What function does the item serve?”

“It absorbs energy,” Vivi said. She could *feel* that it was true. “It’s a mage’s accessory.” As was a natural manifestation, having come from the Umbral Regent, the most powerful lich the world had ever seen. The weakest of the Cataclysms, once human like the Shattered Oracle, and also the freshest-born, a mere few centuries old. The Umbral Regent had been the first Cataclysm slain by the Party of Heroes.

“Absorbs energy?” Rafael asked. “How so?”

“The book is hungry. It wants to be fed,” Vivi murmured. She could feel the pages tugging at that energy core inside her torso. On every power source around them. The Codex was *starving*.

“We’re *sure* we’re not about to birth an eighth Cataclysm, right?” Jasper joked, though it didn’t sound entirely like a joke. He was shooting nervous

glances at Mae and Rafael.

Vivi opened her gates and poured mana into the first page of the Codex. It drank. More and more, oceans of mana, even *her* pool draining considerably. A symbol brightened on the page: *Galdrust*, the rune associated with the concept of *reservoir/storage/container*.

Each page of the Codex could store an obscene amount of mana, but not more than Vivi could supply. The flow slowed to a trickle then cut off, the book—or rather, the first page of the Codex—having glutted itself.

"Fascinating," Vivi murmured. "There's at least fifty more pages." It would take even her weeks of constant feeding to fill the entire thing.

She pulled on the glowing symbol and mana flowed into her, filling her core. There was a conversion loss, but only about fifty percent.

"Useful," she said. "Very useful."

That was putting it lightly. There were no ways to store mana for later, so far as she knew. The closest would be feeding a ritual circle, but that didn't really count. This book was a portable secondary mana pool, and a gigantic one. She would still be gated by other factors—a bigger mana pool was only one aspect of a mage's strength—but it was outrageously convenient.

"Can the mana be shared?" she asked herself, barely paying attention to Rafael, Mae, and Jasper. "No, I don't think so. Each page seems to be locked to the mage who fed it. Or… not locked, but there would be greater loss? Enormous loss, but still functional?" It was difficult to say, since these interpretations were based on broad observations she made from the flow of mana. She would need to experiment.

After ruminating for a moment longer, she jolted back to awareness. Rafael, Jasper, and Mae were looking at her with a mixture of emotions Vivi couldn't identify.

She cleared her throat and closed the Codex. "It's a secondary mana pool," she explained. "A very large one. I've never heard of something like it."

"Indeed," Rafael said slowly. "You identified nothing… concerning?"

"It's not cursed, as I said. Aesthetically, it looks like the codex I remember the Umbral Regent wearing on his belt, but I doubt it's the same. The quest appropriated the design, or materials, or something of that sort."

"Interesting," Rafael said, still reserved. He didn't sound entirely convinced. "Not what I was expecting for a level-two-thousand item with

the requirements lifted. A second mana pool sounds useful even for you, my lady, but is it something to turn any mage into a Titled, as we first assumed?”

“I think I can store my mana, and another could use it. Though with significant loss. Ninety-nine parts in a hundred, maybe?”

He quietly considered the implication in those words. “I imagine,” he said, “that even greatly reduced, borrowing the mana of the Sorceress would be a fearsome ability indeed.”

Vivi hummed in agreement. A fraction of a level 2100’s power was still… quite a lot higher than what most Titled could bring to bear. There was enough mana in that first page for her to erase a city. More like a small village, if someone like Saffra could indeed draw from the reservoir and channel it herself.

“More importantly,” Vivi said, “it’s a functional item for even me. I wasn’t expecting that.”

That concerned her. Because it reminded her of something Rafael had said earlier. There was no proof of an Eighth Cataclysm’s imminent arrival, but a way to store mana over time and draw on it later would be a major boon for her, should anything come that genuinely challenged her.

With that in mind… this Codex might be another piece of evidence hinting at calamity. Why would the System be helping them if there *wasn’t*, somewhere on the horizon, a threat that imperiled the world?

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THE VAULT

While the Codex of the Hollowed Sun had occupied their initial attention, the rest of the vault had plenty of lesser-yet-still-astounding treasures to sift through. Mae especially lost herself in the process of rummaging around in the storage cabinets, shelves, and drawers, *oohing* and *aahing* at each alchemical reagent she identified.

Jasper, meanwhile, had walked over to a pedestal with a glass container, where he stared blankly at the three blocky shapes of silvery-blue material.

"Those are ingots of starmetal," he said blandly.

Vivi's attention drifted over. Sensing an opportunity to deliver long-overdue payback, she walked up next to him. Eyes bored, she looked down at the bars of metal.

"Only small ones," she pointed out.

He looked at her. Opened his mouth to reply. Closed it.

"Yeah. Just… small ones."

"It makes for excellent silverware," she commented, then turned and walked away.

She felt him staring at her back. "That was a joke, right? Hey, that *was* a joke, right?"

She didn't reply.

Rafael's attention turned to her as she approached.

"I have a situation I need help with."

"A lesser demon would run screaming at such words," Rafael replied. "I merely tremble. How may this humble steward serve you, my lady?"

She eyed him. “I mentioned my apprentice, right?”

“You did.”

“She got into some trouble at Meridian. It’s why she was in Prismarche.”

He digested that, then said, “She fled across the entire continent? Not a *small* amount of trouble, then.”

“I don’t know the exact details, but no. In short, the Caldimore family got her expelled from the Institute… though maybe deservedly?” For all that Vivi knew Saffra had a good heart, it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that she bore some guilt for what she’d been accused of. “But I doubt it. I think something more is going on. She allegedly attacked Isabella Caldimore, and was accused of other things too—I don’t know exactly what—but I suspect most if not all were fabricated. However, I have no proof.”

Rafael took the explanation in stride. “The Caldimores. If I made a list of five families to avoid, politically speaking, theirs would certainly be on it. Perhaps at the top. I’ve heard no request, though. Does she have a bounty that needs clearing?”

“Nothing like that. I think, legally speaking, the matter was settled with her expulsion. But someone she knew, a gold-rank adventurer, wasn’t happy when he found out what had happened and… made a scene. He insulted the Duke and was thrown in a cell. He’s been imprisoned for six months so far, and I want him freed.”

Rafael hummed. “Duke Caldimore is not one to let slights slip past his family. A prickly man. And it sounds like he has the legal high ground. This could be difficult to resolve.” Strangely, the demon smiled. “Ah, the old days have returned in earnest. Though I’m surprised you didn’t free him yourself, Lady Vivisari, and leave me scrambling to pick up the pieces. Have you grown wiser in your time away? Or did you pity your steward for once?”

Vivi knew she was being teased… but justifiably so. Because it might have gone that way. Somewhat embarrassed, she admitted, “I went and checked on him. He was being treated well for a prisoner.” By the standards of this world, at least. “I might’ve taken things into my own hands if that hadn’t been the case.”

“I would expect little else; however, I *will* advise you to act with moderation,” Rafael said, only seeming amused. “Now more than ever. You will not escape the repercussions of your actions in the same manner you

once could. There are no remaining Cataclysms for the powers that be to justify a rogue element of your strength doing as she pleases."

"I know," Vivi said, though she knew she didn't—not *really*. The scale of her problems was… too big to contextualize. They didn't fit in her head. She was one of the most important people in the world now? That was surely too ridiculous to be true.

"But yes. Duke Caldimore is famously touchy when it comes to his family's honor," Rafael said. "That said, he is a rational actor both from what I've observed and the profile I've put together. He would not dig his heels in if the detriments grossly outweigh the benefits—pride or not. Thus, I believe there are a number of ways we could exert pressure. I hesitate to do so with either of our names, however, which complicates things. The time is not right to announce your return, or Vanguard's, and my name would dredge up questions—why am I involved? A solution depends on how deep the insult offered was, or the nature of the grudge against your apprentice."

"I don't know the details. I'm still looking into it. But William and the Duke have interacted before. William was a member of the Wardens. He said something about one of his teammates not being healed after a serious injury, when the guild should've helped? Contractually? It upset enough people that Duke Caldimore met with him personally, though they didn't come to a resolution."

"The story jogs a memory," Rafael said, frowning. "Hm. Regardless, I imagine a properly sufficient donation would solve this problem. There should be no need to rely on political weight, much less force. Coin is a panacea for many things. It is perhaps upsetting to reward the Caldimores fiscally, but nevertheless would be the most efficient solution." He shrugged. "If this is unacceptable and there is need for more direct approaches, remember: you borrow the name Keresi. They are honored to stand behind you, and their influence is not insignificant."

"If you think a bribe is enough, let's start there." She hesitated. "But quickly, please?" She felt awkward asking him to rush when he was doing her a favor, but it wasn't *really* a favor—it was his role as Vanguard's steward. Still, she wasn't used to demanding things of people. "I'm worried Saffra will want to see him, and then she'll find out what happened. She'll blame herself, and—" She sighed and waved a hand, not wanting to finish.

"It will be handled with the utmost expedience," Rafael said coolly.

“Thank you. And speaking of Saffra, I need advice there too.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“She doesn’t know who I am yet. I’m debating whether to tell her. The only reason I haven’t”—*besides that I just really don’t know how to approach that conversation,* she admitted in her own head—“is because it’ll change how she sees me. I was thinking it’s better to get to know her without revealing it.”

She would have talked with Tilly about this, but the woman had no idea that Vivi was the legendary savior of the world either.

Rafael considered. “Children are not my specialty,” he said. “But I see nothing incorrect with your logic. Knowing that her master is the Sorceress would indeed drastically alter how she perceives you. Establishing a stronger relationship beforehand could be beneficial.” He shrugged. “Equally so, it might be seen as deception. Regardless of the rationale or reasonability of hiding your title. Emotions are not logical; children are not; *people* are not.”

That wasn’t the most useful advice, but of course there was no cut-and-dried answer. She could only use her best judgment… and in this case she really did think that getting to know Saffra for at least a few days, if not weeks, was smart. It set her more at ease that Rafael didn’t disagree.

Vivi’s eyes drifted to Mae and Jasper. Mae was still rummaging through the vault and arranging reagents on a shelf. Jasper had been appropriated as an extra pair of hands, obediently acting the helper while slipping in obnoxious remarks wherever he could.

“Requests have been sent to the appropriate craftsmen guilds for your project,” Rafael said. “I should have answers by noon; urgency was specified.”

“All three of them?”

“Indeed. Leatherworker, woodworker, jewelcrafter, as you requested.”

“Perfect. Thank you.”

“Merely doing my duty, my lady.”

Glancing over and seeing Vivi and Rafael looking at her, Mae froze with a jar of golden liquid in hand. She hastily set it down and hurried over.

“I’m only organizing,” she said defensively. “I know I can’t just take what I want. It’s for if I need to find something quickly, for an important project. Best to be ready for that sort of thing.”

“I didn’t assume otherwise,” Vivi said. Jasper walked up too, and her eyes flicked to him. “Are you joining as well?” she asked.

“Joining?” he asked.

“Vanguard.”

He froze. His eyes flicked to Mae, then Rafael, who both seemed equally surprised.

“I’m *invited?”* he asked incredulously.

“If Mae is joining as an adventurer, not just as our alchemist, and you’re her teammate, then…?” Vivi could tell she’d asked something strange. “I don’t see why not.”

“Teammates holding membership in separate guilds isn’t unheard of, though is somewhat unusual,” Rafael said, cutting in smoothly. “However, from what I understand, you two have been on a team for eight years?”

“Nine,” Mae said.

“So this is more than a short-term arrangement. Thus I agree—the offer is not out of place.”

Both Jasper and Mae seemed disoriented, which made Vivi realize she’d dropped a bomb on them. Jasper clearly hadn’t expected to join Vanguard, despite how Mae had. And it *would* be a significant offer. Joining the guild that had been exclusive to the Party of Heroes, though that trend had been broken by Mae first, would be shocking even for someone as irreverent as Jasper. She’d just kind of assumed it would happen, seeing how he was Mae’s teammate.

Vivi had her problems with Jasper, but thought he was a good man at a fundamental level. The way he’d jumped to the Convoy’s defense proved it. So, he seemed like a good fit for Vanguard.

“But I would advise an interview first, Lady Vivisari,” Rafael said. “As a minimum requirement. Also, they have a third teammate; it’s best to discuss the topic with him too, in advance.”

“Of course.” She should have checked with Rafael to begin with—she’d spoken without thinking. “You can handle that interview now, if you want. I was hoping I could work with Mae, and we don’t need…” She glanced at the ranger-adventurer. “…a distraction.”

“I’ve never been a distraction in my life,” Jasper said.

Both Vivi and Mae stared at him.

“Maybe once,” he admitted. “Twice at the most.”

“He’s yours,” Vivi told Rafael. She looked at Mae. “Assuming you’re free.”

“Free? For… an alchemy project, you mean?” The excitement in her voice was plain.

“For alchemy,” she confirmed.

Rafael ushered away Jasper, who hesitated, glanced at Mae, shrugged, and followed the tall demon-steward.

“I don’t know how much Rafael told you,” Vivi continued, now alone with Mae, “but my time away left me with memory problems.” Mae seemed concerned but not surprised, so Rafael had probably brought it up. The two had been speaking with each other for who-knew-how-long before Vivi had teleported into the guildhall. “I want to make sure I understand the co-crafting process before I work with others. I have a project planned for my apprentice.”

“The beastkin girl,” Mae said. “Jasper mentioned her.” She frowned. “And how she threw herself against a Titled-rank monster without a second thought. Can’t say I’m surprised,” she sighed. “She’s *your* apprentice, after all. How many thousands of times did you hurl yourself into danger to help people, or Orion, or Axian, or any of you?” Her expression sank, no doubt remembering those friends who had died a century ago. She visibly pushed the mood away. “Is she invited to Vanguard too, if it’s opening its ranks? I doubt Jasper was some special exception. Let’s be serious.”

“If she’s interested, maybe,” Vivi said. “I don’t have concrete plans yet. I haven’t even told her who I am. I was just talking with Rafael about that. It’ll be a… big revelation, I think, so maybe it’s better to wait until she and I know each other better.”

Mae looked thoughtful. “I can see that. Even I try to hide who I am sometimes, because of the assumptions people make, and it goes without saying I don’t have a thousandth the reputation the Sorceress does.” She shook her head, then glanced over her shoulder at the pile of alchemy reagents. “Well, never mind that. I don’t have any good advice, I’ve never had an apprentice. What kind of potion were you thinking?”

“Any,” Vivi said. “I just want to jog my memory.” On second thought, though… “Saffra does need more level-appropriate potions. Or did you want to do work on something more involved?”

Mae squirmed around as if embarrassed to admit it, eyes shiftily sliding sideways. “It *has* been a century since I’ve gotten my hands on mythic-

grade reagents, Lady Vivisari. But of course I'll complete any project you ask of me."

"How about both?" Vivi said, entertained by this woman's obvious addiction. "Something exotic first, then lower-grade potions afterward."

Mae bobbed her head eagerly. "I saw some Heartwood Ichor over there. That's not *too* expensive, right?"

Utterly shameless. Vivi's lips almost twitched in amusement. "I don't have warp anchors set in the Western Kingdom, so not too much just yet. It'd be tedious to get more."

"Barely a few drops," Mae promised, hurrying over to the hoard of reagents before Vivi could change her mind.

After collecting a few more supplies, they left the vault and wound through the guildhall and back to the alchemy lab.

On the way, Vivi's eyes drifted to the quest board. A new mythic-tier quest, the second stage for Vanguard's Restoration, hadn't appeared. Would there even *be* a second stage? Logic seemed to dictate so, but apparently it would be some time before it appeared. Or some other hidden requirement? She would have to check regularly.

Inside the lab, Mae unloaded the collection of items onto a metal table and began plucking glassware off the shelves and moving equipment around.

"So," the elf said. "Memory problems. I'm sorry to hear that."

After a second of not having a clue how to respond, Vivi replied, "It is what it is."

"How serious? Not to pry. Just so I know." Mae gestured around at the lab. "Trying to understand how to help."

"It's worse in some places, better in others. I remember you, the guild, the campaigns. Magic is no problem. I've had no issues casting. But some concepts are patchy—crafting especially. I don't remember much of the collaborative process."

She had real ranks in enchanting, rather than collaborative ranks, and had been given extensive knowledge on how to enchant items and set down persistent effects via Vivisari's memories. But that was because enchanting was just an extension of magic; the other crafting disciplines hadn't been so kind as to throw themselves into her mind.

Mae hummed. "Not surprised your co-crafting memories were the first to go," she said with a snort. "Not like you lost much. Skills handle most of

the work.” She cleared her throat. “Not to make light of anything. Memory gaps are no fun, regardless of what they are or how serious. Sorry.”

“I’m bothered less than you think. There’s no need to walk on eggshells.”

While the discordant knowledge stemming from Vivi’s transmigration could legitimately be called ‘memory problems’ in an abstract way, she didn’t have amnesia or some other unnerving condition. She supposed the whole ordeal was something that still made her internally panic when she considered it more than superficially, but that wasn’t a ‘memory problem.’

“You may have to walk me through a few things,” Vivi said. “Or maybe all of it. We’ll see.”

“That’s usually how it works,” Mae said, shrugging. “Not to say anything too obvious, but having ranks in a collaborative isn’t the same as spending a century studying and leveling the main skill.” She paused, then shook her head with amusement. “Then again, considering the sheer number of skills you’ve gained from… well, I don’t even want to imagine how high your rank is… you’re head and shoulders a better assistant than even a seventieth-rank *real* alchemist.” Her eyes started to sparkle. “Oh, I’m going to be able to make so much *more* now.” She turned back to the metal table and started excitedly arranging her equipment. “It’s been a hundred years since I brewed an [Earthstrider Elixir], or anything half as potent.”

[Earthstrider Elixir]? A top-tier speed potion. Vivi already had some in her inventory and didn’t really need more, but she couldn’t bring herself to disrupt Mae’s enthusiasm. Not when Vivi couldn’t come up with a potion she *did* need created, barring those weaker ones for Saffra. She would let the alchemist decide what she wanted to experiment with.

“I don’t actually have any serious rank in a collaborative myself,” Mae said, “so I’m not sure how much I can talk you through anything. But I don’t think I’ll need to. From what I understand, the skills you’ve earned should handle almost all of it. That’s the whole point of a collaborative, so adventurers who are busy bashing in monster skulls all day can come back and work with their guild’s craftsmen without years of training. You aren’t *supposed* to help with the whole process, just some of the steps, and boost the end result by being there.”

That was what Vivi had interpreted from poking through the various skills, but it was nice to have it confirmed.

“Here,” Mae said, handing her a mortar and pestle with a blue, chalk-like material inside. *Azurestone, I think?* An [Inspect] confirmed the theory. “Start by crushing this into a fine powder, please.”

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LEATHERWORKER

The light of dawn spilled across wooden floorboards, painting Rhek's bedroom in muted hues of orange and yellow. A long groan broke the quiet of the morning. Wood creaked as he rolled out of his cot and reluctantly set to his routine like a golem infused with not quite enough mana.

He spooned dark, fragrant leaves into a mug and poured steaming water over. With the warm cup in hand, he shuffled to the balcony and eased into a squat chair. He carefully kept from aggravating his knee as he settled, and once seated, inhaled the strong scent of the liquid. He held the breath for a moment, then released.

Brown eyes swept across the idyllic view of Meridian from this perfectly situated, private cabin home—a view many of the upper nobility would kill for.

Gods, but it was the worst.

Who had talked him into this? He stared balefully out at the gorgeous cityscape as steam drifted from his mug to caress his face. Not four weeks into his retirement and he was losing his mind. He didn't understand. Who took pleasure in this hollowness? What was a man with no mission to drive him forward? Why had he abandoned what little purpose remained?

Admittedly, he found the idea appealing in the abstract even now. Finally getting to rest. And he was far too bullheaded to let anyone *convince* him to do anything; closing up shop had been his own decision.

Still. *This* was what people aspired to in their old age? What they spent their lives pursuing? Peace and quiet in their twilight years?

Why?

For the millionth time, Rhek was discovering that every person, from king to peasant, was a blithering idiot. This had been a mistake. He would rather work himself to death than wither away in dreadful monotony.

The only reason he hadn't dragged himself back to his workshop already was because of how big of a deal he'd made of quitting. At least he hadn't dismantled his workshop entirely. Maybe even then, he'd known peace and quiet would never sit right with him, so he hadn't done anything he couldn't take back.

He had to survive at least a year. His pride demanded it. Any faster would be too mortifying, considering the sheer drama that had surrounded that event.

A year of retirement. He could manage it. He just had to suffer through.

He took a sip from his mug, and his nose wrinkled at the bitter taste.

He stood up, shuffled over, and poured the liquid over his balcony.

Who enjoys this horse dung?

"Good riddance."

He spat over the balcony to make his disdain clear, then sat with a huff, shoving the mug away.

Several moments passed as he stewed in annoyance, arms crossed.

Why was he in such a bad mood? And it was a particularly bad one; nobody would accuse Rhek Verontell of being a chipper person, but even his attitude wasn't this sour on average.

Dredging up an answer wasn't difficult. Last night, he'd gotten a response back from Leif. A simple three words, seemingly polite, but curt in context. '*No, thank you.*' The letter hadn't even been signed.

One apprentice, he could've chalked up to bad luck. All four shunning him… that made it clear he was the problem. That was the conclusion any rational man would make.

He knew he wasn't pleasant company. But he *was* a good teacher. Or… an effective one. There was a difference between those two things, and a rather substantial one.

"Bah. What do I care?"

He stood, too annoyed to sit and enjoy that vile sunrise for what felt like the millionth time. Though it had only been a few dozen. Had only a month

passed since he'd stormed out of the Guild with that rant of his?

He stalked to the kitchen and started the morning's chores early. Despite his wealth, he disliked people invading his personal space too much to hire a servant. Halfway through noisily putting away last night's dishes, a knock at the door interrupted his thoughts.

He would be ashamed to admit that excitement filled him. Thankfully, he was well-practiced with denial and stuffed that condemning emotion down. He wiped his hands and hurried to the door, his actions contradicting the grumbling under his breath.

That it might be a personal visit didn't so much as cross his mind. He didn't get those. He expected, and found, business on the other side of the threshold.

Stellan.

"What part of *retired* don't you understand?" Rhek snapped.

"Rhek! So great to see you," the aggravatingly tall—and implacably cheerful—human said. "Can I come in?"

"No."

The Leatherworking Guild's highest-ranking intermediary beamed with the unyielding congeniality only a man who'd spent his life working with difficult people could muster. "Outside is fine too. Lovely morning, isn't it?"

"*Retired*," he enunciated slowly. "That means no more jobs. I'm pretty sure I made that clear."

"Right, right," Stellan said smoothly. "You certainly did. Those circumstances notwithstanding, the Guild made the executive decision to come extend the offer. A particularly wealthy client requested you by name, and we thought you might be interested."

Despite his first instinct to slam the door in Stellan's face, Rhek studied him, eyes narrowing. "There's nothing *interesting* about making armor for some spoiled duke's son," he said, though his thoughts were rushing forward. 'Particularly wealthy'? For someone to even consider commissioning him, one of three Master Leatherworkers in the human kingdoms, gold spilling out of one's ears was the barest prerequisite. Stellan highlighting the client's wealth meant, even by his standards, the starting offer must be generous.

Rhek already had plenty of coin to go around, though. All Master craftsmen did. Or *should*, assuming they weren't idiots. High-rank

craftsmen were often guilty of bankrupting themselves through the purchases of ever-more-exotic materials. Past rank fifty, advancing nearly *required* buying ludicrously expensive materials… and the products resulting from those projects only sometimes made back their investments. Rhek himself had almost emptied his bank account on a few occasions, thanks to too many poorly chosen ventures in a row.

“It isn’t about the money,” Rhek said with a grunt, though he considered the Guild’s intermediary with a reluctantly appraising gaze.

Stellan’s smile grew. Perceptive man he was, he knew he’d caught Rhek’s attention. Or barring that, that Rhek was sniffing around the bait. He cursed himself. He should’ve made a bigger show of disinterest—that was the first rule of negotiation. Was it too late to slam the door in the other man’s face?

“Of course,” Stellan said. “I meant to imply no such thing. I should correct a misconception that I assume you’ve made, though. The client requested the final product to be as unassuming as possible. Something a silver-rank wouldn’t draw a second glance wearing. The level maximum is three hundred and eighty-five.”

Rhek paused.

Damn him, but that *was* interesting. More than interesting. When someone came to a Master Craftsman willing to dump a ludicrous amount of coin on a set of gear, the client never said ‘make it as bland as possible.’ The amount of jewels and other frippery he’d stitched into his work over the years made him nauseous, but commissions like those paid the bills, and experimental materials were expensive. So, he’d bitten his tongue and done the work, distasteful as he found it.

Then there was the matter of level. Three hundred and eighty? Who in the hells had enough coin to commission *him* for *silver-rank* gear? Generally, Master Craftsmen were hired for mithril-rank projects at the lowest, most often orichalcum. That way his outrageous prices made sense, since the gear might be used for a decade or two. Levels came slow at those heights.

A silver? No matter how excellently made, gear for a silver-ranker taking his career seriously would grow obsolete in a few years at most, sometimes months. Anyone who could afford a Master Craftsman could no doubt apprentice under an orichalcum, or at least purchase protection,

scrolls, consumables, and whatever other resources needed to rapidly and safely ascend the lower levels.

All of those thoughts sprinted through his head, and Stellan's smile grew as he watched Rhek make the obvious conclusions. "One more thing," the damnably smug man said. It was rare an intermediary entered negotiations with so many carrots to dangle; usually they had to fight for their life to get Rhek to accept a job. Stellan was clearly enjoying himself. "The client wants to collaborate."

Rhek's interest evaporated. "Bah. A leech?" Such requests weren't uncommon; there were few more efficient ways to rank up a collaborative than working with a craftsman far superior, and certain unscrupulous individuals used item commissions as a guise for setting up sessions with craftsmen who otherwise didn't collaborate.

Rhek could suffer through mentoring a guildmate. Dealing with a confused helper he would be working with for dozens of subsequent projects was bearable, but even that he'd never been fond of. Random collaborators for an outside commission? He would rather pluck his beard out one hair at a time.

And that ignored how a weak collaborator actively *harmed* the final product. Unlike most people, he took pride in his work. "Not happening. Only Experts and higher, you know that. Doesn't matter how much coin they're willing to throw at me."

Well, there was probably *some* number he would eventually say yes to, but it would take a ridiculous quantity, especially in his current mood.

He didn't even particularly enjoy settling for Experts, since that would mean working with someone a full tier below him, an adventurer with their collaborative rank in the 60s. But the gear would at least see a minor improvement for the headache.

"Not a problem," Stellan said easily. "The client assures me that the collaborator's rank will be higher than your own."

Rhek paused.

What?

For an adventurer to have a collaborative in the high Master range—upper 70s—would almost undoubtedly mean they were Titled. He was no novice to go squealing in excitement at the prospect of co-crafting with someone of considerable status, but those opportunities were few and far between even for him. Titled could often afford any craftsmen they desired,

and while Rhek was one of the highest-rank leatherworkers in the world, he wasn't *the* highest. Nor in the top three. Titled had better avenues to pursue if they wanted the best, and Titled *obviously* wanted the best. They lacked neither the coin nor the connections to procure such.

He had enough information now to piece together the puzzle. A Titled-rank adventurer had wandered into Meridian and wanted to commission the most available leatherworker a set of gear for their apprentice. Coin was no issue; it rarely was for Titled. Unlike the more common type of commission, this gear wasn't for a high-ranking noble's snotty scion to look stylish. It needed to be practical, and more intriguingly, subtle: something that wouldn't draw attention. Which could mean the Titled themself was adventuring incognito. Would it, even, be a level thousand-plus not recognized by any of the mortal kingdoms? Those were rare, but not unheard of. Or perhaps it was an even stranger situation. Meridian attracted all sorts, including wayward immortals.

Whatever the case, a Titled would no doubt be disgusted with anything less than an item quality of extraordinary. Maybe a masterwork. Which would be a formidable task even for him. He'd yet to attain that impressive feat once, and would consider it a crowning milestone when he did.

He eyed Stellan for a long moment, then reluctantly opened the door. "Come on in, then. Give me the details."

The bastard had the nerve to smirk as he strode inside, but Rhek was probably being uncharitable with that interpretation. Stellan was definitely enjoying himself, though.

"So? What's the starting offer?" Rhek grunted once they'd settled into seats in his kitchen. He didn't offer tea. He didn't want the man to linger. At least, that was what he told himself.

"Nine hundred gold. Any requests allowed, and all exotic materials provided."

He couldn't help the incredulity in his voice as he replied, "Nine orichalcum. *With* materials provided?" He'd expected a generous offer, but that went beyond generous.

"Indeed. And the client would prefer using their locally sourced parts, for resonance."

Resonance—a crafting term for how materials harvested off monsters and used to co-craft by that same adventurer improved the quality of the product. Not by a huge amount, but if the goal was the absolute best result,

then hand-collecting as many materials as possible was a common practice. That boded well for the client's mindset; this wasn't some throwaway project Rhek was being hired for, but something worth his time and effort.

"What's local to them?" Rhek asked.

"The client specified 'anywhere within the Central Kingdom.'" Stellan sounded mildly unsure, despite being the one to answer. "Apparently, travel is less difficult for them than most. I was assured that any request could be met."

This was getting more and more interesting. To the point of being bizarre, quite frankly. As much as he would enjoy the payout—nine hundred gold would have been a sizable sum even if the materials *hadn't* been provided—the real reason Rhek's pulse picked up was because of the opportunity he sensed. It wasn't every day he could send a Titled out on a fetch quest. And silver-rank gear or not, aiming for a masterwork-quality item would be immensely satisfying from a professional standpoint. He still had his pride, no matter if he had retired. And a masterwork might finally be within reach.

"*Any* request?" Rhek repeated, feeling greed glint in his eyes.

"The client insisted any and all resources, regardless of rarity or quantity, so long as they can be found within the Central Kingdom. Ultimate quality is their singular concern."

How utterly ridiculous. He'd never been given such free rein in his life. Did this person have any clue what they were doing? How rare certain materials could become, even for an adventurer with a Titled's means?

He found himself smiling for the first time in weeks.

"Well, then," he mused, leaning back and crossing his arms. All thoughts of turning down the job had left his mind. "I'll get a list made up right now."

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REAPING SHADES

With the outrageous list of materials Rhek gave to Stellan—a list he almost felt guilty for handing over—he had expected not to hear back for several weeks at least, except perhaps a revision insisting he be more reasonable with his demands. Five days at the very minimum. And yet it was later that same day that the Leatherworker's Guild contacted him. Apparently, the client, who he had learned some basic details about after accepting the commission, had already gathered the necessary resources and was heading to his workshop, wanting to complete the job without delays. Rhek had cleared his schedule—not that he had much of one these days—so he hurried out the door the moment he received the news.

Grumpily, though. Because half a day? He knew what that meant. The way the job had been sold to him was that while the gear would be low-rank, the client sought quality above all else. He'd assumed the majority of the materials—though not all, since that would be impossible—would be hand-harvested. It hadn't been more than six hours. He'd be surprised if she'd had time to gather *any* of the resources herself. Presumably, she had gone down the list and simply purchased everything.

Which would still be impressive, he would concede. Not just for the speed with which she'd managed it, but the rarity of some of those items. He wasn't sure whether some were even available in Meridian.

Thus, he doubted his material list had been fulfilled in full. If it hadn't, and the client had nevertheless dragged him out of his home to the workshop rather than submitted a revision, he would be justified in

canceling the commission, and would give the woman an earful for wasting his time. Not that Rhek did anything *but* waste his time these days. It was the principle of the matter.

The client was, he had been informed after accepting, the demonic noblewoman Nysari Keresi. The name seemed vaguely familiar, so the Keresi family was likely important, but not especially so, because it rang no bells in his head. The demon lands were one of the few places he hadn't called home at one point or another.

Despite his so-called 'retirement,' he'd been having someone stop by weekly to maintain his workshop. A damning indicator that even from the start, he'd never intended on abandoning his life's work. When he arrived at that familiar building situated in the Crafter's District, the demon woman was already standing outside, thankfully without attendants, an apprentice, or any other add-on nuisances. She was clearly scrolling through a system screen, pale finger lazily flicking up and down to navigate, though red eyes drifted to him well before he'd neared enough to alert a regular person. But that was normal; all Titled had freakish perceptiveness.

Rhek was never one to filter himself, so the first thing out of his mouth when he saw her was, "Well, you're a little runt of a thing, aren't you?"

Which was an idiotic way to address an unknown Titled for the first time, without knowing whether she was the sort to return such comments with brimstone and hellfire, but Rhek was old, and it was a gods-given right of the old to not care a whit what people thought. Though he'd been that way in his youth too. In any case, being splattered across the cobblestone by an overly touchy Titled sounded like an amusing way to end his four centuries.

Not really, though. He knew he should hold his tongue. He wasn't suicidal.

She didn't visibly react to his words, to his relief, and upon striding up he got a closer look at the woman.

He slammed to a stop.

Those pale features. The long white hair and curling black horns. The image took a moment to place, as a hundred years had passed since that memory—a long time, even for a dwarf. But he had laid eyes on a face just like hers once before. Nobody would forget seeing one of the most legendary figures of history in the flesh. And while this person wasn't *her*,

surely couldn't be *her* for any number of reasons, the resemblance was too uncanny for that fuzzy memory to have triggered falsely.

A powerful unknown Titled… one looking to keep a low profile… and a mage, by the dark robes she was wearing. His mouth worked soundlessly for a moment as he came to the obvious conclusion.

"The damn Sorceress had a *daughter?"*

The words bounced around the empty, secluded streets of the Craftsman's District his workshop was nestled in. The small demonic woman stared at him, not reacting to Rhek's accusation beyond a slight twitch of what he assumed was surprise.

They held each other's gazes for a long moment.

Finally she responded, voice cool and unaffected: "I'm not *that* short."

His mouth worked on instinct. "A dwarf is looking you in the damn eyes." Not actually, but he didn't have to crane his neck nearly as much as usual. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, you'd have to be daft to think short is an insult from a dwarf. You are what you are, and what you are is a runt."

The woman's eyes narrowed. It didn't take long for most people to find out the kind of person Rhek was. He said what he thought, and if that wasn't what others wanted to hear, he didn't see how that was his problem.

"What makes you think I'm the Sorceress's daughter?" she asked coolly.

"Saw her in the flesh, back when she was still making a name for herself." And by that, he meant back when she'd only killed *one* world-ending threat. "You look just like her." He snorted. "But even shorter."

Despite his words, his certainty grew weaker by the moment. He'd only seen the Sorceress from a distance. He'd only just reached Expert at the time. Hardly the sort of status that would have him rubbing shoulders with legends.

The woman met his gaze evenly. "You are mistaken. I am Nysari Keresi. You are Rhek Verontell? The leatherworker?"

"Master Leatherworker to you, brat."

He didn't respond *rudely*, because he didn't go out of his way to be abrasive. But Master Leatherworker was a title he'd worked his hands to the bone for over centuries to acquire, so a client better use it when addressing him for the first time—in the same way he'd have used her title, if she had

provided one. If she was going to drag him out of his retirement, she better show respect. He didn't care how important—or unimportant—she was.

"Master Leatherworker Verontell, then," the demon said, which raised his estimation of her, because most people, *especially* higher-rank adventurers, would have gotten all sorts of pissy about being challenged. But while she seemed annoyed, she accepted the reprimand without comment. Though it was difficult to tell for sure; the girl's inexpressiveness rivaled a statue's.

He grunted. "Come on in, then, Lady *Keresi*." His sarcastic tone made it clear what he thought of her cover story.

Why was the Sorceress's daughter masquerading as some foreign noble? He supposed the name *Vexaria* came with too much baggage. So fair enough.

More and more doubt trickled in, though. The realization had struck him like a thunderbolt and he'd been totally convinced, but it was a rather ridiculous conclusion to draw, no matter how strong the resemblance. People could look alike without being related, and a hundred years dulled the strongest memory.

At the same time, he'd never bought that the Sorceress had croaked. The woman who'd cut down all seven Cataclysms and lived to tell the tale? Even her allies could only claim six. She'd been seen alive after that final confrontation, then disappeared. Of course she hadn't tripped over a rock somewhere, hit her head, and died. When the Sorceress finally did pass, it would come with far more fanfare, likely with the cracking of the earth itself.

So obviously she was alive somewhere, lying low. Enjoying retirement. *And getting busy,* he thought, stealing an amused glance at his client while he undid the locks on his workshop's door. *Is this her only kid? Or are there a whole legion of mini-Sorceresses out there?*

Then again… if the Sorceress *had* lived… how could a woman who could uproot forests with a flick of her wrist just disappear? Moreover, there had been a number of smaller calamities left in the wake of the Cataclysms, and it seemed unlikely she would have let them run rampant. Even purging the dregs of those monsters had taken a bloody toll on the mortal kingdoms. For the Sorceress at the peak of her career, it would have been a triviality to squash the lingering remnants of the Maw's hordes, or

the Regent’s minions, or any of the other threats that had persisted past the Cataclysms’ ends.

That meant there was reason to believe she really had died. Magical experiment to bring back her teammates gone wrong, to name one grim-but-plausible theory.

In the end, he wasn’t sure what to think, but regardless, he had a commission to concern himself with. It didn’t matter who his client was—Sorceress’s daughter included.

Inside his workshop, familiar smells hit him like a sledgehammer: rich and earthy scents of tanned leather and sharp chemical tangs of liquors and dyes. Nostalgia washed over him, then annoyance, because he was *retired*, damn it. This project was going to massacre his resolve to stick it out at least a year. There was no way he could go back to sitting on his balcony in boredom after this.

His workshop was built for someone with a dwarf’s stature, though spacious enough to let those gangly humans navigate too. The demon was halfway between. He’d always found it awfully amusing that the world’s supreme magical talent had been packed into such a tiny frame, and her daughter had apparently gotten the even shorter end of that stick. The thought tickled him pink.

He walked over to a low-set table with the demon following behind. Sweeping a hand out, he said, “Alright. Show me. Hard to believe you got everything on that list in six hours, but I’ll give the Sorceress’s daughter the benefit of the doubt. Mind you, if you downgraded just one without approval, we’re done. Don’t care who you are. Might’ve let it pass if you went through proper revisions, but it’s the disrespect I won’t stand for. Thinking you know what can be substituted or not. You’re not the expert here; I am. I only accepted this commission because the project sounded promising. So. How much did you buy, and how much did you gather yourself?”

“All of it.”

Rhek’s nose wrinkled in disgust. It was the answer he’d expected, truth be told, because what else made sense? “Not saying it isn’t understandable,” he gritted out. “Plenty of work is done through purchased goods. But why did you bullshit your request then? You said you were going to harvest it. What game are you playing?”

The demon paused. “I *gathered* all of it,” she said, a hint of annoyance leaking into her cold voice. “I bought none. I did secure some upgrades while I had the opportunity, but I have the requested materials too.”

To emphasize her point, she pulled out an entire, intact pearlescent shell of a [Crystalback Goliabeetle] from her inventory. His eyes bulged. He’d seen maybe five of them in his life, and none *nearly* as undamaged or in such pristine condition.

It was ultimately a drop taken from a level four hundred monster, so its value was limited, but still… Crystalbacks were a *startlingly* rare variation of Goliabeetles, which were by *themselves* difficult monsters to find and kill. How had she harvested one so perfectly preserved in so little time?

He could’ve gotten over that shock, but items flowed out of her inventory in a stream. A full spindle of silk from a [Cobalt Mygalom]. [Owlbear] fat. Ash from a [Wyrmwood]. More and more, each item outrageously difficult to acquire, materials with which he’d worked only a handful of times in his considerable lifespan.

All leading to the crowning jewel that nearly had him choking on his spit.

Three. *Three*. [Unseen Reaping Shade] pelts.

“How?!” he demanded, for some reason outraged at the development. “I’ve seen two listings of those *ever,* both through private channels even you wouldn’t have had access to. How are there *three* sitting on this table?”

“They’re tricky to hunt,” the woman had the nerve to say in agreement.

“Tricky? *Tricky?* Stitching troll hide is ‘tricky,’ damn you! Finding, let alone *killing*, an Unseen Reaping Shade is next to *impossible*. I don’t care what level you are. They *stop existing* when you look at them, hear them, or sense them! With magic or otherwise!”

“Technically,” she said, “they decorporealize then teleport away. There’s a brief window where certain attacks still work. You just have to act fast.”

He sputtered. “Even if that’s true”—and it had to have been, since there were three pelts on his table and an [Inspect] skill could hardly lie to him —“they’re beyond rare. Even sightings are only reported a few times a year.”

To be fair, half the reason for that was because if you heard or saw an [Unseen Reaping Shade], you were about three seconds from disembowelment. They were nasty monsters, despite their low level.

“I’m familiar with the various hunting zones of the Central Kingdom,” the woman said. “And I also made use of divination spells.”

“‘Made use of divination spells,’” he repeated.

She offered no further explanation, so the two of them stared at each other.

He looked down at the grey-and-white pelts.

Well. He didn’t care how she’d gotten them. Crafting with new materials, especially rare materials—and heavens above, every item lying on his table was *rare* as a massive understatement—gave a huge experience boost. He was looking at maybe a full rank increase if this undertaking went well.

“You really hunted all of them yourself,” Rhek said flatly.

It wasn’t a question; he had skills to confirm how fresh materials were, and all three of the pelts had been harvested in the past several hours. The same with all of the other items on the table. It was unbelievable. He would have thought someone had arranged an elaborate prank, but not only did he not have anyone in his life who would bother, nobody short of an upper-Titled could have managed this. And even *then* he didn’t understand how.

His growing doubts about whether this was actually the Sorceress’s daughter faded to near nothingness. Who else could have done this?

“All right. Whatever. Good. This is… acceptable.” Even he felt ridiculous saying that. “More than acceptable,” he conceded. “I’m impressed. We’ll be able to make something great with this. A full set of mage’s gear, defense focus, you said?”

“Yes, please.”

Mages usually went to tailors, but nothing stopped one from wearing heavier armor. The only reason not to was that the stat bonuses and effect manifestations usually didn’t shake out in the best ways for them. The frequency of magic-type materials arrayed in front of him would stack the odds, but to some extent crafting was a gamble, and while he could guarantee *durable* gear, whether the armor would come out with effects suited for a mage would be at the mercy of the gods.

“What rank are you?” he asked. “In your collaborative. ‘Higher than me’ was all I got. High Master, or Grandmaster?”

Strangely, the woman hesitated at the question.

“Above eighty,” she said.

He narrowed his eyes, because the response was suspiciously vague. But prying for the specifics of one's class, skills, levels, or rank was bad form. No harm in asking, yet definitely rude to insist. And while Rhek didn't mind being rude, he did so only in specific ways.

In the end, she was the client, so if she was lying about her presence being a boon to the project, he was going to be paid the same either way. Earlier, he might have threatened to drop the project because a degraded product wouldn't be worth his time… but with some of the rarest materials he'd ever seen sitting on his table, he would cede the point. Perhaps even try for slightly more politeness than normal.

Assuming she was telling the truth, she was Grandmaster in her leatherworking collaborative. That would simplify things. He'd only ever worked with one person of similar rank. That interaction had turned a project that should have taken a week into one that took an afternoon. Where ranks in proper disciplines gave skills for identification, refinement, guidance, enhancement, and so on, collaborative ranks usually focused on speeding processes up or granting automatic talents to the user—talents that took *real* crafters years to develop.

"Above rank eighty," he echoed. "We'll see about that."

It would be obvious rather quickly. Not that he was actually doubting her. A Titled mage who had somehow gathered all of these resources in a handful of hours, who he had a strong suspicion was the Sorceress's daughter? Grandmaster in a collaborative skill would hardly be a surprise. Though leatherworking was a strange discipline for a mage to focus on. She was even wearing robes herself, a tailor's product.

Despite his interest, he wasted no further time. His fingers itched to get started. He was about to make something *incredible*.

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SINEW-STITCHER

The project began in earnest.

Rhek barked commands, and to his surprise, the Sorceress's daughter obeyed without question—once more raising his estimation of her. Climbing the hierarchy had meant Rhek had needed to work with gigantic egos more and more commonly over his final years in business. Someone who would just *listen* for once was a breath of fresh air.

He discovered quickly that the woman had not lied about her rank. Her presence trivialized several steps of the process. Rhek assigned her to the tanning liquors first, since that normally took days of boiling and most collaborators had skills to speed it up. While she reduced the [Wyrmwood Ash] into a potent concentrate, he began the delicate work on the [Unseen Reaping Shade] pelts. By the time he'd finished with the fleshing knife, several liquors of varying strength were ready. Shaking his head in amusement, he brought the hides over and submerged them in the first vat. Another activation of the demon's skills reduced the tedious process to minutes, the pelts darkening before his eyes. He moved them to the second, and they tanned with similar speed.

While they soaked, he had Nysari pulverize the [Crystalback Goliabeetle] shell into a shimmering dust and render the [Owlbear] fat into oil. He took the leather and cut the patterns for the armor, then began conditioning them. The rigid pieces, he submerged into a hot wax bath mixed with the beetle dust and a half-dozen other materials he'd helped Nysari prepare.

And so on and so on. When the hides were ready for stitching, the woman laid enchantments into them. That process could be performed before or after the item's formation, though doing so beforehand influenced the armor's quality, which made it smart to do when the enchanter was higher-ranked than the main craftsman. That hadn't happened often to him, since Rhek was a Master Leatherworker. A woman of many talents, this mage.

Even with a Grandmaster collaborator aiding him, leatherworking could be painstaking work. And nerve-wracking. It had been a long time since Rhek had gotten his hands on a project this promising, and he didn't want to squander the opportunity. He had a goal today. He always tried to make the best product he could—as any craftsman worth their salt should—but this project especially he put every ounce of his concentration into every step of the process.

Because he wanted a masterwork.

Rhek had devoted himself to leatherworking for many years. For a Master-tier craftsman, a normal quality result meant he'd messed something up; getting one would decimate his mood for the rest of the week, though it did happen on occasion. Good was his baseline, his worse-than-average but not embarrassing outcome. Superior, he would grunt and be happy with. Extraordinary crafts rolled around a few times a year, typically for the projects commissioned by orichalcums with self-harvested materials. Those were the undertakings he put the most blood and sweat into.

But he had never managed a masterwork. Of the four Titled he'd worked with, each collaboration had yielded an extraordinary. They'd been pleased, because even that was a difficult-to-attain quality for a craftsman in the 70s.

There was a single tier higher than masterwork, but transcendent was reserved for Grandmaster and Legendary craftsmen—mostly the latter. Not every profession even had a legendary craftsman. Those who reached that height had names known throughout the world, a more prestigious achievement than even a Title, if less glamorized. Grandmasters were *more* common, but still vanishingly rare.

Rhek wanted a masterwork under his belt. Desperately. And this was his best chance in decades, with a Grandmaster collaborator next to him and a fully self-harvested material lined up with the rarest requests he'd thought

to make—and then even more outrageous materials thrown in as an apparent afterthought.

After a grueling two hours—which was no time at all to craft armor from scratch—he stitched the last lines of dark cobalt silk into the cuirass, finishing the first of four pieces of gear he had planned. He released a breath and stepped back.

Done.

He might have managed it this time. He hadn't faltered once; several weeks of retirement hadn't made his hands or mind clumsy. The relaxation might have done him good, in fact.

A masterwork? Maybe. He waited with bated breath for the item to recognize its completion. It always took a few seconds after the last stitch for it to realize it was whole.

In the end, the gods themselves were who judged the quality and worthiness of a piece, bestowing blessings unto the work by objective measure. Whether Rhek thought he'd done a good job mattered not a whit. Indeed, he remembered a number of instances where he'd smugly thought he'd worked a miracle, only for his efforts to be decried a moment later as merely 'good' if not worse. And to his disgruntlement, when he'd inspected those items with a keener eye, he *had* found flaws. The judgment of the gods was absolute.

He felt the cuirass settle into its final form. He hesitated, afraid to check. Plowing forward anyway, he activated a skill—that basic one even children had access to.

[Inspect].

Heartguard of the Fleeting Shade

Transcendent

Lv. 385

Description

A cuirass crafted from the white-gray hide of an Unseen Reaping Shade.

[Wyrmwood Purification]

[Effortless Weaving]

[Enchantment: Fount of Mana VI]
[Enchantment: Sorcerous Might IX]
[Enchantment: Aegis X]
[Enchantment: Arcanic Deflection V]

Rhek was an old man. Even fellow dwarves would say he'd trudged well past his golden years. For one of the long-lived races to go gray in the beard was a considerable feat. He wasn't *quite* there—merely some wisps of ash hidden in the black—but that was a rare sight itself.

He'd been through a lot and had seen a lot in his centuries of life. Especially as a craftsman who'd served in seven guilds across the dwarven enclaves, the human kingdoms, and at one point an elvish city. He'd been commissioned by four Titled. More than half of all known leatherworking materials had passed under his hands to transform into gear that had likely gone on to save its wearer's life. He'd almost died four times, only three of them his fault. Married twice, neither lasting more than a year.

After everything he'd been through, he was a hard man to shock. Even the possibility he was working with the Sorceress's daughter hadn't fazed him much. A jolt to the system, maybe, but not something to leave him slack-jawed.

This?

This ridiculous item?

He knew what should come out of a set of materials. Not the exact details, since crafting was always a dice throw. But a ballpark. A low and a high.

This was tossing a six-sided die and getting a seven.

Nonsensical.

"Hm," the demon next to him said. "Not terrible. Maybe I should've pushed the enchantments harder."

Not… terrible?

A vein bulged in his forehead at the words. *Not terrible*. A *transcendent*-quality item described in that manner fell a few hairs short of blasphemy. He was offended on a moral level.

Transcendent.

He’d skipped over his first masterwork and gone straight to transcendent. How was that possible? How? Even a masterwork was something a Master-tier crafter dreamed of. Grandmasters only managed a few of them in their lifetime, from what he understood.

He’d done a good job—he’d known that before [Inspecting] the item. An excellent job. But… no. He couldn’t credit himself for this. He wasn’t delusional enough to claim the miracle in front of him. His eyes drifted to the bottommost lines on the screen displaying the item’s identification.

“You fit four enchantments on it,” he said dumbly.

“I would have preferred five but didn’t want to risk failure,” the demon said idly. “This is just temporary gear, so it doesn’t matter much.”

A soft wheeze rattled out of his chest—his pride leaving his husk of a body.

She wasn’t impressed. This was an *acceptable* result. For *temporary gear.* A masterwork would surely have left her disappointed.

…four enchantments had been her *safe* standard? Not her ambitious one?

Like most armor crafters, he had worked with enchanters on plenty of occasions. He knew roughly what their capabilities were. The number of enchantments depended on the strength of each effect, though no matter what, putting in more than three was outrageously difficult.

And the enchantments themselves. Fount of Mana VI? Sorcerous Might IX? Aegis X?

Not *one* of those enchantments should have fit on level 385 gear. Sorcerous Might of the ninth tier belonged on mithril gear at the very minimum, as the *sole* enchantment.

And there were four enchantments of that quality! On silver-rank gear! His brain struggled to process what he was seeing.

The realization hit him like a punch to the gut.

“You aren’t the Sorceress’s daughter.”

Maybe his subconscious had been churning over that fact for a while now, but he’d been absorbed in the project. Like any craftsman of considerable rank, when he was occupied, only his work existed. Now that he had a moment to think, the oddities added up to form a coherent picture.

The woman paused. “I said as much.” She seemed to realize his implication. Her lips pursed. “I am Nysari Keresi,” she continued, monotone. Totally unconvincing.

He stared at her.

She stared at him.

She turned away. “Level three hundred and eighty-five,” she said. “Right on target. Well done gauging the materials. That can be tricky. It would have been unfortunate if we went too high.”

He kept staring at her.

“We have three more pieces to finish,” she said. “Vambraces, greaves, and boots. Shall we?”

He was co-crafting with the heavens’-damned Sorceress herself.

“Don’t you have a vault with half the world’s treasures?” he asked. “Why not grab something from there? Why bother crafting anything at all?”

Nysari—*Vivisari*—sighed and gave up on the flimsy lie. “Circumstances prevent it. I wanted gear focused on defense. Most traditional mage equipment aims for sorcerous bonuses and minimal physical guards. And it’s a gift as much as anything, so I want to make it from scratch.”

All perfectly fine reasoning, he supposed, but he still couldn’t believe it.

The *Sorceress* was standing in his workshop.

It had been a long time since he’d felt self-conscious about his ability. He thought he’d left insecurity behind entirely, considering the heights he’d climbed to. But here was a woman who had co-crafted with Rowena the Sinew-Stitcher herself. The woman who had made the gear the Party of Heroes had ridden into their final battle and saved the world with.

Rhek felt sick. He’d been *grumbling* about dealing with a collaborator. Had thought it would be a headache—an irritation to get through, because co-crafters were so often clueless. And frankly, she had been a bit confused at times too; all of them were. Collaborators didn't spend decades honing skills related to the discipline.

But here? He had no doubt *he’d* been the one to look like a fumbling novice. The Sorceress had spent her golden years supplying and assisting craftsmen he could never dream of matching, even with a millennium to catch up.

He swallowed.

“Let’s get to the rest,” he grunted.

The Sorceress nodded, unaware of his mental turmoil. He thanked the heavens that when he returned to his task, his hands didn’t shake. It seemed the centuries had driven that foible away no matter the circumstances. He

was keenly aware of her attention now, though, in a way he never had been for a client. Having his skill judged by the most powerful living mortal—maybe *individual*—in the world… now there was something to test a man's mettle. If that couldn't make him falter, nothing could.

He was somehow both utterly floored and completely unsurprised when the vambraces, greaves, and boots finalized with equally absurd results. Three more transcendental items. Two effects each, and between three and four enchantments.

But of course that was the case when he was crafting with a woman who had collaborative leatherworking in the nineties. Maybe high nineties. If anyone living could reach that rank, it would be the Sorceress. Perhaps another member of the Party of Heroes, one who'd worn medium armor, might have matched or even surpassed her, but they were long gone.

With the enchantments that had been laid into each piece, he'd have been more surprised if the gods *didn't* recognize the armor as the highest possible quality. Transcendent. By literal definition, that was what this armor was.

Rhek came to the horrible realization that he'd just been present in the workshop as a warm body. He didn't matter. *Any* leatherworker would have been suitable to this task. The Sorceress herself was the driving influence on the item's quality. And she had requested Rhek because why not? He'd been available. But she wouldn't have minded if he'd declined. It wouldn't have mattered much; someone else would have done just fine too.

He'd never felt so humbled in his life.

If nothing else, he supposed he'd crafted for the Sorceress herself and she hadn't come away disappointed. On the other hand, she certainly didn't seem impressed. He couldn't blame her. His hands surely looked like they were clumsy blocks of steel next to the Sinew-Stitcher's.

Following the completion of all four pieces, next came the grading process. Testing the armor for its physical and magical durability. Rhek would always expect his work to hold against spells and attacks fifty levels higher than the requirement listed on the item description, perhaps as much as a full hundred. Yet he watched numbly as the usual tests were completely rebuffed. Four fifty. Five hundred. Six hundred. Only at six hundred and fifty—*mithril rank*—did the gear start showing signs of stress.

Silver-rank armor as durable as mithril-rank. How many times today was he going to have his worldview shattered? He hadn't known that was

possible. It shouldn't *be* possible.

"Good," the Sorceress said, appraising the final result of the four pieces of matching gear. "A little more distinctive than I'd hoped for, appearance-wise, but I asked for the Reaping Shade pelts, so that's my fault. You did a good job keeping them from standing out too much." She nodded. "Payment, then."

She pulled out a pouch from her inventory and counted out coins. A moment later, she passed over nine green bits of metal. He stared at them.

Nine orichalcum. Hardly the largest sum he'd held at one time, but dealing with coin in those quantities usually meant he was purchasing rare Titled-rank materials—of which he would make only a fraction of the project's total cost in profit yet come away quite a bit wealthier.

But the materials had been provided for this project. Here was nearly a starmetal for an afternoon's work.

"Thank you for your time and for helping me on short notice," she said. "I need to get going. I would appreciate it if you kept silent about… your theories concerning me."

The Sorceress, he had discovered, was strangely polite.

He managed to return a weak reassurance that he wouldn't go blathering about her presence. Not that anyone would believe him, even the Guild. Once she'd left, he stared at the closed doors she had stridden through for several minutes. Maybe longer.

He wondered if he'd dreamt the whole thing. A glance at the leftover materials scattered throughout the room—their combined values likely surpassing the coins clenched in his fist—told him he definitely hadn't.

"The heavens'-damned Sorceress," he muttered.

He looked at the coins in his open palm.

Today, he decided, was a good day to start drinking again.

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MISINTERPRETING

Saffra had traced this arrangement of runes so many times that she was sick of it. She'd be happy if she could go the rest of her life without sketching that sequence a single instance more.

And never mind trying to manifest that design into reality. [Scorchlance] was complicated even on a basic level. She would struggle to paint it with ink on paper. Doing so with the unwieldy, chaotic force that was mana was an exercise to induce madness.

But she'd been practicing relentlessly these past few days. Even more so than usual. Part of the reason she'd performed better than average at the Institute was because she *liked* training. Not for the act itself, necessarily. As much as the end result inspired awe—pulling forth great gouts of flame from nothingness—magic could be frustrating enough to make her want to rip her hair out. No, she liked training because it occupied her mind. She didn't like sitting alone with her thoughts most days, so that frustration was, in a way, a salve. One she applied often.

Especially these past few days. Being back in Meridian had dredged up all sorts of unpleasant memories. She'd thought she'd gotten over what had happened at the Institute, and with Isabella. But no. Never mind that she hadn't stepped foot anywhere near the Institute; simply being in the city had brought back that bone-deep dread from those first few days after her expulsion. Of all the places in the world, why had Lady Vivi's business taken her here?

With the sort of razor focus granted only from the agony of a thousand failed attempts, she painted the eleventh rune… the twelfth… the twentieth… until the last glowing arcane symbol of [Scorchlance] formed ahead of her, and a shoddy—but stable—imitation of Lady Vivi's spell shone in the air.

And didn't destabilize?

She froze, wand pointed at the spellcircle.

She'd gotten it? Just like that?

But that was how most first incantations came about. Getting closer and closer until eventually, an attempt crawled over that invisible line that determined it was 'good enough,' and the spell finally obeyed.

Jolting out of her shock, she incanted—before the spell fizzled away—"[Scorchlance]."

A small sun ignited in the center of the spellcircle then hurled forward, hues of red and orange swirling and expanding into the shape of a spear. Launched with the speed of an arrow, when [Scorchlance] met the gold-rank training dummy, it burrowed into the blocky wooden torso and tore through reinforced wood before detonating. A gigantic fireball engulfed the dummy, Saffra's shield flaring in response even twenty feet away.

She stared wide-eyed at the resulting carnage. The training dummy's chest had all but blown apart. Would its self-repair enchantments even work after that? But yes—she saw that the magical dummy was thankfully repairing and the flames slowly quenching, so she hadn't ruined the expensive practice equipment.

That had been a *gold-rank* dummy. Rated for level 450. A single [Scorchlance] had nearly blown it apart? She'd expected the spell to be strong, but that strong?

A smile slowly spread across her face.

"Ha!" She jabbed her wand in the dummy's direction. "Only took two million tries! It wasn't even hard! Coulda done it in my sleep!"

"Well done," a familiar voice intoned.

Saffra didn't scream, because that would have been way too embarrassing of a reaction. And she definitely didn't jump two feet in the air and spin to face the intruder while backpedaling in a panic, wand raised defensively.

It was, of course, Lady Vivi. She had raised both hands, an obvious sign of apology, even if her smooth face and bored red eyes didn't mirror the

gesture.

“I didn’t mean to startle.”

“You didn’t startle me!” Saffra’s slamming heart begged to differ, but who cared what it had to say? “Who sneaks up on people like that! What’s *wrong* with you?!”

It was insane for someone as unbelievably lucky as her to speak so disrespectfully to her master, but Saffra had never been able to control her mouth when her emotions ran hot.

“I didn’t want to break your concentration,” Lady Vivi responded evenly. “It was shaping up as a promising attempt.” She nodded at the already-mostly-repaired dummy. “And you got it. That was your first success, I take it?”

At the praise, Saffra swallowed and looked away. “It’s about time,” she muttered. “Only took me three times as long as it should’ve.”

A short pause. “It’s supposed to be difficult. I think you picked it up quickly.”

Saffra scoffed. “I bet *you* were casting spells like that when you could barely walk.”

The retort wasn’t fair. She knew her mentor was just trying to be encouraging, and Saffra barely deserved having a teacher of this level at all. So why was she being difficult?

“These things come at different paces for everyone,” Lady Vivi said after a moment of silence.

“I guess,” Saffra mumbled, managing to avoid digging her heels in about it. But as much as she knew she was being annoying, she also knew she was right. Someone who had reached level nineteen hundred… who was probably *draconic royalty*… had surely never struggled with magic as basic as tier four.

A week ago, she’d hardly have considered tier four spells as supreme magic worthy of an archmage, but she would’ve patted herself on the back for adding another to her grimoire, at least. Now it felt distinctly unimpressive. Her view on magic had been seriously warped these past several days. Watching someone erase a Titled-rank monster with a single spell… how *couldn’t* she see the world differently after that?

“Besides, the only reason I learned it as fast as I did was because you held my hand through the whole process.”

“That’s how teaching is supposed to work.”

Which was an annoyingly fair response. “I guess.”

After another short pause, Vivi said, “You had breakfast yet? I came down and couldn’t find you. I had to ask Tilly where you went.”

“I ate.” Not much, but she *had* nibbled at the corner of some toast Missus Tilly had offered. So it wasn’t a lie. “Didn’t sleep great,” she added in explanation, since that was the implicit question.

Vivi didn’t ask *why* she hadn’t slept well, or try to pry at all, which was something Saffra really appreciated. Honestly, this whole apprenticeship would’ve been a dream if not for how she had ended up in Meridian, and thus around all the complications she’d try to leave behind. Saffra had enjoyed seeing Missus Tilly again, and Will and Rose might finish whatever mission they were out on in time for her to see them too, but other than that, being in this city made her… anxious. She couldn’t shake the feeling Fate was out to screw her. That she would somehow be thrown into the warpath of a Caldimore or one of their cronies. If not the Duke himself. Or the High King. Because why not? That was her luck. It was why she’d been sticking to the inn and refusing to go out. She’d learned her lesson; if she provided the slightest opening, Fate would take it.

She pushed the malaise away. “Any plans today?” Saffra asked.

“I handled most of what I needed to. I still have a few things to deal with, but I’m waiting for certain arrangements to be made. So I’m free now.”

Saffra didn’t ask what had been occupying her time. If a person spoke in generalities like that, it was because they didn’t want to be specific. It annoyed her how many people couldn’t pick up on that.

“Since you were getting close with [Scorchlance] during last night’s lessons,” Vivi continued, “I was going to help with your first invocation this morning, then take you hunting. But it seems you’ve managed the first part yourself.” She nodded toward the fully repaired dummy. “Again, well done. [Scorchlance] will be a significant upgrade over your previous standard attack spell.”

Saffra snorted. “That’s putting it lightly.” Her amazement over the spell’s efficacy had been cut short thanks to Vivi’s intrusion, but the woman was right; Saffra had been working tirelessly to get [Scorchlance] to manifest, and the result had been every ounce what she’d hoped for. Even a low-gold training dummy hadn’t stood a chance against the spell, being blown nearly to pieces with one cast. That was insane.

A warm feeling filled her. Not too shabby. Magic had always been something she'd taken pride in. There was something deeply comforting in having concrete goals to work toward: seeing her level go up, adding a spell to her grimoire, reaching a new tier of magic. Simple and uncomplicated, unlike so many other things. And casting [Scorchlance] in a few days, even if she only had her teacher to thank for it, was a solid pace for a fourth-tier spell when she hadn't even hit level four hundred, the normal benchmark for mages to start picking those up.

It would've taken Isabella half the time, a voice in her head sourly reminded her.

The good mood faded.

"Hunting where?" Saffra asked, and even she heard how her voice had turned dull. She scolded herself. Her attitude, at least, she needed to keep a better hold on. She was already on thin ice. Being any more of the massive headache than she'd already been would shorten the tenuous apprenticeship.

Like usual, those red eyes watched her passively, and Saffra knew Vivi had read the shift in mood. Lady Vivi might be clumsy sometimes—or more likely, she didn't *care* to be tactful, because what need did a level nineteen hundred have for tact?—but she wasn't clueless. With how obvious Saffra was being, anyone could've identified the mood swing. Which only further soured her disposition.

"I have a hunting ground in mind. Somewhere [Scorchlance] will be particularly effective. Should make for quick progress. While the fundamentals are important, levels are nothing to ignore."

That was a given. There were things a mage simply couldn't *do* at a given level. The same way a swordsman of a certain level could only move so fast or strike with so much force, a mage's mana pool—and their control of their mana—were gated by their stats. The best of the best, the prodigies, could do more with less, but even a Sword Saint's disciple would never win against someone four hundred levels their superior.

At the mention of levels, her mind of course went to that earth-shattering revelation from last morning. Her *mentor's* level.

Saffra's heart started to beat faster. "Um. I should probably tell you something," she said, feeling immensely awkward—and a bit scared, to be honest. She should've brought the topic up the same day she had learned about it, that same *morning*, but she hadn't. She'd been too overwhelmed.

Was still overwhelmed. She had done her best not to think about who her mentor was, because it broke her brain every time she did. She took a breath and finished: “The apprenticeship went through.”

“That’s a good thing, yes?”

The wind went out of Saffra’s sails. Because she could tell that Vivi didn’t know what she meant. “Y-yes, that’s good. For me. But also…?”

Didn’t Lady Vivi know what she was getting at?

Understanding hit her like a lightning bolt. Lady Vivi didn’t *realize* that the apprenticeship status had given Saffra a rough idea of her level. Possibly because of the memory problems. That she’d made clear to Saffra. And was relying on her to patch over where necessary. The only reason Saffra had been offered an apprenticeship in the first place.

So, not only had Saffra failed her in that regard… was Lady Vivi’s level supposed to be a secret? Would she be upset Saffra had learned it? And in turn, learned what her identity must be? Because only an ancient immortal could have reached that pinnacle of power. That narrowed down who—and what—Lady Vivi could be rather massively.

She swallowed and finished speaking. Her mentor deserved honesty. She already felt guilty for not being forthright about her situation with the Caldimores.

“But also, that means I know what your level is. Roughly.”

Lady Vivi paused. “You do?”

“I—I didn’t try to hide it,” Saffra said, panicking and trying to defend herself. “Or trick you.” Lady Vivi wasn’t an easy person to read, but Saffra knew how to surmise the obvious. “I didn’t know that you wouldn’t know. But maybe I should’ve assumed. S-sorry.”

Lady Vivi studied her. Saffra really wished the woman’s face wasn’t always so inexpressive. Anxiously, she waited for a response.

“I suppose I should have guessed that it worked that way,” Lady Vivi sighed. “How else would it? Hm. What did it tell you? How specific was it?”

“…that you’re fifteen hundred levels higher than me,” Saffra mumbled. “I didn’t even know the apprenticeship bonus went *up* to twelve. I kind of assumed it stopped at a thousand levels—tier ten. That was the highest I’ve heard about.” Since that was what archmage apprenticeships sometimes were.

Obviously *she* didn't know how apprenticeships of an even higher tier worked. She doubted most noble families did either. Hiring a sufficiently skilled adventurer with coin, even orichalcum-rank, wasn't unheard of, but Titled? Titled were rare and capable enough that coin—unless it was a truly, *truly* ludicrous amount—couldn't buy their loyalty. They chose their apprentices for reasons specific to them. A Titled had no need to be a sellsword. Much less the *stronger* Titled, the ones capable of giving a 1250-level-difference apprenticeship or higher.

"Fifteen hundred?" Vivi asked, a small frown on her lips.

"I won't tell anyone, of course!" Saffra hurried to assure her. "I know it's a big deal for you to be here. You… you can trust me."

Vivi stared at her.

"Your homeland has *really* strict rules about coming to the mortal lands," Saffra explained. "Even I know that. I won't bring it up again. I just wanted to tell you I know."

Though, would a dragon princess have special privileges? Or the opposite? Maybe it would be more of a scandal for someone of her status to break her kind's enforced isolation. Maybe her being in the mortal lands would draw the wrath of the Dragon King himself. Saffra could see it going either way. Obviously, she had no idea what dragon culture was like.

She wasn't sure why Lady Vivi kept staring at her. She shifted uncomfortably.

Vivi abruptly summoned her staff and bonked her on the head.

"W-what?" Saffra asked, startled, rubbing the spot. What had prompted *that?*

Instead of answering, her mentor sighed. "Stop making ridiculous assumptions about me."

After a moment of confusion, Saffra understood and nodded rapidly. Of course. It was only natural that Lady Vivi wanted this topic dropped and would pretend Saffra had gotten something wrong. It was a massive deal for a dragon to be outside of the Sky-Pillar Range. Bringing it up in general had probably been a bad idea. Someone might have been listening in, for all she knew—though she doubted Lady Vivi would be caught unaware like that.

Lady Vivi eyed her a moment longer, then sighed. "You're misinterpreting things. But maybe that's for the best. I'll explain in a few weeks, once we've known each other longer."

Saffra’s brow furrowed in confusion. The words didn’t fit with her understanding of the situation, yet Lady Vivi was moving on before she could puzzle over it.

“Come on, then. Let’s go hunting.” The woman held out a hand. “It shouldn’t take long to reach our destination. It’s not far from Prismarche.”

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GIFTS

Vivi had [Blinked] Saffra around a few times now, so the girl had developed some resilience to spatially induced nausea. Nevertheless, [Greater Warp] was an order of magnitude more powerful, so when the two of them popped into existence atop Prismarche's wall, her tail dropped to the floor and she went pale in the face.

"That's *really* unpleasant," she groaned, a hand shooting up to press against her stomach. After a few seconds of breathing deeply, she shook herself, and her color returned.

Her gaze drifted across the pine forest on the other side of the city's perimeter, eyes widening at what she saw. "A warp spell. That's how you got back so fast for the Convoy, isn't it?"

"It is."

Saffra didn't seem surprised. She knew the extent of Vivi's abilities in a general sense by now and even had an approximation of her level. Kind of.

"It took me two *months* to get to Prismarche," Saffra muttered. She sounded genuinely irritated, though not at Vivi. "Must be nice to snap your fingers and cross the continent."

"It certainly is convenient," she agreed. She couldn't imagine spending months traveling between cities. Her modern self was spoiled by planes and cars, and teleportation spells were a big step up from even that.

"Why didn't you use one to get to Meridian?" Saffra asked.

"Warping requires spatial anchors. The ones I'd placed in Meridian had expired."

“Oh. How long do they last?”

“A while,” Vivi said, querying that vast mental repository of magical knowledge. “They degrade faster in areas of high atmospheric mana. In most of the human kingdoms, they’ll last several decades.”

“Can they be renewed? Did you forget to?”

Saffra was only asking out of earnest interest, Vivi could tell. Who wouldn’t be fascinated by super-high-tier magic? She would have been disappointed if her apprentice *hadn’t* asked questions.

“More or less,” Vivi said, keeping it vague. She hadn’t *forgotten* to renew her anchors—she’d arrived in this world many decades after they’d presumably expired naturally.

At the answer, Saffra seemed to realize she was asking questions maybe she shouldn’t, though Vivi hadn’t minded. Saffra reined herself in, and green eyes turned back out to the pine forests. “We’re here for ice monsters,” she guessed. “Since those are weak to fire. You’re going to take me over the Granite Spines?”

“That’s the plan.” Vivi supposed it wasn’t an impressive deduction, but she gave the girl credit for figuring it out so quickly. “I know a hunting ground dense with ice elementals, ones that’ll be especially weak to [Scorchlance] because of the impact factor. Brittle, and weak to heat.”

“Sounds… fun,” Saffra said slowly. A shiver went through the girl, and she grabbed her arms and rubbed them. “Took me ages to get used to the cold, but apparently it goes away the moment you leave.”

Vivi pointed her staff. “[Aura of the Ember Giant].”

“Wasn’t asking for help…” Saffra mumbled, looking away. “I was fine.”

Vivi didn’t comment. “[Farsight].” After scanning the streets and picking her destination, she held a hand out. Saffra reflexively put her own in it. “[Blink].”

They appeared in an alleyway. Vivi strode out, and Saffra hurried to follow.

“Order something,” Vivi told her, fishing out a silver coin. A fried-food snack stall stood in front of them. She remembered it from the festival and had tracked it down. The festival *was* still ongoing, though calming as the week’s conclusion approached. “I have something I need to do. Shouldn’t be more than five minutes. Ten at the most.”

Unsurprisingly, Saffra refused Vivi's meager offering, pulling out her own coin purse and plucking out payment instead. "Okay. Good luck."

Vivi suppressed a sigh at the implicit refusal and put the silver coin away. "Be right back," she told the girl.

She was avoiding putting tracking spells on people she didn't have a strong reason to suspect of wrongdoing, so she had no easy way to find Archmage Aeris or Tatiana. Thankfully, Aeris was a wise man, and—knowing Vivi had promised to come find him today yet they hadn't arranged a meeting point—had erected a beacon of mana. She wondered what other mages nearby thought of it… if they could even sense it. It was a rather subtle thing, though she had spotted it immediately, even from the city's walls.

She found him inside an inn, hunched over a table, a mess of parchments sprawled out. Tatiana sat across from him, nose in a textbook. With the way the two were sitting, Tatiana saw her first, glancing up and doing a double-take when she recognized Vivi. She jumped to her feet.

"Lady V—m-my lady," she hastily corrected herself. Vivi *had* asked to keep her presence a secret.

"Vivi is fine," she told the girl as she closed the distance. Aeris had turned in his seat and made to rise, but she gestured for them to both sit. "Thanks for the signal," she told the archmage. "I didn't think to set up a meeting point."

"I'm pleased this old man's foresight aided you," Aeris said with a smile. "I imagine you are a busy woman, so I find no fault in the hasty departure." He cleared his throat. "I fear our mutual oversight inconvenienced my apprentice, though. She's been missing classes."

Vivi paused. That thought hadn't so much as crossed her mind. Her eyes drifted to Tatiana, who was already waving her hands in a panicked negation.

"My apologies," Vivi told her.

"I-it's no problem! Of course it isn't!" She glared at Aeris for putting her in this situation, then hastily returned to effusing: "Really, I don't know why he brought it up!"

Aeris chuckled. "No man or woman of any status should be above admitting an honest mistake." He nodded at Vivi. "It's time to return?"

"If you want."

He hummed. “To be honest, I’m not pleased with the progress I’ve made.” He patted Vivi’s closed notebook. “If it’s no trouble, I think it’s best I continue my studies. I’ve grasped so little. Tatiana, however, does need to return to her classes, if you could be so kind. I’ve given her instructions on how to deal with my absence as well. I doubt anyone’s noticed, but better to be safe.”

“Of course. I’ll check back each morning until you’re ready?” She looked at Tatiana. “You have everything you need?”

“Um.” Tatiana’s eyes flitted around the table, and she hurried to scoop up her textbook and other miscellaneous supplies strewn about. “Yes. Yes, I’m ready.”

“Follow me, then.”

Vivi took shelter in the nearest alleyway for privacy’s sake, then warped Tatiana back to Archmage Aeris’s office. The young woman handled the experience better the second time, yet couldn’t help but look queasy afterward just as Saffra had.

“Sorry again,” Vivi said to her. “That you had classes slipped my mind. That was inconsiderate.”

Tatiana seemed horrified that Vivi had apologized not just once, but twice. “Please, it’s not a problem in the slightest, Lady Vivisari. I had my textbooks with me, so I caught up on some of my coursework. I mean it: it was no problem.”

Vivi doubted that; she was fairly certain the effusive assurances were because the one apologizing was a legendary figure of history. Which was why she didn’t want to tell Saffra yet. It would undoubtedly change their dynamic, and Saffra already treated her with too much caution.

“I’m glad. Do you need anything else?”

When Tatiana shook her head no, Vivi warped back to Prismarche and returned to Aeris. She checked that he didn’t need anything, and after that went and found Saffra.

The girl was finishing a ball of fried batter when Vivi arrived, and upon seeing her, she scarfed it down as quickly as she could, like she was embarrassed to have been caught eating. Vivi had left her by the food stall on purpose; she’d suspected the girl hadn’t had a proper breakfast, having gone out to the inn’s training courtyard so early in the morning.

As for why she’d slept poorly and rushed out to distract herself? Vivi could invent plenty of ideas. And for all the world-altering powers she’d

been granted, she couldn't help Saffra with her past. Issues like those required people skills. Meaning that in some ways, Vivi was the worst possible guardian for this girl.

Hurriedly wiping her mouth with her sleeve, Saffra thrust out a second skewer of the treats. "I got you one, if you want it."

Leave it to Saffra to refuse Vivi's offer to pay, only to turn around and buy some for her. She suppressed a sigh, accepting the offered snack. "Thank you. I'll eat them later, once we're there."

"Where's there?" Saffra asked, following Vivi as she led them down the street and turned into an alleyway. "Over the Granite Spines, I know, but a named zone?"

"The Icevein Craters."

Saffra's brow furrowed as she presumably tried to place the name. She'd spent a few months in Prismarche and had taken her adventuring career seriously, so it wasn't a surprise recognition dawned. "That's a mithril-rank zone, isn't it?"

"Naturally."

"Naturally? I'm… well, *close* to gold by levels, but I don't have a team! I know we're just going there to practice [Scorchlance], but mithril rank? Really?"

"You'll be fine," Vivi said dismissively. "There are lower-level monsters there too. Those are our real targets. And I'll be there to help if you need it."

"That's… true, I guess. I just doubt I'll be able to kill anything that high." She shrugged. "You know better than me, though." The dubious quality of her tone made it clear she wasn't giving Vivi the full benefit of the doubt.

"Fighting half a rank higher isn't difficult," Vivi assured her. That would be doubly true after she gave Saffra her new armor. "And the experience will be much better. You'll see."

Vivi held a hand out, and Saffra accepted.

Several [Blinks] later—along with an application of various flight and speed spells—the ground was blurring beneath them. Green froze to white and the already brisk air turned biting as they hurtled to the north. Flying over the snowy caps of the Granite Spines, Vivi surveyed the sprawling tundra of the northernmost reaches of the continent.

Her memory hadn't failed her: the Icevein Craters were where she expected. Most of the hunting grounds this far north were mithril-rank at

the lowest, but the Icevein Craters had upper-gold spawns scattered around as well. The real threats were the [Star-Ice Sentinels] at level 800, but those territorial monsters would only attack if she or Saffra got close enough to the meteors they grew from.

Setting down on a cliff overlooking the Craters, she swept her eyes across the terrain. The hand of time hadn't so much as grazed the environment over the past hundred years. Pockmarked craters dotted the icy plains, the smallest ten meters across and the largest nearing a thousand.

At the center of each impact zone lay celestial bodies: dense gray meteors veined with spiderwebs of blue metal. Living crystalline growths sprouted from each of the rocks—[Star-Ice Sentinels]—and giant crystal blades spun lazily around them in sleeping orbits. Those Sentinels, and the meteors they guarded, dense with Star-Ice, were what adventurers typically sought when coming to this difficult-to-reach zone.

Of course, Vivi had a different goal in mind. She had no need for high-mithril crafting components. Her real targets, or rather Saffra's, were the weaker minions prowling the expanses of flat ground around the craters. [Rime Crawlers] and [Icevein Shardlings] and [Glacial Geists]. Like the Sentinels, the monsters were natural constructs spawned from the ice mana the meteors were radiating.

"Wow," Saffra murmured to her side. "I've only heard of this place. What *are* those things?"

"[Star-Ice Sentinels]. The biggest one"—she gestured at the widest and deepest impact crater a full two miles from their overhang, where a gargantuan crystalline growth similar to its little brothers sprouted from a massive meteor. Ice-blades the size of buildings spun in orbit around it—"is the [Star-Core Bloom]." The zone boss, to put it in the game's terms. "It's been left alone for too long," she commented idly. "It's grown much larger than I remember. Even reached level eleven hundred, it seems."

"Titled?" Saffra asked, alarmed.

"Not a dangerous one. It'll only wake if we enter its crater. Same as any of the other Sentinels. We're here for the weaker elementals." She pointed with her staff at the nearest, a [Rime Crawler]. "Before that, though, I have items to give you."

Saffra tore her fascinated gaze from the Craters. "Wait, you do?"

"Gear. And some other things."

Saffra’s eyes widened, and she shook her head rapidly. “What? Why? I don’t need new gear.”

Vivi wished she could say she was surprised by Saffra’s reaction, but she’d more or less expected it. She understood that the incident where she’d tried to hand over a portion of the Morningstars’ bounty had been a mistake, yet the girl’s refusal to accept help went beyond that. It had repeated itself in miniature not fifteen minutes earlier with a single silver coin.

So of course *new gear* induced an emotion approaching panic. Saffra probably wanted to minimize how much Vivi perceived her as a burden.

Thankfully, Vivi was starting to understand her apprentice—or was putting her best effort into doing so—and thus she had come prepared.

“It’s not suitable for an apprentice of mine to walk around with inferior equipment,” she said. “And I also want to maximize your leveling pace. As such, I’ve prepared armor and weapons appropriate to your new status.”

Saffra stayed stiff for a moment, then—to both Vivi’s relief and resigned disappointment—she relaxed. Vivi helping *her apprentice* was apparently fine in the girl’s mind. Expected. Of course a powerful mage didn’t want her apprentice making her look bad by wearing shoddy equipment and leveling slower. Saffra could accept that. She just didn’t want *gifts*, or to be helped purely for her own sake.

Vivi would’ve summoned her staff and delivered a justified bop on the head if that wouldn’t have ruined the trap she’d set.

“I guess that makes sense.” Saffra sounded only somewhat uncomfortable. “But you really don’t have to.”

“Take,” Vivi ordered, summoning the first piece out of her inventory.

She could have given Saffra the gear earlier—and that probably would've been better timing since the girl could have donned it in a more comfortable environment—but Vivi had wanted to show her the Icevein Craters and the monsters below, to hammer home the fact she would *need* the bonus stats if she wanted to be strong enough to kill the mid-gold monsters.

Saffra’s eyes flicked to the cuirass in Vivi’s hands, [Inspecting] the item.

Her face went blank.

That was the second problem. The gear wasn’t *that* good, all things considered, but it was probably exceptional by Saffra’s standards. *Though even the Master Leatherworker seemed to think it was pretty amazing…*

Vivi waited several seconds for Saffra to react, but she stayed frozen. Vivi frowned. She pushed the cuirass into the girl's hands, and Saffra took the offered item. Vivi pulled the vambraces out next, then the greaves and boots, and finally a staff, a bracelet, and two rings—the total haul from yesterday's crafting experiments. She stacked them in a pile in the unmoving Saffra's arms.

"What is it?" Vivi asked when the silence stretched too long.

The words spurred her into responding. "T-transcendent?" she stammered. "A-all of them? Three or four enchantments each? Isn't that a lot?!"

"It's about average, I think." Which was true for having been a crafting project she'd attended to personally. But even she knew it wasn't average in the universal sense. "Put them in your inventory. I'll summon up a room for you to get changed inside, but there's more I want to give first."

"Isn't Sorcerous Might *five* the highest you can get on silver-rank gear?" she asked hysterically, apparently stuck on that. "Why does it say nine? That's… not possible? It can't be Sorcerous Might nine."

"Perhaps it's a misprint," Vivi said. "Put it in your inventory. There's more."

"What *are* these items? I know you… I know that you're…" She paused and—no doubt mentally completing the statement in her head with *'a dragon'*—seemed to come to terms with the situation. Saffra's disbelief cleared, because of course it made sense for a dragon to be able to secure items like these.

Once more, Vivi resisted smacking the girl atop the head with her staff. Seriously, a dragon? That was the wild conclusion she had come to? What about her was even remotely dragonlike? She blamed Jasper for this, and intended to exact her revenge.

"How much did these cost?" Saffra asked.

"A few hours gathering materials and crafting. Otherwise very little. I handled much of the process myself. As I said, I won't have my apprentice working with substandard equipment. Now, *inventory*. There's more."

Saffra finally obeyed, dropping the items into that invisible spatial storage, the gear disappearing with a slight *pop* of displaced air. She seemed highly embarrassed. "You made it yourself? You really didn't have to do that."

“Market quality wouldn’t have been acceptable. It was far less of an ordeal than whatever you’re imagining, not even a full afternoon.”

Besides, compared to what she was about to give Saffra, the armor paled in significance. She hoped Saffra wouldn’t know that, but she doubted it. Titled-rank summons probably weren’t common in this world.

She withdrew a brilliant gold-and-orange feather shedding motes of fire in a constant cascade. The snow began to melt for fifty feet in every direction, and she had to personally suppress the effect.

“Here.” She held the feather out. “This is for your protection.”

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FEATHER

The expression on Saffra's face was rather comical. She at least didn't look panicked at being presented another gift—though Vivi predicted that was only thanks to superseding emotions. Wide green eyes flicked around at the huge radius of melted snow, then back to the brilliant, otherworldly red-and-orange feather.

"Please tell me that isn't what I think it is," she said weakly.

"It's a phoenix feather."

Saffra winced hard, as if Vivi had physically struck her. "That's… what I thought it might be. Lady Vivi, why are you giving me a phoenix feather?"

"It's just a vessel. Here, take."

Fortunately Vivi didn't have to insist this time; with extreme hesitation, Saffra took the feather without need for cajoling. She cradled its hollow base between two fingers, holding it as far away from herself as she physically could.

"A vessel?"

"It stores a magical construct. Say [Summon]."

Several seconds of dubious silence passed, but finally, Saffra commanded, "[Summon]."

In a familiar display, a pillar of sunfire exploded from the ground, from which a huge bird of burning plumage emerged with a cry. Resplendent in orange and yellow, the simulacrum of a phoenix was a magnificent sight, nearly indistinguishable from one of its true brethren.

Saffra immediately began scrambling backward, almost tripping over herself in her haste to escape the legendary creature. Vivi realized she should have warned the girl.

“It’s not a real phoenix,” Vivi tried telling her, but Saffra was already pointing at the bird, her face ashen.

“A phoenix? You’re giving me a *phoenix?*”

“It’s a construct modeled to look like one. Calm down. His name is Nova.”

The sheer strangeness of that statement seemed to snap Saffra out of her panic. She turned an incredulous look to Vivi. “His name is *Nova?*”

In another life, Vivi’s cheeks would’ve colored. Maintaining a straight face, she said, “It’s as good a name as any.”

Saffra’s mouth worked soundlessly. Rather than responding, she shifted back to Nova, and her briefly recovering complexion whitened again.

“Phoenix,” she repeated dumbly. “It’s a phoenix.”

“*Fake* phoenix,” Vivi corrected, shooting an apologetic look at the giant flaming bird, who didn’t seem to take offense. He preened a misplaced feather and seemed generally unbothered by everything happening. “It’s level thirteen hundred. A real phoenix would be much higher. They’re stronger than dragons on average, just far rarer.”

The words didn’t seem to assure Saffra. Vivi cleared her throat. She wasn’t handling this well.

“Just think of him as any other summon.” She paused. “Oh. You haven’t used any other summoning magic, have you?” Her grimoire had been quite small.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well. He’ll listen to commands. There’s a limit to his intelligence, but most tactical and some strategic orders work. Attack, guard this position, patrol that area. That sort of thing. He also understands nonlethal orders like ‘subdue without killing,’ which many don’t.” She’d tested that during her preparations for ensuring that handing over an artifact of this caliber to a thirteen-year-old girl was a smart idea. Even if it wasn’t, Vivi didn’t want to give her any super high-level offensive scrolls, and also didn’t want to leave her without any attack capabilities. Nova was a good middle ground. “Try it. Point at an area and say [Solar Flare].”

Saffra seemed to act on autopilot thanks to sheer mental overload, which Vivi supposed was better than standing there dumbstruck. The girl

raised a finger—to which Nova stiffened to alertness, sensing an incoming order—and pointed to a spot off in the distance.

“[S-solar Flare],” Saffra stammered, her cat ears flattening in anticipation.

Nova took to the sky with a flap of wings that spawned a small blizzard around them. Hovering airborne a few dozen meters up, Nova began casting a spell. A long, thin strand of gold manifested from the ground and ascended to the heavens, like a lightbulb filament slowly brightening. When the precursor of [Solar Flare] reached its full brilliance, washing the reflective white plains in a glare of yellow, the spell activated.

A pyre fit for a dragon erupted where Saffra had pointed. It was an impressive light show, and Vivi enjoyed it as she did all magic, though she had to say that compared to *real* upper-tier area-of-effect elemental spells like [Kaelum’s Thousand-Year Pyre], it was merely exciting, not anything to write home about.

When the spell faded, and a small section of the tundra had been thoroughly melted, Vivi turned to Saffra and said, “Of course, I expect you to use him judiciously. Only for emergencies.”

“Only… for emergencies,” Saffra echoed numbly, cat ears still flattened to her skull.

“He has a few other spells. I wrote them down for you.” She handed the folded paper over, which Saffra took without a word. “To unsummon him, the command is [Dismiss]. Go ahead and do so.”

Saffra obeyed. Kind of automaton-like, as if she’d become a summon herself.

Vivi pursed her lips. She still had the scrolls to hand over as well, but she was worried any more artifacts would break the poor girl. *Maybe holding off until the end of the hunting session is best.*

“All right. That’s it for now. Let’s get to hunting. As we begin, I have a few questions for you about how experience gain works.”

Saffra's attention locked to her, seemingly out of desperation. Maybe wanting a shred of normalcy. While this was an odd question for Vivi to ask considering her rank, her memory problems explained the gap, and musings over how exactly leveling worked in this world were probably fairly common even among higher-level adventurers.

“Like what?” Saffra asked.

“It’s clear that at a basic level, both practice and combat provide experience. Has this been studied, though?”

Saffra tilted her head. “Sure. Or well, people have tried to. There’s too many factors though. Two people doing the exact same routine will see way different results.” She seemed to relax as she talked, happily wiping the memory of a phoenix melting a small portion of the tundra from her mind. “It’s basically impossible to know how it really works.”

To be fair, progress varied wildly in natural, non-System growth too. Talent mattered, even if it wasn’t the be-all end-all. “If you ordered Nova to wipe out this entire zone,” Vivi asked, “you wouldn’t level, right?”

“No. Summons or pets or anything like that only give experience if they come from your class.”

Vivi had intuited as much. Society would surely have turned out very differently if reaching Titled was as simple as abusing artifacts. Then again, Vivi doubted many non-level-gated items like the phoenix feather existed in the first place. Surely at least a few, though.

“Does that apply to any items? What about the armor I gave you?”

Saffra blinked. “As long as it’s normal gear, I’m pretty sure it doesn’t hurt experience gain. Same with potions and consumables. That’s how most rich people get ahead.”

“And if I put shields on you?” she asked, curious how extensively the concept of ‘power leveling’ had been tested. “Or buffs?”

“You’ll get the credit. Or almost all of it—I’m not sure exactly? You can have strong gear, but *you* still need to be the one doing most of the work to level up.”

That lined up with Vivi’s assumptions. “So there’s no quick way to move through the levels besides an apprenticeship status and best-in-slot gear?”

Saffra paused. “Best in slot?”

Er. I should probably be careful with the gaming terminology. Some of it had transferred from Seven Cataclysms, thanks to stats and game screens and so on actually existing in this world, but not all of it. Seven Cataclysms hadn’t even *had* ‘gear slots’—that term was just carry-over shorthand from games as a whole.

“Best available for your situation,” Vivi clarified.

“Oh. Then yes. Those are the main ways, as far as I know.”

Vivi didn’t like that she would have to remove her shields on Saffra, which she’d been recasting as necessary as a matter of habit, but the System wouldn’t recognize Saffra’s efforts as ‘solo’ otherwise.

Saffra seemed to be calming down thanks to the conversation, though she was steadfastly holding the phoenix feather away from her body like it was a poisonous snake.

“Is watching over you detrimental to your progress even if I’m not casting shields on you?” Vivi asked.

Saffra hesitated. “No? There just can’t be anything active on me. Being there, ready to help, doesn’t change anything. I think?” She shrugged. “It *is* the same thing, I see what you mean. But *active* magic means you specifically would be engaged in the fight, and since you’re so much stronger you would get all the credit.”

It made sense from a technical perspective, and Vivi supposed that a System imposed onto a world would need technical boundaries. What about the edge cases though? Would the System itself make the decision, or had everything been defined perfectly such that there weren’t edge cases? If not, did the System have a basic level of consciousness to make those judgments? How did all of this *work*? Who had created the Grand System? Was it a force of nature like gravity? A natural manifestation of magic somehow?

She could invent a thousand theories and found herself wondering if this world had a commonly accepted one. Probably something to do with the gods. Vivi was curious if *those* existed too, or if they were simply figures of this world’s religion clerics and other divine-type classes could link to. Despite having played Seven Cataclysms endlessly, there was quite a lot she didn’t know about this world, especially regarding how game lore had translated to reality.

Waving her staff, Vivi dispelled the various effects she’d put on Saffra. She felt instantly uncomfortable, but she couldn’t let her paranoia get carried away. Saffra had gone her entire life without being guarded by Vivi’s spells, and Vivi would be there to watch over her while she fought. The girl would be fine.

“Go ahead and equip everything. Here’s some privacy.”

She constructed a stone enclosure with a light inside—the versatility of an archmage’s kit was seriously amazing. Five minutes later, Saffra called out that she was done, so Vivi disassembled the room.

In the meantime, she'd been cataloging the monsters prowling the Icevein Craters and had identified the lowest-level one she could spot: a level 512 [Rime Crawler], a crystalline leopard-like monster composed of white-blue ice. She held a hand out and the girl accepted; a [Blink] teleported them off the cliff and within casting range of the monster.

"I know I managed it last time," Saffra mumbled, "but that doesn't mean I can get it again. I still need to practice before I'll be able to cast it consistently."

"Just do your best. You can keep trying until you have it. There's no rush."

Saffra took a breath, then lowered her new staff toward the beast. Without ceremony, she began taking slow steps through the snow, closing the distance as the spell took shape. Mana flowed from Saffra's staff and engraved onto the air in bright runes. The monster, sixty meters away, perked up at the sensation of magic filling the air. It seemed confused—the mana too distant and suppressed to identify immediately—but after turning in a circle it spotted the flash of bright red hair and gray armor against the backdrop of snow. It charged without a moment's hesitation.

Saffra didn't flinch, but Vivi did internally. Her palms began to sweat seeing a monster charge at her undefended apprentice, full of killing intent, but she could pull together a spell to erase the [Rime Crawler] in less time than it took to blink. Saffra was in no real danger.

Still, it was impressive how little she faltered. Brow furrowed, the novice mage patiently formed the spell diagram—and even more commendably, seemed to do so *better* than last time. Here was someone who didn't falter under pressure. Vivi could tell that the spell would properly take hold well in advance of its completion.

"[Scorchlance]," Saffra incanted.

Vivi had honestly been curious how powerful the boosts from the new armor would be, and to what extent the enchantments would amplify Saffra's spells. On the rings and staff especially, Vivi had put in some devastatingly strong sorcery boosts, since jewelry held enchantments better than other gear.

The lance of orange fire manifested from the mana held in Saffra's spell circle, then flew forward with disastrous speed, melting snow and ice in a twenty-meter-long trail to the charging elemental. It impacted—

—and obliterated the target entirely. The missile hit the construct center of mass, burrowed in, and exploded, disintegrating the creature in a shower of ice shards. After waiting a few seconds for the flames to clear, Vivi saw that nothing remained but a huge circle of melted snow.

Saffra gaped, staff pointed incredulously at where a monster had once existed.

Vivi was pretty sure a silver-rank mage shouldn't be capable of one-shotting a gold-rank monster. Though she couldn't say she was *surprised*. Strong starter gear like this would have allowed something similar in the actual game too. She'd helped arrange something like this for Alex's—Axian's—little brother when he'd first gotten into the game.

"Well done," Vivi said. "You'll likely be able to deal with some of the more powerful monsters in this zone too, it looks like. Not just the weakest. Perhaps up to six hundred?"

But not more than that. Unless Saffra could one-shot the monster, she wouldn't do well in a fight. At her level, a mage needed a team for any sort of extended combat.

Saffra didn't seem to hear Vivi. Her eyes had locked onto something mid-air, slightly offset from where the monster had been.

"What is it?" Vivi asked.

"I leveled up." A second of incredulous silence passed, and she added, "Twice."

That brought a quirk of satisfaction to Vivi's lips. She supposed that brief combat *had* counted as ten equivalent ones, thanks to the apprenticeship boost. And Saffra killing ten monsters a hundred levels higher than her, by herself, would have given a good chunk of experience.

"It seems like we'll be making decent progress this morning," Vivi mused.

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CLASS EVOLUTION

People could adapt to anything. Saffra knew that on a personal level, not as some truism. Prior to Lady Vivi, her life had veered off course wildly on two occasions, and she'd settled into a routine both times, despite how world-ending each occurrence had seemed. And there were people who had gone through worse, she knew, and they had learned to get by. People were resilient. By nature, they survived.

That said. While Lady Vivi's introduction into Saffra's life was a *good* left turn for once, how could she possibly get used to… this?

A full set of transcendent-quality gear. A ten-times multiplier on experience gain. A phoenix feather that summoned a Titled guardian. A spell that could one-shot monsters a hundred levels higher than her.

It was too much. And the surprises didn't seem to be slowing down.

Over the course of the hour-long hunting expedition, she cast several dozen [Scorchlances], instantly killing three-quarters of her targets. The other one-fourth, she either missed or had the spell fizzle just before it cast, so Lady Vivi had needed to step in to save her. Which was deeply embarrassing, though she knew it shouldn't be.

She didn't level up twice with every kill. That would have been ridiculous—as if it happening once wasn't. Levels weren't totally predictable to begin with, but that initial jump had probably come from the Grand System recognizing the achievement of killing a monster a hundred levels higher. Leveling was feat-based as much as effort-based, and not

always linear. The Grand System was far from perfectly understood, as she'd told Lady Vivi.

Saffra had been level three hundred and eighty-five when they had met, and she had gained one level since then through training and the events of the Convoy. Killing twenty-five monsters, which was equivalent to *two hundred and fifty* thanks to her apprenticeship status, had rocketed her up in advancement faster than she had thought possible.

As in, literally faster than she had thought possible. In her wildest dreams, she couldn't have imagined any confluence of factors that would allow for fourteen levels in a single hour of hunting. She knew a person could make blazing progress through the lower ranks, especially below gold—noble families made use of heirloom gear and apprenticeship bonuses all the time. But that many levels? And so fast? It boggled the mind.

And also made her angry. Never mind that she was the one benefiting; the sheer unfairness didn't sit right with her. Levels should go to those who worked the hardest. Or more realistically, the hardest-working talents, since the world could never *really* be fair. Some people simply learned and grew faster.

Seriously. She had spent so many hundreds of nights studying until she'd crashed into bed in a dead stupor—or more recently, had risked her life out in the forests surrounding Prismarche—and in that time, she had seen progress at a tiny fraction of what she had this past hour. And she was most definitely not 'trying harder,' nor had she suddenly become 'more deserving.' She'd just been in the right place at the right time several days ago, and a strange, powerful mage had taken interest in her.

All that said. While a part of her was outraged, she couldn't help but be a little giddy too. Or a lot giddy. She had gained *fourteen levels in one day*.

And more importantly: she had just crossed the four-hundred barrier.

"There it is," Saffra announced as the most recent monster exploded into a shower of ice shards. A thrill of excitement and anxiety seized her as the screen appeared, announcing her level—with two more screens behind it, waiting to be read.

"Oh? Good news?" Lady Vivi asked.

She'd warned Vivi that she was getting close, since obviously the one-hundred-level summits were a big deal. Not just as some arbitrary crowning milestone—though it certainly felt incredible to say she'd climbed that mountain—but also because of tangible benefits. There were few hard and

fast rules when it came to the Grand System and how it doled out classes, stats, and skills, but there was an undeniable trend toward the ten, fifty, and hundred-level increments providing larger bonuses, with the hundred-level marks often offering a class evolution and a cornerstone skill.

Holding her breath, she mentally reached out and dismissed the level-up notification. The screen behind it then became visible. Her heart all but leapt into her throat as she read the words ‘Class Evolution.’

Saffra had spent the last few years aiming for an [Elementalist] class. If she was honest with herself, that decision didn’t stem from a deep fondness for elemental spells, but rather a practical mindset. The truth of the matter was that more complex magics—sometimes even the most basic versions of them—were locked behind social connections.

Whether family inheritance, guild, noble title, or simply currying favor from an Institute mage, the more esoteric spells like divination, illusions, druidism, or any other weren’t available to an orphaned commoner of mildly impressive talent at best.

Especially because her attitude issues hadn’t endeared her to the proper families or institutions. She’d never been good at sucking up, and most Grand Magi possessed fearsome egos. Ones that needed stroking if she wanted to get into their good graces and learn their magics.

Hence, she had pursued elemental spells. It was a staple branch for a reason. With no shortage of firepower or utility, [Elementalists] were highly sought after in adventuring teams—and that had always been her long-term goal. She’d not once imagined herself cooped up on the highest floors of the Institute, researching ever-more-inscrutable spells. She wanted to be out in the world. Making a difference.

So. Simple, effective, and easily available as elemental spells were, that class had been her obvious choice.

And yet [Elementalist] wasn’t the evolution she received.

She blinked a few times. Rubbed her eyes and looked again. The words didn’t change.

Congratulations! Your class [Initiate Mage] has transitioned into [Pupil of the Magus Prime].

———

The announcement caught her so off guard she couldn’t help but blurt out, “*Huh*?”

Nearly every waking moment in the past few years she had devoted to learning elemental spells. How could she *not* have gotten that class variation?

…because of her apprenticeship to a powerful draconic mage, obviously.

The implications slowly settled in. Inheritance-type classes weren’t unheard of. Maybe the most famous example was that of [Sword Saints] and their disciples. But they were vanishingly rare, because it meant the Grand System acknowledged the master of said pupil as so staggeringly important that even their *student* deserved a special class. So far as she knew, those classes themselves didn’t bestow a specific benefit… but apprenticeship to someone even the Grand System acknowledged was by itself more valuable than nearly anything in the world.

That wasn’t what had Saffra freezing up, though. She already knew Lady Vivi was one of the strongest casters in the world by simple merit of having reached level nineteen hundred. Likely near peerless even among immortal-kind, not too much weaker than the Dragon King.

No. The part she didn’t understand was that inherited classes surely required *intent*. The Grand System wouldn’t label a [Disciple of the Sword Saint] as such unless the Sword Saint truly considered their disciple *their disciple*. Apprenticeship statuses were just that: statuses. Easily gained and easily lost—nobles bought them for their scions all the time. Classes, while not permanent, were obviously a far stronger decree.

“Good news?” Lady Vivi prompted again, oblivious to Saffra’s internal panic.

“Y-yeah. Class evolution.”

She spoke the words automatically, thoughts rushing forward.

This meant… Lady Vivi *actually* saw her as her apprentice? Her promise to train her wasn’t a temporary whim that would fade any day now?

Well. Saffra supposed she didn’t actually know how student-type classes worked. They might be as transient as apprenticeship statuses… even if that didn’t make sense.

“[Elementalist]?” Lady Vivi prodded, the extended silence making her look at Saffra oddly. “What is it?”

“No. Um. I got… I got something else. Something weirder.”

Pupil of the Magus Prime.

What did that mean, anyway? ‘Magus Prime’? From her understanding, that would be Lady Vivi’s [Sword Saint] equivalent. A special class assigned by the Grand System in acknowledgement of incredible talent in her field. She had never heard of it though. Maybe ‘Magus Prime’ was a title that held great weight in dragon society, in the same way Sword Saint did for mortals?

And yet… there was another interpretation. That *Magus Prime* wasn’t a long-standing title that many casters before Lady Vivi had held. But rather exactly what the class name itself said. Magus Prime. *The Highest Mage*.

She threw that idea away as hastily as she could. Not because it wasn’t plausible, but because acknowledging that her master might be the *strongest spellcaster in the world* was way, way too terrifying.

And surely Lady Vivi wasn’t. That title had to belong to the Dragon King. Or to another legendary immortal. Though she wasn’t sure whether they counted as *mages*, rather than just people who ‘used magic sometimes.’ At level nineteen hundred… and clearly a pure magic-user… Lady Vivi really might be the strongest mage.

“Something weirder?” Lady Vivi encouraged patiently.

Saffra swallowed. “Yeah. I got… [Pupil of the Magus Prime].”

Lady Vivi was silent for a long moment. “Does that… have some particular meaning?”

“I was going to ask you that.”

The two of them stared at each other.

Saffra desperately tried to not make the logical connection that if Magus Prime wasn’t some title Lady Vivi was familiar with—a title dragons used—then it really might mean exactly what it said.

Or maybe her memory problems were to blame? Saffra happily seized that excuse.

“I see.” Lady Vivi’s eyes drifted away, and to Saffra’s horror, she *deflected*. “Did you get a useful skill to accompany it?”

Saffra felt faint. She tried to ignore the revealing response. “I… I haven’t checked yet.”

After everything that had happened so far, she was almost afraid to. She wasn't sure how much more she could handle.

Compared to most classes, mages didn't get great skills. Not like how warriors might pick up devastating weapon arts on a random level-up that drastically improved their fighting ability. Mages were expected to *learn* their own spells.

Still, they did receive skills, though they were almost always passive bonuses. Something like '[Hastened Meditation] - Regenerate mana faster when entering a meditative trance for more than ten minutes.' That had been Saffra's level two-hundred skill, and a common one for Institute mages.

Nervous, she closed out the class notification and scanned the last of the three screens.

Skill Earned!

[Cinder and Rime]: Fire-type and frost-type spells refund a small portion of mana on successful casts.

She breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Which in retrospect was an odd reaction to have for the… not *underwhelming* skill, but totally normal skill, which became underwhelming compared to everything else. [Cinder and Rime] was exactly the sort of ability she would have expected for the extensive efforts she'd put into elemental mastery these past few years. And while greater mana efficiency wasn't going to impress anyone or be worthy of much celebration, it was undoubtedly a useful addition to her adventuring kit. Adventures often had to be called off early because of flagging stamina or mana, and mages were especially vulnerable to resource expenditure over longer trips.

Case in point: that was why *this* hunting trip would be ending soon. Her mana pool had dwindled to a tiny puddle after so many [Scorchlances], and mana potions really weren't something to go chugging on a whim. A body had limits, and while pushing past them was more than possible, a person

should avoid that sort of strain unless they had good reason. Downing multiple resource potions certainly wasn't advisable for routine hunting sessions. And insane as this morning had been, it *was* still 'routine.'

"You look relieved," Vivi said curiously. "Something good?"

"Nope!" Saffra realized she sounded too cheerful about that. She cleared her throat. "Just, um, a basic fire-and-ice elemental affinity. Refunds a small portion of mana. Nothing crazy, though the name is interesting. [Cinder and Rime]. Haven't heard of that one before."

"Does the Institute keep a record of known skills?"

"Basic ones. There are probably better encyclopedias out there with rarer skills, but I've never gotten my hands on one."

"Interesting. Mana efficiency does sound like a useful addition."

"Yep." But more importantly, the skill didn't make her rethink her entire life.

Saffra wondered what *Vivi's* skills were. What kinds of passive bonuses did mages above level 1500 receive?

"You're running low on mana?" Lady Vivi asked.

"I could manage a few more casts, but yeah. I have the mana potion, if you want to keep going?"

"Better to recover naturally," she dismissed, confirming Saffra's earlier assumption. "There's no rush. We can continue tomorrow. There's something I need your help experimenting with before we call it quits, though."

Saffra blinked. Something *Vivi* needed *her* help with? Sure, Saffra could provide basic information to patch over those memory issues of hers, but this sounded like something else. What sort of aid could she, a level-four-hundred mage, provide Lady Vivi?

The immortal mage held a hand up, and a book with a silver symbol of a black sun appeared in it.

"I need to test how this codex works."

Almost by reflex, Saffra tried to [Inspect] the item, yet Lady Vivi swatted the skill away immediately. It fizzled and responded with a screen that read 'Inspection Failed.'

"I would prefer that you didn't," Lady Vivi said. "Sorry."

Saffra flushed. "N-no. My bad. I checked by instinct." The rudeness was entirely her own. Trying to read the details of someone's possessions

was something a person should *ask* to do first, and it was totally normal for her prying request to be shot down. “What does it do?”

“In short, it’s a secondary mana pool, and a way to share mana between mages.”

Saying it so casually almost primed Saffra to think that the effect was nothing special, but then she parsed the words.

She stared at the woman. “That’s *possible*?”

“It’s a unique artifact, even by my understanding.” Vivi held the book out. “It’s safe—I’m certain of it. Can you try using it for me?”

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BORROWED POWER

An artifact that allowed the sharing of mana. Saffra hadn't known such a thing existed. *Could* exist. A person shouldn't be able to share mana. She supposed rituals and enchantments came close, since those allowed for collaboratively fueling some grand working, but they weren't the same as spellcasting, even if the different disciplines used the same language of the arcane.

Lady Vivi held the codex out, and Saffra hesitantly accepted.

She nearly toppled over as it dropped into her grip.

Vivi lurched to help, but Saffra recovered, straightening out with a firmer hold on the codex.

"It's heavy! You made it look light!"

"I didn't—" Vivi paused. "I didn't realize. I suppose I should've."

At Lady Vivi's level, even a mage would be ridiculously strong. The reminder caught Saffra off guard for some reason. Despite the magical might her mentor displayed so often, Saffra hadn't internalized that Lady Vivi, despite her small frame, possessed an enormous amount of *physical* might too. Though they could meet each other's gaze without either of them craning their necks, and that she was arguably slimmer than Saffra, Lady Vivi very likely could pulverize stones into dust with her bare hands. And that was without enhancement magics.

Lugging the book up—the thing had to weigh thirty pounds or more—she paused one more time to eye the cover. Something about it set her on edge. The simple, minimalist design radiated an ominous aura. The black

cover, despite its glossy smoothness, didn't seem like metal or obsidian, though she had no clue what it could be instead. She swore the book had a… a *presence*. Like it was alive.

Some deep, instinctual part of her told her that it was *hungry*.

She itched to know what an [Inspection] would say. Since Lady Vivi had taken a special interest in the item, it was undoubtedly the sort of relic found in the deepest alcoves of the High King's vault.

…or the Dragon King's vault.

"You want me to use it?" Saffra asked.

"You should be able to. I found the process simple, and there isn't a level requirement."

Saffra flipped open the cover to the first page. Her brow furrowed, and it took a second to recognize the symbol glowing inside: *Galdrust.* Reservoir. That confirmed what Lady Vivi had said about the book's purpose, not that Saffra had doubted her.

Focusing on the rune, she opened her magical senses, wondering whether this really would be intuitive. Items *were* often easy to activate, but something 'intuitive' to Lady Vivi could very well be impossible for any mortal caster.

The moment Saffra focused on the page, she felt something—or maybe she'd felt it the whole time and only now noticed. A tug. A pulling in her gut. An offer to link, to open herself to the book and accept its bounty, or to offer her own mana instead. With reluctance, and even more fascination, she hesitantly accepted the former.

An ocean.

She stood at the bottom of an ocean. All other senses fled her as she became aware of a great, titanic pressure. Mana, enough of it to drown the world, a continent-sized mass of pure, unbridled *energy*. Churning all around her was the power to flatten a mountain, wither a forest, boil the sky. It pressed down on her. Into her. From all directions. She was a minnow lost in the deep currents of the abyss, leviathans swimming all around her.

The link broke, and Saffra found herself screaming, having dropped the book and backpedaled with such haste she'd tripped and fallen into the snow—and then kept pushing herself backward, scrambling on all fours. She stopped abruptly, getting control of herself.

"What? What is it?" Lady Vivi had followed, even her stoic expression breaking into alarm. "I was certain it would be safe. What happened?"

Safe?

Saffra supposed that wasn't… wrong?

She hadn't been in danger. For all the pressure that ocean of mana had exerted on her, wanting to be grabbed and used, the sensation hadn't *hurt*. Or even been threatening. Except in the way an ant standing underneath a suspended boulder might feel threatened.

"M-mana," Saffra managed to stutter out. "That was… yours?"

How many years had it taken Lady Vivi to gather that much? Decades? Centuries? Saffra knew how strong of a mage Lady Vivi was, but the woman wasn't *that* powerful. That was… enough raw energy to crush the Colossus within her fist like some fragile bird. She understood that on a primal level.

Or… it *felt* like that. She knew she couldn't trust her instincts, not for magic on that scale. But still. Surely even for a level 1900, that book would need to hold years or decades of mana. How could a single artifact contain such an absurd quantity? How did the book not explode and erase the entirety of the Icevein Craters, and her insignificant existence with it?

"Are you hurt?" Lady Vivi asked, having crouched down next to her, deeply concerned.

Swallowing—and feeling her cheeks heating up—Saffra climbed to her feet and dusted the snow off.

"I'm—I'm fine. Sorry. It caught me off guard."

"You're not hurt?" Vivi insisted.

"No. I wasn't in danger, you were right about that." A flashback to that ocean of primordial energy hitting her, and Saffra's skin went cold. "Just…" She swallowed. "That was *your* mana?"

"It was." She watched Saffra carefully. "I should have partially filled a different page. The quantity was too much, wasn't it?"

Saffra tittered, slightly hysterical. "It was a lot."

That was *one page?* She had thought she'd been looking at the entire book's contents. The codex could hold *more* power than that? What in the world *was that monstrous relic?*

Vivi pointed her staff at the book, plucked it from the snow, and levitated it over. "I can find someone else to test it out for me. I shouldn't have asked you."

"No!" Saffra blurted out. "It's fine." The mortification settled in. Had she actually *screamed?* That was so dramatic. "It just caught me by

surprise. Sorry for dropping it."

Lady Vivi studied her evenly, and Saffra could tell she hadn't convinced her master.

She insisted, "Please. I want to. I wasn't ready, but I am now."

And she meant it: she did want to. Not just because she needed to pay Lady Vivi back in whatever tiny ways she could, but because getting to use an extremely rare artifact to channel someone else's mana—and so much of it—was *selfishly* enticing. She wanted to experience that for her own sake.

The earnestness of her voice seemed to sway Lady Vivi, though only after a long hesitation. She flipped the book open and turned to the second page. Saffra dimly perceived an immense flood of mana moving from her mentor into the page, though with how expertly controlled it was, she couldn't get a grasp on how much.

"There. I should have done that from the start. I didn't realize it would overwhelm you."

No, Lady Vivi didn't always think things through; Saffra had picked up on that a while ago. Like a whale swimming through the deep, Lady Vivi had only a vague awareness of the vast currents each of her movements resulted in. The sheer insignificance and frailty of everything around her. Saffra wondered if she herself could keep aware of such a thing had she been put in Lady Vivi's shoes.

Saffra properly braced herself for the second time she linked to the book, this time to the weaker page. With the first experience as her standard, the enormous quantity of mana that consumed her awareness was certainly *lesser* than before, but that was like comparing the Maw of the Abyss to a regular kraken.

She must have dumped her entire mana pool into the page. Had to have.

Saffra struggled to come to terms with the fact she probably hadn't. That even *this* was only a portion of the mana that the immortal carried around with her at any given moment.

Even though one half of Saffra's instincts had always told her that Lady Vivi was harmless, there was another part of her that was terrified of this eldritch creature.

"I can feel it," Saffra said, not letting the veritable lake of mana overwhelm her. At least it wasn't an ocean this time. "You want me to try casting?"

“Something simple. I’ll intervene if you find it unwieldy, prevent anything bad from happening. Start small.”

Start small. That was easier said than done, having all the power in the world at her fingertips. In some sense, being a mage meant spending one’s whole life starving, never quite having the mana desired for a magical working, yet here was the largest buffet she’d ever seen. A banquet for a king.

“Does it matter what?” Saffra asked distractedly, eyes going unfocused as her imagination ran wild.

“I just want to see that you can use the mana, and how it behaves. So any spell is fine. [Scorchlance], I suppose. More practice is always good.”

Taking a breath, she did as she’d been asked. She pulled on the endless, swirling mass of mana. No resistance met her—the energy threw itself at her. A whole river of it, blasting into her face at full speed the moment she turned the metaphorical valve.

Strangely, the experience didn’t disorient her, nor was the mana difficult to control. She’d never in her life worked with even a fraction of this power, but she seized the energy and shaped it as if she were creating any other spell. Like she was drawing from her own core. The glowing pattern of [Scorchlance] formed in the air with runes so dense and bright they scalded her eyes to look at.

Fascinated, she accidentally ignored Lady Vivi’s instructions to ‘start small.’ She claimed the entire lake of energy and shoved it into [Scorchlance]. And, only as the circle’s formation completed, did she realize that she’d somehow created a Titled-rank spell and now had no idea what to do with it.

In a panic, she looked around for a target. In retrospect, she could have shot it off into the sky, but her eyes locked onto a [Star-Ice Sentinel] barely in range, the orichalcum-rank elemental asleep at the bottom of a shallow crater.

It seemed blasphemous to waste a spell of such magnitude. Why not make practical use of it? Pointing [Scorchlance] at the unsuspecting monster and aiming carefully, she incanted the spell’s name.

“[Scorchlance].”

Though she’d thought [Scorchlance] potent, her previous spells now seemed like bare flickers of a candle in comparison. A spear of fire darted forward so swiftly it vaporized the [Star-Ice Sentinel] before it could so

much as stir to awareness. Charged with so much mana, Saffra couldn't even properly process what happened. The spell had formed, launched, and detonated on the timeline of a Titled-rank spell—meaning she could only react to the resulting explosion.

Which was certainly impressive. Her ears rang. Her teeth rattled. A fireball engulfed the crater and washed the world orange.

Only after a long minute of watching the flames dwindle did she jolt in realization.

"W-wait. You said to start small. I uh… I think I used it all." She shot a distraught look at her mentor.

Lady Vivi only seemed amused. "I can't blame you for getting carried away. Did you get experience for it?"

Saffra paused.

Experience?

She *had* just killed an orichalcum-rank monster in a single attack.

Except no. Not really. Because she would've leveled if she had. The Grand System clearly didn't acknowledge that as her feat—as it shouldn't. It was Vivi's mana she had used, even if Saffra had been the one to form and incant the spell.

"I didn't. It works like the phoenix feather, I guess."

"Hm. I expected as much. I do wonder if it would work differently if it were your stored mana in the pages instead."

"That's… a good question." Saffra had no idea, nor the foundational knowledge to guess.

Vivi mused over the possibility before giving a small shrug. "What was it like?"

"Easy." She couldn't believe how much so. "The mana just *flowed out*. A river of it. I barely had to pull. And it wasn't hard to control either, not any more than my own mana—just a thousand times stronger."

"Interesting. Want to try again? An even more powerful [Scorchlance], this time?"

Saffra blinked.

"Remember, there's a much larger reservoir, if you're interested." Her lips quirked the smallest amount, and red eyes drifted off to the distance. To the largest, deepest of the craters, where a massive monster lay sleeping. "And a worthy target."

Saffra's brain briefly shut down at the implication.

“You want *me* to fight a *Titled-rank* monster?”

“It’s probably best someone kills it before it grows too large,” her mentor said. “And the Star-Ice inside that meteor is likely worth harvesting, if just because we have the opportunity. So yes. If you want to. I’ll be here to fix anything if it goes wrong.”

Saffra’s mouth worked soundlessly. Lady Vivi was serious. But why wouldn’t she be? With the sheer mana Saffra had felt inside that first page of the codex, even she might be able to one-shot a level eleven hundred monster.

Saffra gripped her head with both hands, since a headache had abruptly slammed into her. “Why do you keep doing this to me?” she groaned. “A silver-rank adventurer can’t kill a *Titled*. It’s not possible.”

“It’s entirely up to you,” Lady Vivi said, seeming to rein in her muted excitement. She *wanted* to see Saffra blow up a monster seven hundred levels her superior. “I figured you might be interested. You obviously enjoyed the previous spell.”

She totally had. Forming that first [Scorchlance] had been incredible. And making one a hundred times stronger? The idea terrified her—but also excited her. Like the thrill that came from standing atop a cliff, intending to jump, looking down at the dark waters below.

Plus, having power at her fingertips, even if it wasn’t her own, reminded her of her goal. Why she worked so hard every day to climb the hierarchy. So that eventually she would have her *own* power—though obviously never at this scale.

“I’ll do it,” Saffra said.

“You probably don’t need to use the entire page. So try to limit yourself.”

Saffra accepted an offered hand, and Lady Vivi [Blinked] them within range of the [Star-Core Bloom], right on the edge of its enormous crater. The monster, all those crystalline growths, and its huge orbiting blades were even more intimidating up close. The Ghul-Feather had technically been stronger, and by a hundred levels. But it had seemed so much less intimidating—likely because it had been so many times smaller. It was a reminder that a creature’s appearance hardly indicated its strength.

For example: the small, passive-looking demon standing next to Saffra, who might not even need to lift her staff to kill an insignificant *low-Titled* monster. Saffra shivered at the thought.

With equal parts giddiness and horror for what she was about to do, she held the heavy tome in the crook of her elbow and aimed her staff. Once more, she linked herself to the first page of the codex and was swallowed by an ocean of mana. She tolerated the experience better the second time—which was to say, she didn't scream and drop the book. It did take several deep breaths to come to terms with her cosmic insignificance again.

Then she began to cast.

She could get addicted to this feeling: holding the absolute power of life and death in her hands. There was no way to put it into words, really, drinking in an entire ocean of energy and cramming it into a tier-four spell. The wellspring felt endless. Like she could pull and pull and never run out, despite drawing a city's worth of mana with every greedy gulp. But eventually, she *had* drained every last drop, and it was time to invoke the spell.

"[Scorchlance]."

A truly cataclysmic ray of energy burst forward, and a prismatic barrier flared around her and Lady Vivi to protect them from the fallout. The world burned white. When Saffra could finally see again, blinking spots out of her eyes, she was met with the aftermath of what had *supposedly* been a tier-four spell. But more realistically, was no less than a hundred thousand of them layered on top of each other.

The [Star-Core Bloom] was… gone.

So was the meteor. And so was the *crater*. Well, okay, not really. But the crater had gotten noticeably deeper. It had transformed into the mouth of a volcano. Molten rock and slag had replaced the smooth, icy walls, smoke billowing up to the sky in town-sized clouds. That simple spell had changed the geography of the zone in a very significant manner.

Saffra gaped. *She* had done that. Well not really… but sort of. She had been the one to cast the spell.

I have absolutely no idea how to feel about this, she thought faintly.

"I said don't use the entire page," Lady Vivi said wryly. "I guess we *won't* be collecting Star-Ice." She looked down at the utter ruination Saffra had wrought, then nodded approvingly. "Well done. That was even better than I expected."

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THE LIBRARY

The loss of the Zone Boss's loot didn't bother Vivi, obviously. There were a dozen higher-rank hunting grounds she could fly over to and clear out in an afternoon if she actually needed coin. She shut down Saffra's panicked apologies for vaporizing an admittedly significant sum in crafting materials, telling the girl that if she had wanted to, she could have extinguished the supercharged [Scorchlance] herself. She had purposefully allowed it.

With the day's leveling session coming to a close, Vivi handed over the last of her gifts: the scrolls of sixteenth-tier-and-higher defensive magics. Saffra really *was* adapting to the absurd, because she only gawked for about a minute as she listened to Vivi's explanations. Then she groaned and accepted the items.

"We made good progress," Vivi said. "You'll need to pick another spell to start working toward though, now that you've gotten [Scorchlance] down." Interest sparked in Saffra's eyes, and Vivi suppressed a smile. "However, there is something I wanted to bring up. I can coach you through spell designs and mana exercises, but there are parts of your education I'm certain I can't help with. The Institute's Library could help bridge the gap."

Saffra stiffened.

"I've intended to search through it myself," Vivi said, "since there are resources I want to hunt down and read." While she had Saffra and Rafael to provide her 'common-sense' information, it seemed wise to pick up a few primers on topics like basic history and world geography as well. Plus,

there might be insight into dimensional magic and adjacent theory. “Of course, I know you don’t want to return to the Institute. So can you provide me a list of books you might want? I’m not familiar with what would be best.” She could ask Aeris, or someone else, but wanted to see what Saffra had to say first.

Saffra was quiet for a long moment. “Not off the top of my head, no. But… I could… just come with you?”

Vivi paused in surprise.

“The library *is* one of the things I’ve missed most,” Saffra admitted, casting her gaze to the ground. “It would be super useful to have access to it again, and like you said there wouldn’t be much risk—not with an illusion.” She seemed to realize something. “Wait, are you allowed on the *upper* floors?”

Vivi had no idea. She hadn’t known the Institute divided its library. But demons and humans seemed to have diplomatic peace, and Nysari was a tenth-elevation mage. Surely she would have implicit access to more-restricted reading? Rafael would have arranged that.

“I believe so. Perhaps not the *most* restricted sections, but the majority.”

“Could I look through them?” Saffra asked, wide-eyed.

Whether it went against policy or not, the dawning excitement on her apprentice’s face obviously meant the answer would be ‘yes.’ Vivi was trying to obey laws and authority as much as possible, but if her spurned apprentice wanted to poke through the library she’d been banned from, Vivi would arrange it.

She just had to make sure the incident didn’t draw attention. *Flaunting* her power was the problem; she didn’t want to scare or disrupt the social structures of this world. As Rafael had pointed out, that might have catastrophic, cascading complications that Vivi didn’t want to deal with.

“You may.”

Saffra looked torn. Her desire to avoid the Institute clearly warred with her natural inclination for magic—her curiosity for what lay in the upper, restricted floors of the library.

“I guess you’d want someone to show you around…” she finally said.

“It’s up to you.”

Making her decision, Saffra nodded. “Even if you *didn’t* put an illusion on me, I doubt people would recognize me. My hair is shorter now. I’m

older.” She hesitated. “And… I do want to go. But technically I *am* banned. I won’t be causing trouble?”

“That’s for me to worry about.”

“Then… sure, I guess?”

Vivi held a hand out, and Saffra twitched in surprise. “Now?”

“When else?”

Vivi warped them to a safe spot inside her manor. Hopefully, the privacy wards were masking the warp’s spell signature, in case there were prying eyes in Meridian. Even [Blink] itself was high-enough tier she might draw attention, but she could fall back on Nysari’s identity if she needed to.

In preparation for heading to the Institute, Vivi layered carefully obscured illusions onto her apprentice. The same that she used to hide her tear-trail tattoos and robe designs. Barring a stray dragon casting detection spells directly on her, nobody should have the slightest idea; Saffra might as well have been transmogrified.

Admittedly, *Aeris* had recognized Vivi, but that was because he was one of very few individuals who had worked closely with the Sorceress over the years. Hiding her tattoos hadn’t fooled him for a second.

Saffra had requested black for her new hair color. She’d cut it short to better suit her adventuring career, so Vivi didn’t tweak the length; it already was different from what it used to be. She considered changing Saffra’s height and other basic features, but the more an illusion tried to change the easier a powerful individual could see through it—less was more, in this domain. Besides, Saffra seemed convinced that nobody would recognize her even if they hadn’t chosen to take these precautions. She’d just been some random second-year who’d gotten into drama, so it wasn’t like everyone in the Institute knew her by face, much less well enough that they would spot her from across the library even with her hair cut and dyed. Also, nearly a year had passed.

Once that was done, Vivi [Blinked] them onto an empty alleyway near the Institute. They took the elevator up onto the Institute’s sky-island campus, and Saffra seemed jumpy enough that Vivi wondered whether she should have made this offer at all. *Maybe I should’ve dropped a warp anchor in the library and taken Saffra straight there. That might’ve helped with some of her nerves.*

Saffra relaxed slightly after they’d passed by various Institute-goers and nobody had given her a second glance. Their attention fell generally on

Vivi, the bigger curiosity by far. The Institute was composed almost entirely of humans and beastkin, probably because of how differently the long-lived and short-lived races developed mentally, physically, and strength-wise. Demons and elves leveled slower; hence, they had their own academies. So Vivi's short stature—suggesting she was a student—despite her clear demonic heritage made her an object of interest to anyone passing by.

"I should mention," Vivi said as they ascended to the first floor of the library via an elevator, "that you should call me Nysari when we're in public. That's the persona that will have access to the restricted sections of the library."

Though she didn't know yet if she *did* have access. It just seemed like something Rafael would have arranged—or barring that, access would be implicit in her status as a high-ranking mage. She had appropriate identifying material: a signet ring with the Keresi seal and a 'letter of credence,' as Rafael had called it.

"Persona," Saffra repeated. "You have… several of those?"

"I do."

The elevator shuddered to a stop, and the gate swung open. Vivi strode down a short hallway and through a huge, arched doorway, and put eyes on the first floor of the Thaumaturgical Institute's library, one of the premier collections of knowledge in the world.

The Library spanned the entire diameter of the Institute, which was not a skinny tower by any imagination. Vivi's gaze drifted across the open space, taking in the millions—yes, surely millions—of books organized in shelves along the circular walls and throughout the ground floor. Enchantment-fueled glowing white orbs hovered throughout, washing the library in dim atmospheric light. The air was thick with the scent of paper and vellum.

The Library's design had changed less than she had expected, given that a century had passed. It was as grand a construction as she remembered. Mages did have a natural instinct to show off, after all, and since they were academic creatures by nature, the Institute's Library had been one of their great focuses. She stood at the entrance for a moment, absorbing the sight.

A receptionist sitting behind a half-moon desk blocked their passage deeper in. Vivi approached and stated her identity and explained the situation in brief. The poor woman immediately started sweating, surely concerned with how the strange demonic mage would respond to her words.

“Of course, any member of the First Blood is welcome to all but the highest level of the Library,” the woman assured her nervously, “though the Deep Archives are, unfortunately, restricted to Grand Magi and other officials with proper clearance.” She swallowed. “I see you don’t have a badge. I’m afraid I’ll need to see some… identifying documents? To confirm that you are who you say you are? No offense meant whatsoever, my lady, it’s just policy.”

The receptionist seemed braced for anger or worse, but Vivi of course offered no such thing. Vivi showed her signet ring and letter of credence, signed by the patriarch of the Keresi family. After inspecting the seal with an enchanted magnifying glass, the receptionist seemed immensely relieved.

“Thank you so much, Lady Keresi,” she said, handing the paper and ring back. “Please, let me know if you need anything at all.”

When they’d moved into the library and were out of hearing range, Saffra said, “Isn’t the First Blood basically the same as a ducal family? How do you *fake* an identity of one?”

“I have… connections.” Moving past that tricky question, she asked, “You know your way around?”

Saffra shot her a sidelong glance but didn’t comment on the vague explanation. “I do. The Library is easy to look through. Maps are everywhere. The helper golems will find specific books too, if you know the title or author.” She tilted her head. “I always wondered how they did that.”

Vivi’s gaze drifted over to one such helper golem. The iron constructs lumbered around with long gaits, blocky humanoid creatures with dull black gemstones for eyes. They trudged along the ground floor and the walkways lining the circular walls, stocking shelves or tracking down requests.

If they really could find a book by its title, Vivi was interested in how. That implied an extremely sophisticated construction, something novel even to Vivisari’s sensibilities. She couldn’t help but start churning over her own implementation: how would *she* create semi-intelligent helpers that could find any given book in a sea of tomes? The magic would be too complex to apply to any individual golem, so they surely linked to some master enchantment array.

“So what did you need again?” Saffra asked.

Her train of thought cut off, and she shelved that thought experiment for later. “Basic information. History, politics, geography. I’ll make copies, so I won’t need to sign them out. I just want material to poke through when I have a spare moment.”

“Make copies? Is that… allowed?”

“Is it?”

“I don’t think you’re allowed to make copies.”

“They’re for personal use, so it’s fine.”

Saffra opened her mouth, probably to contest that obviously incorrect point, then hesitated and closed it. “Anyway. Those will obviously all be on the ground floor. And then we’ll go to the higher ones, for instructive tomes?”

“Training material for you.” Vivi nodded. “Grab anything you want from this floor too.”

“To make copies of.”

“Yes.”

“How, again?”

“With magic.”

“There’s a spell to copy physical objects?”

“Not physical. Or, the copies won’t be *real*. But you’ll be able to interact with them. It’ll be a physical illusion, of sorts.”

“Illusions by definition aren’t physical,” Saffra said dubiously. “There’s no such thing as a ‘physical illusion.’”

“It’s an illusion with a physical aspect, then.”

“Right.” Saffra seemed torn between amusement and bewilderment. “Okay, so you said history, politics, geography. Probably some general encyclopedias? That’s gonna be in a lot of different sections. We should split up, otherwise it’ll take forever.”

Vivi’s eyebrows rose at the suggestion. “If you’re fine being alone.”

Saffra nodded, not conflicted. “Seriously, no one will recognize me like this.” She shook her head and set her short, jet-black hair bouncing. “I’ll keep an eye out too. I know how to walk around a library without setting it on fire, I promise.”

Vivi was somewhat worried about letting Saffra go off on her own, but she seemed certain that she would be fine, and it *would* take a long time hunting down each book if Vivi tried to do it herself.

If Fate truly was out to get Saffra and leaving her to her own devices for all of a few minutes spawned a debacle—well, then Vivi would take matters into her own hands. Maybe even happily.

Referencing the map, Vivi began her hunt. When she tracked down her first target and cracked open a random book to skim the words within, an unexpected burst of disorientation hit her.

There was so much *information* in that one page, those dense paragraphs of neat lettering. And there were millions of other books just like it scattered throughout the library. She had hardly forgotten that she'd been thrown into a new world, but the sheer quantity of history and culture in these shelves—these *insane* amounts of shelves—served as a stark and surreal reminder.

Shaking those feelings away, Vivi closed the book and cast [Illusory Scan]. A copy of the book's physical structure tucked itself away into an archive inside her head, which would let her call out a magical copy of it when needed.

After storing several more general resources on world history, she headed for the nearest library map to hunt down the next section. But a ping to her magical senses interrupted her.

She slowed, then came to a stop.

There, set into the wall and between two bookshelves, was a door.

An *absurdly* well-fortified door. On initial appraisal, she guessed that even *she* would have to put some elbow grease into battering the enchantments down. Not that it would give her genuine trouble, but the strength of the magic radiating off the unassuming slab of wood put even the Convoy's defenses to shame.

Sixteenth tier? Higher? What is something so obscenely defended doing here?

Vivi blinked at the door. She looked over both shoulders, then back. There were no signs or placards explaining its purpose. The door could be a simple staff entry or a secret passage into the most restricted sections of the library, where archmages hid away their personal codices. She had no idea.

And she didn't have opportunity to muse over which, because her attention immediately latched to something more important: the markings covering the rich teak wood. There was a half-finished spell design etched into it.

Is this the beginnings of a… a gravity spell?

A puzzle.

She was looking at a puzzle, she realized.

A really *interesting* one, too. It ensnared her attention wholly. Brow furrowing, she flicked her eyes across the dense, complicated design, trying to make sense of it. The longer she studied, the more certain she grew: it *was* the outline to a gravity spell. Specifically, a way to attach anchors onto objects—or any target?—that would subsequently be attracted to each other.

Had she gotten that right? Yes, she thought she had. She saw no other unifying purpose behind the design. But it was tricky to make sense of. She could, with relative ease, create a spell circle that accomplished something similar from scratch, but having to understand someone else's spell and modify it was far more difficult.

What a delightful brain teaser.

If she hadn't been so absorbed in the discovery, she probably would've thought twice about inscribing symbols into strange doors sequestered in random sections of the Institute Library. As it was, she traced the runes with a few quick brushes of mana, feeling immensely satisfied with how quickly she'd grasped the solution—her brain passively working on alternate, more efficient ways she could've patched together the incomplete design.

Nothing dramatic happened. Horns didn't blare and the door didn't explode to release hellfire. A slight *click* echoed through the air, and the defensive enchantments guarding the door faded. The slab of wood creaked open no more than two inches, allowing entry if she so desired.

She frowned, only then realizing her judgment had faltered again. *This is how you keep getting into ridiculous situations, Vivi.* Not that it seemed to have mattered. She'd just solved some interesting puzzle left behind by an Institute mage. Maybe there were tons of these scattered throughout the Institute, serving as challenges for the students. The building *had* been the congregating point of mages for millennia. Quirky situations like magical puzzle doors were probably everywhere.

Sensing an approaching presence, she looked over her shoulder—only to find Saffra slam to a stop and stare at her and the door with abject horror, a bundle of books hugged in her arms.

Vivi read the expression and stifled a sigh.

"What did I do now?"

"Isn't that *Osmian's Door?"* Saffra choked out.

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OSMIAN'S DOOR

"Osmian? The archmage?" Vivi asked.

"Yes, the archmage! The founder of the Institute!"

"This is his door?" Vivi raised an eyebrow at the cracked-open entrance. "How so? And what's the big deal? Why are you so flustered?"

"I'm not flustered," Saffra said defensively. "But I thought we were just grabbing some books. You—you went and opened *Osmian's* Door?" She hurriedly looked around, checking to confirm that nobody was nearby. A lumbering golem didn't spare them a glance. "Don't you know what that *means?"*

"Not in the slightest."

"I… well… neither do I, really."

The two of them stared at each other.

Saffra flushed. "But it *is* a big deal. It's supposed to hold Osmian's legacy. His inheritance. Or some kind of treasure? I don't know, really, I don't think anyone does. It's basically a folk tale. How did you open it? Archmage Lysander is the only one who ever has."

That caught Vivi by surprise. "Lysander? What about Aeris?"

"Er… no?" Saffra seemed confused by the question. Vivi had only asked because she'd thought Aeris would be the more talented of the two… though even Aeris had told her that Lysander was phenomenally skilled for his age. "Just the Headmaster. I think. I'm not sure if the door has ever *presented* itself to Archmage Aeris, though."

"What does that mean?"

“It shows up everywhere. Randomly. Usually only to full magi, but sometimes the upper-year students too. I think the library is one of the most common places?”

Interesting. “But what is it, exactly?”

“I… don’t know. It’s Osmian’s Door. There are trials inside. And some kind of reward. That’s what the rumors say.”

“Did Lysander fail at whatever it is, if it’s still showing up?”

“He never said.” Saffra’s bafflement at the situation morphed into a smirk. “But if he *did* pass, he totally would’ve bragged about it. So he must not have.” She wrinkled her nose. “Then again, he’s the only person to ever get the door open in the first place.” Her gaze drifted back to the ajar slab of wood. “I guess there’s two of you now.”

“It was just a moderately difficult puzzle.” But even Vivi knew *moderately difficult* meant outrageously challenging for most magic users. Likely closer to impossible. “Most people aren’t familiar with gravity spells, I suppose.”

“Is that what that is?” Saffra’s brow furrowed as she peered at the design etched on the door. She lost herself for a moment, then jolted. “Never mind that! We have to go. Someone will see us.” She half-turned to scurry away, then froze. Slowly, she faced back to Vivi. “But… you can’t *not* go in. You opened Osmian’s Door!”

Vivi mulled over the situation. “Alright, let’s go find out what’s inside.” Though this event was a diversion, and she was busy, she was too intrigued to ignore the development.

Saffra blinked. She pointed at herself. “What? *I’m* not allowed inside.”

“Why not?”

“I’m… just not, obviously.”

“Where does it say that?” Vivi made a point of searching the door and surrounding area. “Come.”

Vivi beckoned for her to follow, walking up to the threshold and pushing the slab of wood farther open with her foot. A dark void met her. She stuck a hand in, felt no adverse effects, and nodded to herself.

Seeing how she was entering a strange archmage’s personal ‘room of trials,’ or whatever was going on here, she double-checked that the appropriate defenses were on Saffra, then grabbed her by the elbow to be safe. Physical contact would make splitting them up more difficult.

“This ought to be interesting,” she murmured to herself.

With Vivi leading, they plunged into the inky blackness. Immediately on entering, teleportation magic tried to grab them. She allowed it, since she could only assume that the spell intended to ferry them from the library to wherever the trials took place. Osmian was a heroic archmage of ancient history. He wouldn't teleport them into the middle of a volcano. Probably. Even if he did, she could deal with it.

In a single footstep, they passed through the boundary and appeared—

—in an astoundingly mundane office.

The room wasn't spacious, but not cramped either, and was lit by a single floating white orb that bobbed near the ceiling. Bookshelves lined three walls, packed with faded brown leather tomes. A large mahogany desk dominated the center, behind which sat a high-backed chair with worn cushions. The desk held three items: an inkwell and quill, a brass astrolabe, and a leather journal bound with a silver clasp. The fourth wall, the one behind them—from which there was no door they could have emerged—held a large window where stars wheeled across the night sky. Where *was* this office, anyway? Were they even in Meridian anymore?

Vivi released her grip on Saffra and looked around curiously. The journal magnetically drew her attention—not by some magical ensnarement, but because she herself felt an urge to read through it. Archmage Osmian's personal journal. Who knew what she might find inside? The bookshelves would be her next targets; ancient tomes were equally exciting.

Just as her fingertips brushed the journal, though, a papery voice grouched from behind her, "No respect for a man's privacy, I see. Why did you bring the brat with you?"

Saffra spun and faced the voice. Vivi turned slower, withdrawing her hand from the journal. She wasn't quite as caught by surprise, since she had felt a presence manifest a moment earlier through a short-range teleportation spell.

There, at the other end of the room, gaze on an open book and not them, stood a silvery ghost. He thumbed through the tome, flipping pages idly and not sparing them so much as a glance. The man bore a clear resemblance to one of the towering portraits Vivi had seen on the first floor of the Institute—those of the scant few prior Headmasters.

"Archmage Osmian," Saffra breathed.

Vivi stood there, stunned. But not because of the sudden presence of a legendary archmage's ghost. Honestly, what else could she have expected from this sort of situation? No, her surprise came from something else. An ethereal, crystallized shard hovered inside the silvery essence of the ghost, and upon recognizing what it was, she was nothing less than astonished.

"How did you do that?" Vivi asked in fascination, gaze locked not on the man's eyes but just beneath his collarbone, where that fragment lay.

Osmian's lip pulled up in distaste, still not dignifying her with his full attention. "If even that impresses you," he said, "you'll be even more of a disappointment than that last boy."

"No, not the teleportation," Vivi said. "You ripped out a piece of your *soul*. That vessel isn't a projection—it's alive. It's *you*, in some sense. How?"

The ghost of Osmian froze. His head turned slowly toward her, the bored disdain in his eyes shifting immediately to curiosity. He closed the book with a snap.

"My," the old man said. "You have sharp senses *indeed,* to read that with a glance."

"Thank you." Vivi hesitated, remembering what he had said earlier. "Also, don't call my apprentice a brat."

Osmian frowned. His attention slid over to Saffra, who was watching the exchange with wide eyes. "Why bring her?" he asked again, that obvious hint of irritation returning.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Demon or not, if you've walked the halls of the Thaumaturgical Institute, much less passed my filter, you surely know where you stand. My room of trials. Why bring a child to such a place? She doesn't belong."

"I'm thirteen," Saffra interjected, her awe for the ghost washing away to annoyance of her own.

Osmian gave Vivi a significant look, and Vivi had to admit Saffra had helped make his point.

Instead of addressing that, Vivi said, "How did you stabilize a soul fragment?" That was the only truly intractable problem with this vessel, one that even she struggled to come up with a solution to. "Splitting a soul without killing yourself is an astounding achievement itself, but not theoretically impossible. A fragment, however, can't survive outside of the whole. Fundamentally. How did you do it?"

“You’re well versed in necromancy,” he said mildly. “Your specialty?”

She wasn’t especially knowledgeable in that field, but neither was she particularly weak. “I’ve studied every branch of magic to some degree,” she responded vaguely. “Necromancy more than some.”

“*Every* field?” He snorted. “That’s a bold claim. Hm. You’re correct: this vessel will expire, and the shard is not truly self-sufficient, so it will destabilize and decay. Simply much slower than under natural conditions. And thus, no, this vessel is not as indefinite as other, more artificial workings. But more whole for that fact. As with any living creature, death is what defines us.”

“But *how*?”

“Even I couldn’t give a satisfactory answer,” Osmian admitted. “That particular genius was Lucorius’s.”

The answer hit Vivi like a slap in the face. Osmian continued, oblivious, the sort of man far too interested in his own words to concern himself with another person’s reaction.

“The sum project,” he said, waving at his ghostly form, “is a collaboration, but the most insolvable aspect was his. I’ve wondered about it myself on many an occasion.”

“Lucorius?” Saffra asked, and Vivi almost held a hand up to stop her, but it was too late.

Osmian looked at her oddly. “From what backwaters did you venture, child, if *Lucorius’s* name hasn’t graced your ears? I understand many centuries have passed, but his was not a legacy that would fade. A peer of mine, easily. Perhaps greater, mmh, it is debatable. You are a mage, are you not? Have you no shame in knowing so little of your forebears?”

Saffra most definitely knew of Lucorius… just not by his original name. Apparently, the Institute did not teach the truth behind one of their greatest failures. Saffra and the rest of the world knew that man by a different title: the Umbral Regent.

Vivi diverted the conversation before the confusion on Saffra’s face manifested into a question that would bring the truth to light. That was *far* too heavy a topic to broach with Osmian’s shade. He clearly thought well of Lucorius. Had trusted him enough to perform joint soul-surgery. He had no idea his well-respected archmage-in-arms had absorbed the souls of hundreds of thousands to claim the cursed immortality of lichhood.

Though how could he *not* know the fate of his colleague? An educated guess supplied itself to her readily: this ghost, and the fragment of a soul within, had been born before Lucorius's ambition had led him down that path. His memories were thus limited to the time before Lucorius's transgressions.

"The puzzle on the door was a gravity spell," Vivi said. "That was your specialty, wasn't it? Gravity?"

The man didn't think twice about her deflection, though Saffra looked curiously at Vivi.

"Indeed, it was." Osmian lifted his chin and arrogantly continued, "As I'm sure you're aware, I was the one responsible for setting aloft the very grounds the Institute stands upon."

Vivi hadn't known that. She'd been obsessed with Seven Cataclysms, but she didn't have a perfect memory. From what she could remember, Osmian had merely been referenced as 'the founder of the Institute.' He hadn't been a prominent character. She supposed that as a founding father, it was logical he had been the one to lift the campus.

"But that is neither here nor there," Osmian said. "I am not interested in chitter-chatter. This form has an expiration, so I must seek out my inheritor before that time comes." He grimaced. "With how the search has gone across a millennium, I fear the worst: that I will have to *settle*." Genuine disgust warped his wrinkled features, but it didn't seem to be aimed at Vivi herself. "Now. I will present three trials and determine your suitability to inherit my personal grimoires and be named my apprentice post-mortem."

That was the purpose of this room? Had he really not found someone he wanted to name his apprentice in life? Osmian had been ancient by human standards—more powerful than Aeris, and thus longer-lived. How could he *not* have found someone to call his apprentice after so many centuries?

Vivi suspected his standards weren't 'high,' then, so much as 'completely unattainable.' Even Archmage Lysander had apparently fallen short.

"What if I don't want them?" Vivi asked.

"Naturally, in the course of those trials, I will appraise—" He cut off as his eyes widened, recognizing what she had said. "Excuse me?"

"I don't think I should be the one you give your life's work to, assuming it's instructive or symbolic in nature," Vivi said. "Though I'm definitely interested in a conversation, since I have questions you might be able to

answer.” She paused. “And the trials would be interesting to take regardless, if you’ll allow it,” she added. “I just don’t think I’d make a suitable apprentice or inheritor.”

Saffra stifled a snort to Vivi’s side. Osmian was too flabbergasted to take offense. “You’re not *interested* in the personal journals and grimoires of one of history’s supreme archmages?” he asked.

“I am,” Vivi said, though she found that description rather self-important. “It just wouldn’t feel right if you’re expecting me to consider myself your apprentice. Or follow in your footsteps somehow, continue some project or grand working of yours? I’m very busy. But I’d love a conversation between peers.”

“Peers!” He gaped at her. “And who are you, might I ask?” His tone took on an aggressive edge. “I skipped an introduction because I care not for titles and reputation, only the merit one displays in front of my own two eyes. But clearly you see yourself as a mighty master of the arcane indeed, to be so dismissive of this opportunity!” He huffed, missing the irony of his words, then hesitated and grimaced. “It was well-spotted, your appraisal of this form. No applicant before has deduced my nature so quickly. An archmage yourself, and a studied one, I presume, but any who would pass my first filter would be—I have little interest in training those a thousand levels my lesser.” He flicked a borderline disdainful look at Saffra, who shifted uncomfortably.

Vivi’s eyes narrowed. The arrogance was exhausting, but she didn’t mind if he insulted or cast doubts on *her*. Saffra was a different matter. That comment bordered on what she would allow, so she didn’t push back—yet.

“I agree. My name doesn’t matter. Call me Nysari, or Vivi.” She considered him. “I have questions on an esoteric branch of magic where your insight might help. If I face these trials and pass, can you reward me instead with a conversation?”

She, of course, wanted to pick his brain on the topic of the dimensional anomaly. She didn’t have great hopes he would actually be able to help, but the possibility had turned this detour from ‘distraction’ into ‘possible boon.’

“An esoteric branch? Which?”

“Do you agree to the terms?”

The ghost of Archmage Osmian seemed torn between annoyance, indignation, and unbridled interest. He likely sensed that Vivi’s claim of

being his peer was not entirely hot air. And any academic, which this man certainly was, would be intrigued by a mention of ‘esoteric magics.’

“Very well,” he said after a long moment. “Let’s see if this arrogance of yours is founded; you have interested me. We will discuss inheritance—or a *reward*—afterward. Your apprentice will not be coming, however; as I said, she does not belong.” Before Vivi could reply to that, he continued: “Behold, then, the first trial.”

He snapped his ghostly fingers, and magic filled the air.

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FLY

Several arcane workings activated at once.

First and foremost, a teleportation spell reached out and tried to grab Saffra—no doubt Osmian's attempt to send her away. Vivi was near certain the spell would have bounced impotently off the defensive shields she had placed on her apprentice, but she squashed the magic herself on principle.

Secondly, she appeared on the flat top of an unfamiliar mountain range, gazing out across flowing green plains. For a moment, she was startled: unwanted magic had affected her? How else could she have appeared in a different location if not through a teleportation spell? But then she identified a shimmering quality to the landscape, and she understood.

Clever—and carefully constructed. Osmian had primed her to expect teleportation when he'd said he 'would not be taking Saffra with them.' But he hadn't *taken* them anywhere. Rather, Vivi had shot down his attempted dismissal of Saffra, and so neither of them had moved an inch. Everything *around* them had changed.

"Did you *[Dispel]* that?" Osmian asked, shocked. "So quickly?"

Vivi summoned her staff, stepped up to the ghost, and smacked him on the head. It wasn't the gentle, admonishing tap she sometimes gave to Saffra. Wood cracked against ghostly flesh, and the man reeled back, clutching at the spot.

"Don't use magic on my apprentice without asking," Vivi ordered flatly.

She could have taken far more offense at something that could easily be construed as magical assault. Especially when she didn't know where

Osmian had been trying to send the girl. The only reason she wasn't genuinely mad was because she knew there had been no malice behind his actions.

"You struck me!" Osmian gaped at her, rubbing at the top of his head.

"As far as I'm concerned, that was a warranted response."

"No. You *struck* me. How? This form is incorporeal! What is that staff made of?"

Vivi frowned at him. *That* was what he was focusing on?

He seemed to realize the oddity of his priorities himself, straightening and clearing his throat. "I was merely sending her back to the library," he said, looking down his nose at her. "As I said, a child has no place in these trials. She'll only be a distraction."

"That's for me to decide." She almost left it at that, then chose to give the more practical explanation. "She was expelled from the Institute, so I won't leave her there on her own. Something might happen while I'm occupied."

Osmian blinked in surprise. "She was expelled?"

Saffra's cheeks colored, but rather than shriveling in on herself, she stuck her chin up and demanded, "Yeah, what about it?"

"What for?" Osmian asked. There was surprisingly no condemnation in his tone, just curiosity.

"That's none of your business, is it?" Saffra shot back. She was not, apparently, intimidated by legendary figures of history… or at least not when they were annoying her.

Osmian frowned. "Mind your tone, girl." His annoyance then turned to Vivi. "Are all the youth so disrespectful, or is this a failure of your own? What have you been teaching her?"

Vivi suppressed a sigh. Crotchety old men would be the same everywhere, it seemed. She had great respect for Osmian simply from what she knew about him through the game's lore, but he wasn't especially endearing in person.

She decided to bring the topic back to what mattered. "Don't cast spells on someone's apprentice without permission. What are they teaching *elders*, if they think that's acceptable?"

Osmian seemed somewhat embarrassed by her accusation, but indignation was the more prominent emotion. "I hardly assaulted her. I was merely sending her away."

“And how would *you* have reacted, if someone cast foreign magic on someone under your protection?”

He opened his mouth, about to happily contradict her point, then grimaced and closed it. “Fine, yes, I understand. But there was no ill intent in my actions.”

She gave him a pointed look. “If there were, I wouldn’t have just smacked you with my staff.”

He rubbed the spot at the reminder. Strangely, he still didn’t seem upset by the physical assault. Instead, he rolled his jaw side to side before guessing, “Wraithbone.”

“What?”

“The material of your staff. The appearance doesn’t match, but there are very few substances that can interact naturally with the incorporeal. Am I correct?”

It’s rather revealing of his character, Vivi thought with amusement, *that he cares more about* how *he was hit, rather than that he was. Or the why.* To this old archmage, academic interest superseded social missteps, whether his or another’s, several times over. She supposed they weren’t too different in that regard.

Unfortunately, the origin of her staff was a thorny topic, seeing how she’d gotten it from raiding the Burial Room of the Ashen Hierophant. She dropped the item into her inventory and said, “I’ll give you answers when you give me mine. During our conversation after these trials.”

“Presuming you pass. Arrogant creature… though I have yet to find one of considerable skill who is not. However they may hide it for the sake of their public image.” He snorted at the concept. “Very well. If you insist she remains,” he waved dismissively at Saffra, “she is your responsibility. And she will remain silent.”

Vivi’s eyes narrowed, but the request wasn’t actually unreasonable. These were Osmian’s trials, and his door she had walked through. His words again bordered on rude, though, so she found herself further annoyed. She chose congeniality, since he obviously wouldn’t.

“It was cleverly done,” she said, nodding in the direction of the mountainside sloping thousands of feet to the plains below. “You didn’t teleport us. I almost thought you did. You teleported the office away, and a realistic stage around us”—she twisted a foot into the soft dirt beneath her to indicate the ‘stage’ she was talking about, since the dirt, shrubbery, and

other immediately local scenery were most definitely real—“and also erected a subtle illusion to serve as the backdrop. I bet it would impress most people, being ‘warped’ with no spell circle, spatial sensations, or other indicators. How are you casting without casting, anyway? Preset enchantments? How do you fuel them? A soul fragment generates no mana, so that means you’re drawing power from elsewhere. An ongoing ritual?”

Osmian leveled an appraising gaze at her. “You truly are a cut above that last boy who made it here.”

“Lysander?”

“Was that his name?” He shrugged. “A disappointment, as they all were. Yes, you have surmised the basics—he was baffled by what was ultimately little more than a parlor trick. I dismissed him before so much as administering the first trial. Talented, undoubtedly, but I seek more than run-of-the-mill, once-in-a-century talent. But enough of these distractions.”

He strode calmly over to the cusp of the mountain, raised a hand, and began to cast. Or… began to sort of cast. As before, Vivi *felt* the magic, though she couldn’t quite tell where the mana was coming from. Certainly not Osmian’s ghost.

She wondered if he *could* cast. More likely, the original Osmian had given this pseudo-construct the ability to interact with premade mechanisms; this whole ‘room of trials’ was probably a shockingly complex arrangement of enchantments and rituals to fuel them. Osmian *had* been more famed for those two disciplines than his raw spell casting. He’d been an academic, not a combat-mage like Vivi herself, and thus less concerned with the primary benefits of pure spell casting: that spells could be used anywhere, quickly, and were supplied from one’s own core. If one didn’t care for that, enchantments and rituals were more often useful forms of magic.

“Behold,” Osmian said. “An unfinished design of my own creation.” An illusory spell circle appeared in front of him, and he gestured at it. “Your task is simple. Complete it, then use it to cross the range.”

He pointed to a distant mountaintop to indicate the finish line.

Vivi looked at the design…

…and was confused.

Her brow furrowed.

Was she missing something?

“Isn’t that [Fly]?” Saffra blurted out.

Osmian seemed instantly irritated at the girl for speaking, then digested her words, and the expression morphed to confusion.

"[Fly]?" he asked.

"It totally is! That's a public-record spell," Saffra said. "I've seen it before. It's [Fly], but missing the modern control arrays. Right?"

That was indeed why Vivi had been confused. Even Osmian's 'basic filter'—the puzzle on his door—had seemed many times more complex than this.

But only because it had been *novel*, Vivi realized. She used [Fly] all the time, so that familiarity made it seem simpler than it was. In reality, though only tier ten, its complexity prevented even most Titled-rank mages from properly forming and incanting it. An ongoing effect that allowed intuitive control of one's body in total defiance of gravity was no simple thing. Truth told, even Vivi herself was impressed by the relatively low-tier spell's architecture.

"You were the progenitor of [Fly]?" Vivi asked, intrigued. "I suppose that makes sense. You were a gravity specialist." *The* gravity specialist.

"[Fly]? [Fly]? What nonsense do you two speak?" Osmian waved a hand at the spell circle, agitated. "This is [Earthly Shackles Unbound]!" He seemed almost horrified as his attention pivoted between the two of them. "Surely this grand working was not perfected in my absence and given a name of *[Fly]*."

Vivi shared a look with Saffra, who shifted in discomfort and gestured hurriedly for Vivi to answer him.

"I do think your name is better," Vivi hedged, feeling awkward. She supposed the mundane title for such an astounding design *was* rather underwhelming.

If ghosts could pale, Osmian would have. "[Fly]," he said faintly. Cobbling his composure back together, he said, voice strained, "I knew millennia passing might bring wondrous advancements to spell design, such that even my grand workings might become commonplace… but such ignominy! [Fly]? [Fly]! I will have the one responsible strung up and lashed! Do they have no *respect* for such a wondrous design?"

Vivi shifted her weight side to side, genuinely unsure how to respond. "Does this… change the trial?"

Osmian gave her a sour look. "No. Demonstrate that you're capable of forming and controlling… *[Earthly Shackles Unbound]*, and I will consider

you to have passed. Spellcasting is the least significant of my trials, and I've already seen your competence in it. My legacy was never that of a combat mage."

Does that mean the later challenges will be enchantment- or ritualism-based? she thought, intrigued. *If so, I might actually fail.* She was more than competent with enchantments, but Vivisari, while familiar with nearly all aspects of magic, had little experience with ritualism.

She focused on the task presented to her. Bright white runes appeared in the air as she painted out [Fly]. Osmian watched with rising eyebrows. There had been a number of improvements made over the years, and Vivi suspected her own version wasn't standard either; she'd made her own personal modifications.

"Incredible," Osmian murmured as gravity lost its hold on Vivi. She floated up, then side to side, demonstrating the fluidity and ease of movement. "The task is clearly perfunctory to you, but complete the trial as prescribed." He gestured at the distant mountaintop.

Vivi did so, putting the spell on Saffra and flying over as a pair. Seeing how this entire environment was a stage, the room followed them and the illusion shifted as well, so seamlessly that it seemed nothing was amiss—as if she really were out in the wilderness. For all that [Fly] had dumbfounded Osmian, the man was clearly a genius; even the 'parlor tricks' that composed this room held magic that impressed Vivi, and she wasn't an easy mage to impress.

Osmian was like a founding mathematician. One of the geniuses who had invented algebra, however simplistic the field seemed now, to the point it was taught to children as young as eleven or twelve.

When she set down, Osmian nodded. "Very well. It is undeniable that your spellcasting abilities more than meet my standards. But now let us see your proficiency in enchanting. I will need to teleport us." He glanced at Saffra, and his lip pulled up in annoyance. "Your apprentice… may accompany us."

He snapped his fingers and the environment flickered. Vivi stood in darkness. Magic grabbed at her and Saffra, and she reluctantly allowed it this time. A moment later, light returned.

She stood in a new environment: a lush tropical island. A boulder the size of a small house sat in front of her. Her magical senses indicated nothing special about the huge rock.

She was pretty sure she hadn’t been [Warped], just [Blinked]. That meant she couldn’t be far from the Institute. So how was she standing on a tropical island underneath a blue sky? Squinting, she identified illusions once more, though that explained only half of the puzzle. They’d definitely moved a great distance from Osmian’s staging room; he’d needed to [Blink] them to a larger arena.

Where are these places? she wondered. *Underneath the Institute?*

Osmian’s next demand cut those musings off. “Devise an enchantment to make this boulder orbit around the island's perimeter,” he commanded. “You may presume an energy source is provided via an ongoing ritual.”

Vivi considered the challenge.

An orbiting gravity enchantment?

“Interesting,” she said.

Osmian’s trial of flight had been trivial, but only because [Fly] had been perfected across the years since his death. This was a task with no premade solution. She would need to construct one from scratch.

Which direction to tackle it from?

She paid no mind to Osmian or Saffra, the puzzle ensnaring her attention. It was certainly more challenging than the half-completed design on Osmian’s Door, though hardly on the level of the dimensional anomaly. That, she had spent days ruminating over and made little progress on.

In the end, composing a complex gravity enchantment could only serve as a temporary entertainment. But she enjoyed working through the design in her head nonetheless—she appreciated magic in nearly all its forms.

“Do you have tools and materials?” she asked, having sketched out the general idea.

“Simply present the design for now. No inscription necessary.”

“Very well.”

She began to draw using an illusion laid out in the air ahead of the three of them. Osmian snorted when she started, giving a derisive dismissal of “At least *consider* your approach first, woman. Only a fool rushes headlong into a project of such…”

He trailed off as the various enchantments took shape.

“No,” he announced, pointing at a clumping of runes. “You’ll need to… if you want…” His mouth shut when more glowing symbols joined together. “Ah, I see. My mistake.” He cleared his throat. “Novel, yes, but—aha! I can see you haven’t taken into account the…”

Once more he cut himself off, and this time stayed silent. He gazed at the array of growing enchantments not with awe, but stony silence.

Once she'd finished, he stared at the enchantments written in the runic language of High Arcana for a long minute. Finally, he shook himself.

"Well. Some of your clusters are oblique in purpose, I must admit, but the core design is sensible. I see no major flaws. Not how I would've approached it, but…" He was silent for another moment, then turned to frown at her. "What rank in enchanting do you hold?"

"Does it matter?"

"Nineties? The same as I?"

Vivi inclined her head. That much had to be obvious to someone as experienced as him.

"Interesting," Osmian said. His expression remained difficult to interpret. He was looking at her with serious, appraising eyes.

"In any case," he said, "let us see if this design is as impressive as it appears." He smiled, some of the smugness returning. "I have my reservations. Your work here will be used in the third, and final, trial: To fuel this enchantment, you may not use your own mana. Draw the requisite energy from the flora of the island itself."

Ah. It was as Vivi had expected.

A trial of ritualism.

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RITUALISM

Draw the necessary energy from the island itself.

She might be able to manage that. But of the major magical disciplines, ritualism was by far her weakest—and certainly her worst among the three fields Osmian was testing her on. Vivisari had been an accomplished spellcaster for obvious reasons: her adventures against the Cataclysms had forged her into such. Likewise, a decade of campaigns had given her plenty of rare materials and experience in enchanting, since she'd constantly made legendary gear for herself and her teammates.

But rituals? Vivisari had never concerned herself with *rituals*. She had more experience dealing with their catastrophic fallout than creating ones herself. At least a few of the Cataclysms had spawned from rituals gone wrong—or right, depending on perspective. The Umbral Regent's ascension into lichhood, for example, but also some of the more grotesque of the Flesh-Weaver's work, and of course the Shattered Oracle's glimpse into the unknowable and his subsequent madness. Vivi wouldn't have been surprised if the Colossus and the Maw were results of rituals themselves, though it was possible they were simply ancient mega-fauna. The game's lore had never concretely defined their origin.

"Fuel the enchantments using the flora of the island," Vivi said, "but without killing anything, I assume?"

Osmian snorted. "Yes, the orbital enchantment should persist indefinitely. That was clearly implied."

Vivi didn’t think he needed to be snarky about it, but she knew by now that this man wasn’t very pleasant. She wouldn’t stoop to his level and return the attitude.

“I expect that will be outside of my capabilities, then,” she admitted.

Osmian made as if to reply, paused, then blinked at her. “Truly?” he asked quizzically. “You say so definitively?”

“I know very little of ritualism. The basics, yes, and I could compose the *structural* elements of the ritual, but when it comes to the conceptual, the decisions and guidance there… no. I don’t have much confidence.”

“Conceptual elements?” Saffra asked. “What does that mean?”

Osmian shot an annoyed glance at the catgirl, and Vivi summoned and raised her staff at the man in a vaguely threatening manner. The ghostly archmage wisely chose to let the interruption pass, though Saffra colored, probably not having meant to interject—she was just curious.

“Rituals are considerably less ordered than enchantments and spell circles,” Vivi answered. “You haven’t taken a class on them? They aren’t in the curriculum?”

“They are higher up, but not for the early years, no. They weren’t even talked about in general terms.”

“I would hope not,” Osmian huffed. “Ritualistic magic carries *far* greater potential for catastrophe than ordered magic. Even a low-level mage could call down ruin with nothing but basic knowledge. The discipline is well-guarded for a reason.” Lifting his chin, he continued, “That said, the potential for *any* working of wonder is greater—those of noble purpose, too. Merely look at the Institute: no mage could lift an island and keep it afloat for more than a millennium with their *own* mana.”

Saffra hesitated at his words, then shared a look with Vivi, who could intuit what she was thinking—could *Vivi* do such a thing?

Probably not. Not in a single cast. A millennium was a long time and the Institute’s campus quite large. Even she had a limited mana pool.

Answering Saffra’s question, Vivi said, “Creating the framework of a ritual requires familiarity with spell design and the runic language of High Arcana—that’s what the ‘ordered’ half of a ritual is. But in the best of cases, those designs are just a skeleton. The instructions might not be strictly obeyed, like with spellcasting and enchantments.”

Osmian snorted. “That is a correct if amateurish explanation, yes.”

Vivi almost sniped something back, because the man's smug attitude was getting on her nerves, but she reined herself in and considered. Osmian genuinely might be one of the most capable—non-insane, non-cultist—ritualists in history. In this domain, his arrogance had been earned.

She gestured for him to elaborate, and he paused, grimaced, and did so. Though his tone was impatient, he quickly explained the basics:

"There is the ordered design, yes, written in High Arcana. But there are also the *conceptual* elements that guide the ritual's effect, and arguably more so. Foremost: all rituals are invoked with a sacrifice. This sacrifice must have *weight*, and will influence how the ritual manifests. This is why so many cultists use blood sacrifices." He wrinkled his nose. "A shortcut, but an effective one. Life is heavy and in all cases it provides ample fuel. With any sacrifice, you must have conceptual dominion over your target, what you are drawing energy from. Dominion over, for example, a man strapped to an altar with your knife at his throat is easy to understand: that control cannot be questioned, and such a sacrifice will always be accepted. Though there are more *conceptual* dominions to claim than the bloody ones preferred by cultists."

A sudden realization hit Vivi. "Like that of a founder of an institution and the sworn mages within."

Osmian paused, then turned and eyed her. "Indeed. That is certainly a dominion of sorts."

"This trial obviously mirrors your lifting of the Institute," Vivi explained. "I was wondering how you fuel those enchantments. You want me to drain the plant life on the island… which means you drain the *mages* of the Institute, don't you? That's where the ongoing power comes from."

Saffra's eyes widened, and she looked nervously at Osmian.

Osmian scoffed. "You think it some nefarious plot? The ritual only targets full magi or higher, girl, and siphons those who idle about with nearly full mana pools. They are aware of it. Or at least *should be*."

Vivi was impressed. "That's a sophisticated ritual, if it targets so precisely and never goes astray." And knowing how disastrously magic went astray, the ritual faltering even slightly could mean unsuspecting mages being drained to a husk in an instant.

"By the standards of an amateur, perhaps." He sniffed. Then he cleared his throat and shifted in place. "Well, no, it was a significant working even

for me—one of my crowning achievements. Nevertheless. Such a thing is more than possible; rituals are only unpredictable to the unpracticed."

Vivi worked hard not to roll her eyes. "I see. We were discussing dominion…?"

Osmian glared at her. "I'm glad you're using my limited lifespan to request a lecture on basic ritualism." But he faced Saffra and continued nevertheless: "Dominion. You may sacrifice anything you have conceptual control, or dominance, over, though the less distinct and undeniable that control, the more likely something will go wrong. Rituals are fundamentally wild magic. All magic is, but as your master indicated, some forms less so. You may establish a complex framework in High Arcana if you desire, but in the end a ritual's design may be as simple as this."

He traced his finger into the air, and a rune appeared.

Summon.

"Fuel that with sufficient power, make a sacrifice with proper invocation, and a ritual would succeed—it would even align to your mental *intent*, regardless of formal instructions. Though what form it might take exactly, I shudder to imagine. I would advise against giving such free rein to magic," he said dryly. "Magic is not evil. Neither is it good. It is wondrous. And what is wondrous to man is often horrible beyond comprehension."

He waved his hand, dispelling the glowing symbol.

"In the best of cases, the guiding framework you lay down is a suggestion. A [Fireball] will always produce a fireball, and of roughly predictable size, velocity, and power. A mage's self-formed mana is the most docile version of magical energy to work with, hence the inherent stability of spellcasting—and the stability of the Institute's ritual, for that matter, since it intentionally uses mana as fuel." He smiled. "Stealing a living being's life force is far more unwieldy. Less so with plants lacking a mind… but still, vital energy is many, many times more prone to rampage. A trial is not supposed to be easy, is it?

"Now, enough wasting my time," Osmian said. "Begin."

Vivi humored him, if merely because she agreed that Osmian *did* have limited time on this mortal coil: his soul fragment was decaying slowly, and she would be surprised if he had more than a few months of life left in him. No doubt he went into hibernation between trials. Even five minutes was a concession, and he'd given it for something as mundane as providing a

lecture for Vivi and Saffra's sake, however condescending. He was a crotchety old man who clearly liked the sound of his voice… but Vivi didn't get the impression he was a bad person.

She didn't hold great hopes for success. Her spellcasting and enchanting abilities likely surpassed anybody in the world's, but when it came to ritualism, she was probably beneath the average archmage.

Nevertheless, she would give it a college try. Her only hope was that sufficiently elegant instructions—the ordered half of the ritual—could make up for her poor grasp and control over the more conceptual factors. Clearing out an area of flat stone, she began inscribing runes. If nothing else, she enjoyed the challenge of creating a framework that drained an island's flora without killing the weakest of the plants or draining so much the ecosystem would collapse over the years. Truly a conundrum.

Still, the first half of the task fell in line with traditional spellcasting enough that she could create something she felt had merit.

Then came the more conceptual parts.

The sacrifice. What sacrifice was most suitable? A poor decision could destabilize the entire project.

Technically, she could target anything she held conceptual dominion over. Osmian owned this island and had ceded it to her for use during the trial; anything within was thus up for grabs. But did she sacrifice an initial pool of vital energy, distributed across all the flora? A specific plant within, or maybe consume a whole section entirely? Something else—her own mana, possibly? Each choice would affect the ritual in drastic ways, guiding High Arcana be damned. Rituals were wild magic. Osmian might have implied that a truly competent ritualist could have consistent control… but Vivi simply didn't believe that. It was his ego speaking.

After a long deliberation, she decided to target a sacrifice that most closely mirrored the ongoing effect. She would sacrifice a small portion of the island's collective vital energies, hopefully without killing any individual plant even down to a blade of grass. That might be an excellent conceptual choice; it might be a terrible one. For once, Vivi was well and thoroughly out of her depth.

She didn't just have to worry about her decision-making, either. Implementation and control mattered too. A ritualist had to actively direct the magic once claimed, and through a far less structured process than spellcasting.

After invoking the ritual, she became conscious of energy all across the island, shimmering like pockets of green light to her senses. She reached out and grabbed at them, narrowing her grasp on each plant to only what was needed. She had very little practice with this, but Vivisari had experimented with most things magical, so she wasn't totally lacking experience. And Vivisari was a talented individual, to say the least.

She made the sacrifice. The island seemed to groan, the bright green life all around her fading. Yet without dying outright. That was promising.

Funneling the flood of vital energy rushing toward her—so similar to mana but most definitely not—she shoved the resource into the orbital enchantments she'd inscribed in preparation. Some rituals were more than simple power generators, but this one was not.

The enormous rock shuddered, then threw off the shackles of gravity and floated into the air.

Grass all around the island began to wither and blacken.

Her heart sank.

Instant failure… how depressing.

She aborted the ritual.

Canceling magic in any scenario was difficult—[Dispel] handled lower-tier spells just fine, and higher ones too for someone like Vivi. But an entire ritual fueled by vital energy, a force many times more unwieldy than mana? She needed to call on heavier dispersion-type magic than a simple [Dispel].

"**[Dissolution]**."

The command echoed across the island with such absolute authority that everything present—person, plant, or mana—froze. Like mist in bright sunlight, the vast energies running wild from the aborted ritual dispersed. In less than a second, nothing remained of what should have been a catastrophic amount of suddenly unbound power.

"I assume that's a failure," Vivi sighed, wrinkling her nose. She'd expected it from the start, but was still disappointed in herself.

Archmage Osmian gaped at her. "Did you purposefully *abort* a ritual? Are you insane, woman?"

"The guardrails I put down clearly failed." She nodded at a patch of blackened grass. It would probably recover; she'd canceled as soon as she'd seen the rampant draining. "I didn't want to ruin this lovely island of yours."

“I had my own precautions for mitigating a failed ritual! Of course I would. And what… what *was* that spell?”

“[Dissolution]?”

“No, the other *seventeenth-tier magic* you cast on a whim! [Dissolution]? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Vivi paused. It was actually two tiers stronger than seventeen, but she probably shouldn’t point that out. Osmian already seemed disturbed. “Yes. It works against most forms of energy, not just mana. I didn’t know you had your own precautions, and like I said, I didn’t want to kill everything on the island, which that ritual might have.”

Osmian stared at her.

“You aren’t a demon at all, are you?” he asked flatly. “I had my suspicions, but this…” He shook his head. “Seventeenth-tier magic, with no preparation. Good gods. What level are you, you monstrous creature?”

Vivi suppressed a grimace. He could only mean one thing by that. Wonderful. Yet another person assuming she was some ancient immortal, maybe even a dragon specifically. When she looked over at her apprentice, she saw Saffra bobbing her head, not surprised by anything that had happened. She seemed *pleased* that Osmian had finally come to ‘the obvious conclusion.’

“That was a failure, correct?” Vivi repeated.

He frowned at her. “It most certainly was.” His eyes drifted to the ritual inscribed on the sprawling stone surface they were both standing in the center of. “The High Arcana was phenomenal, as before. I doubt I could have improved on it myself… besides adapting it better for a ritual. You’re clearly inexperienced. *Too* much specificity harms the design, in this instance; rituals are not enchantments. Suggestions over orders. Besides that, your choice of sacrifice was abysmal… though control of the resulting energies was acceptable, bordering on clumsy. A very strange set of capabilities you have. Clearly you are a warmage. How could you possibly have expected that sacrifice to be suitable, though?”

“Please, illuminate me,” she said dryly. “What would have been better?” Somehow, she meant that sarcastically and earnestly at the same time. Though she was embarrassed by the failure, she was more than willing to learn about a magical field she considered herself deficient in.

“Hmph.” He narrowed his eyes and didn’t answer. “You were correct from the start, apparently: you are not a suitable woman to call yourself my

apprentice, or inherit my grimoires. Our specialties are too divergent, and I can tell you have little beyond superficial interest in ritualism."

She hesitated, then nodded in concession.

He snorted. "Very well, then. Let us have a conversation between peers, as you requested. This vessel's lifespan is limited, but I will make an exception for such an interesting guest." He waved his hand and teleported the three of them back to the office. Saffra twitched in surprise, but Vivi met Osmian's gaze evenly, not reacting to the sudden shift in environment. "What questions do you want answered?" he asked. "I have some of my own."

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ISABELLA

Vivi's conversation with Osmian turned out to be far less productive than she'd hoped. Though a fiercely educated man, he was an academic belonging to a period of history long past, and immense magical progress had been made in that time. There was no substitute for the slow, inevitable accrual of knowledge; even titans like him eventually wound up left behind.

Mostly, he huffed and sputtered about how dimensional magic was ludicrous at its conceptual core and that she should dispense with that inane notion and consider what she'd seen from a different, more reasonable angle. That by itself wasn't bad advice—she even humored him for a moment. But no. She knew what that fracture above Prismarche was, and what it meant.

As he'd said, Osmian had questions of his own, though mostly about the talents she had displayed during his trials. Interestingly, he seemed completely apathetic to world events and what had transpired in the many centuries since his death. Vivi had some strong suspicions why, especially combined with the fact he'd never discovered Lucorius's fate despite having hosted several trial-takers. If *she* designed a soul-shard copy of herself whose only purpose was to pass on her inheritance, she would install plenty of safeguards too. Like not allowing that shade to grow ambitious or seek their freedom. That could go rather catastrophically in all sorts of imaginative ways. Though Osmian's ghost presented strongly as a person, she didn't think he was quite as whole—in many senses of that word—as he seemed.

Beyond chalking up the encounter as an intriguing detour and not a total waste of time, she came away with a more tangible benefit: she got permission from the archmage's ghost to set a warp anchor in his office. Should she need to consult him, she could. He wouldn't be able to help her in the same manner as Aeris, since his lifespan was extraordinarily limited, but having the option in her back pocket was certainly a plus.

It also meant she had an easy way to visit the library whenever she wanted—or indeed most of the Institute, since Osmian's Door could manifest nearly anywhere.

And so, after concluding that interesting misadventure, she and Saffra returned to their library exploration as if nothing had happened. They collected a small pile of books containing all of the general information Vivi thought she might need, and she copied them and stored them away.

"Now the restricted floors," Vivi said, the two of them taking a long spiral staircase up. "If you're not allowed inside, I'll sneak you in with [Invisibility]."

"Won't they be able to detect that?"

"Not mine, they won't."

Well, probably. She couldn't say that with total certainty, which was why she'd been careful with what spells she'd been casting and where. But if it was the only way to ferry Saffra in, she would do so.

Yet the librarian she spoke to didn't protest Vivi's taking another person into the restricted archives. Not with Vivi's credentials, and with her naming Saffra her apprentice. Perhaps that would change for higher floors, but not the first level—which was apparently limited to full Institute Magi and important, well-connected guests. The lowest of the floors hardly held the most powerful tomes in the Institute's possession, so access wasn't especially exclusive.

Unlike the spacious, arena-like construction of the main floor, these shelves were smaller and fewer in number, more like a regular library rather than the awe-inspiring atrium below. Vivi and Saffra poked through the shelves together, though Saffra was far more intrigued than Vivi herself. Vivi found the experience *interesting*, yes, but she was disappointed in the quality of the tomes. Even the spell designs that the Institute hid away for their full members were rather crude, apparently. She no longer felt certain that handing over the primitive instructional manuals to Saffra was a good

idea—the information within wasn't *wrong* or *harmful*, just not up to her standards. *Better to have than not*, she supposed.

Wrinkling her nose at a journal detailing a grossly inferior implementation of the seventh-tier spell [Earthrend], she found her thus-relaxed exploration of the library come to an end. Because Saffra came rushing around a corner, a panicked expression on her face.

"Hide me," she hissed. "Hide me!"

For all her faults, Vivi had never had a tendency to freeze up. Not a tenth of a heartbeat passed before she had drawn mana, shaped it, and silently invoked an [Invisibility] spell. The catgirl, who'd dived for cover behind Vivi, blinked out of existence.

Just as someone else spun around the corner.

A young teenager wearing a student's uniform. She was tall for her age, wore her long blonde hair straight, and looked like she'd seen a ghost. The girl's features were bony in a regal way, but thanks to the thinness of her frame, what might have come off as elegant in another situation presented as gaunt instead.

She looked sick. In the way of someone who hadn't been eating properly for months. Vivi was instantly concerned for the girl, whoever she might be, especially in combination with her expression, which reminded Vivi of Aeris when she had first shown up: pure panic and horror.

Blue eyes searched the hallway and failed to find their target, and the piercing, frantic gaze snapped to Vivi.

"Where did she go?" the girl demanded. "Where is she?"

Behind her, Vivi felt Saffra's grip tighten on her robes, and the girl's forehead press into her back. Saffra was trembling. The last time Vivi had seen her in a similar state was immediately following the encounter with the Morningstars, and that comparison, obviously, put her on high alert.

"Where is who?" Vivi asked evenly.

The blonde girl stepped closer, eyes wide. She was breathing hard. "I know I saw her. I'm not *crazy.* Her hair was—but she—she can't *be* here." She took another step, and Vivi had to resist taking one back. "Who are you? And where did she go?"

Vivi returned the demands with stony silence and an unperturbed, bored expression, which of course came naturally. Though her pulse picked up, her body retained its stoicism. She watched the young woman for several

long seconds, making it clear she wasn't intimidated, then said, "And who might you be?"

The question seemed to anger the girl—then slowly bring her back to reality. Her eyes flicked down Vivi's body, and she seemed to notice that Vivi wasn't wearing a student's uniform, nor was she even human. Clearly not a student here, as maybe the blonde had first assumed in her flustered state.

Realization dawned, and—with a clearly herculean effort—she forced shaky composure back. She took three steps away to create an acceptable distance between them.

Her mouth opened, then closed.

"I—I thought—" A hand rose to clutch at her head, and she slouched in on herself, the brief control she'd tried cobbling together crumbling.

Despite the adrenaline Vivi felt, she almost stepped forward in concern.

"I'm sorry for bothering you," the girl mumbled. Then turned and fled.

Silence filled the shelves. Saffra stayed cowering behind Vivi for several long moments, clutching the back of her robes. Eventually, Vivi dispelled the [Invisibility] and said, "I'm assuming that was a classmate of yours. Maybe we should've gone with a more thorough disguise after all."

The attempt to break the tension fell flat. It took nearly ten seconds for Saffra to speak. When she did, it was a quiet mumble, and didn't seem addressed to what Vivi had said, only to herself.

"Of course she was here. She's the only one who would recognize me. The *only one*."

Vivi had already held a suspicion about who that blonde girl was, but Saffra's words all but confirmed it.

Saffra took a deep breath and separated herself from Vivi. "Sorry." She didn't meet Vivi's eyes. "That was dramatic."

Vivi considered her apprentice. She wasn't sure what to say. "Let's go sit down for a moment."

They found a reading alcove and sat. To say that Saffra looked miserable would be an understatement. She didn't even seem to care that Vivi was watching her—or, more likely, was stewing in her thoughts so deeply that she might have forgotten she had company at all.

This obviously went beyond the unease that someone might feel being caught by one of her previous classmates. That had to have been Isabella Caldimore herself, the Duke's daughter. Vivi couldn't imagine what else

would prompt this reaction besides Saffra coming face-to-face with the prior friend who had betrayed her.

“What happened?” Vivi asked. “Did you just bump into her? Or was there something more that happened?”

Saffra startled at Vivi’s voice. After a second of staring wide-eyed at her, she shook herself. At least her voice sounded steadier than before. No longer as shaky. “Um. She saw me, and I ran away.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Saffra hesitated. “Did she… look sick to you?”

Yes. Vivi had noticed that immediately. There had been a gauntness to Isabella Caldimore’s features—not pronounced, but noticeable—that definitely wasn’t healthy.

Before she could decide how to respond, Saffra was moving on.

“And why did she look at me like that?” she muttered. “*She’s* the one who got me…” A short silence, and then Vivi watched the girl visibly push the thoughts out of her mind. Squaring her jaw, she stood. “It doesn’t matter,” she announced, though there was a definite lack of conviction to the words, however much she tried to muster it. “She doesn’t matter. Forget about her.”

Vivi had no idea if, as the so-called responsible adult in this situation, she was supposed to sit Saffra down and insist on an explanation. In the end she didn’t have much choice, because Saffra stomped away. Shoulders squared, but her drooping cat tail telling the truth of her feelings. Vivi sighed and stood as well. She really wished she knew how to handle situations like these.

She still didn’t know what had happened between those two girls, but she was growing more suspicious by the day. Because with or without context, that was *not* how a two-faced bully would have reacted to her target returning to the Institute.

More and more, Vivi suspected there were two victims in this whole debacle.

Vivi wished her outing with Saffra could’ve ended on a positive note, but encountering Isabella had ruined any chance of that. While the girl did

try to plaster on an unbothered mask, she was visibly distracted for the rest of the exploration, so Vivi ended the trip early. They could always come back later.

The event had bumped the Caldimore situation up on her list of priorities, though at this point finding out what had happened seemed impossible without asking the individuals involved… meaning the Caldimores, whose responses would be obvious, or Saffra. And a conversation with the latter could wind up being disastrous. It was possible Saffra would be honest, but it also seemed likely she would shut down—and maybe take offense at the investigation.

Thankfully, when she met with Rafael that evening, Vivi discovered there had been movement on the Caldimore front.

"Good and bad news," he said. "The good: Duke Caldimore seems receptive to our token of apology."

"Our bribe?"

"Our *token of apology."* He gave her an amused but stern look. "The Caldimores do not accept bribes; that would be unscrupulous of such a respected family."

If Vivi were in her previous body, her eyes would've rolled. Instead, she met Rafael's gaze flatly, and his lips twitched, sensing her exasperation.

"The bad news is that the Duke insists on meeting you." He grimaced. "That's natural, considering the circumstances. He wants to put eyes on the foreign noble attempting to buy his forgiveness, despite my attempts to present you as a busy woman. He insisted that it 'need not be a formal meeting.' The Duke has business at the Wardens' Guildhall for the majority of the evening, apparently, and wants to make a quick greeting; he asks that you drop by."

"I see. Why is that bad news?"

"It's not catastrophic, but if this could have been resolved without you two setting foot in the same room, I would have wept with relief."

"That's theatrical."

"Is it? Will you manage your temper, my lady? You are difficult to read at times, but your dislike of the Caldimores is clear. To a surprising degree." He raised an eyebrow. "And that seems to have only grown. You don't frown often, I will point out."

I'm frowning? She realized she was. She sighed and decided to explain.

“There was an incident earlier. Isabella Caldimore found my apprentice in the library and recognized her even through the illusion I’d put down. It was a minor ordeal. Isabella’s reaction made it clear—and I was already suspicious of this—that whatever happened, she herself is likely innocent. Or rather, it’s not as simple as her being a bully.” Saffra had strong judgment when it came to determining moral character, and the two had been friends; seeing Isabella’s strange reaction and sickly appearance was all but definitive proof that something was up. “That makes me think whatever is happening, neither of them is to blame. Which leaves…”

She’d meant the words as a ‘gotcha’ of sorts, but Rafael replied smoothly, “…a third party framing the Caldimore family for political gain?”

“I—what? How so?”

Rafael shrugged. “I could invent any number of theories, of varying plausibility. Point being, we know phenomenally little about what truly happened, and assuming Duke Caldimore’s guilt simply because he—within his rights—threw a man in jail for slanderous insults—and the insults were quite bad, my lady, I looked into it myself—is a recipe for disaster. Did you know that this William of yours could have had his sentence ended at any time? Duke Caldimore merely demanded an earnest apology. I would call that lenient indeed, perhaps graciously so. You may not like hearing this, but the Duke has come off rather reasonable within the scope of these events.” He sighed. “If you meet with Duke Caldimore, Lady Vivisari, I implore you to not escalate this from a possibly simple resolution into a political disaster that would make an embassy choke and keel over. I will admit that I find myself most alive when given problems to solve, but the imminent return of Vanguard and my resignation as Chief Guildmaster are complicated enough. Spare your humble steward; give me a single week—seven days—to deal with *those* matters before we usher in the second era of Vanguard.”

She knew Rafael was joking, or putting on a bit of a performance, but she also recognized a kernel of earnestness to his words. He really did need a moment to organize his and Vanguard’s situation.

She was still recovering from the offhand mention of a possible ‘third party,’ though. She hadn’t even considered it. Mentally, she’d been blaming the Duke even before seeing Isabella, and so Isabella’s telling reaction had shifted a mental ‘probably’ into a ‘definitely.’ Yet Rafael was right. She

couldn’t say anything for certain, and assuming might have horrible consequences.

“Point taken,” Vivi sighed, not happy about it, but seeing reason. “I promise I won’t escalate if I can help it. The situation is too delicate.”

“A fish can promise not to swim, my lady, but I fear such words are only half a reassurance. No offense meant. As your steward, I am merely aware of your proclivities and will attempt to mitigate them where I can.” He waved a hand. “In any case, this meeting is inevitable. He made it clear that he would not accept the bribe—”

“The token of gratitude.”

“The token of gratitude,” Rafael repeated dryly, “without meeting Nysari Keresi first. So our hands are tied.” He leaned back, drumming his fingers on his armrest. “Thus, in preparation, there is material I should brief you on. The Caldimore history… and some rather concerning things I’ve learned during my inquiries into the Duke these past thirty-six hours.”

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THE DUKE

"You learned something concerning about the Caldimores?" Vivi asked, shifting in surprise. "What?"

"We'll get there," Rafael said. "First, what do you know of that house and its history?"

She thought for a moment, then slowly shook her head. "The name sounds the slightest bit familiar, but I might be imagining it."

"Seeing how you've been gone for a century, that isn't surprising. It was during that period they rose to prominence. The Caldimores were of mild relevance during the Cataclysm Campaigns, enough for you to perhaps have heard mention of them, but they weren't important enough that their name would stick in your mind, occupied as you were with," he paused, "world-ending threats, and such. The house patriarch, Marquess Dorian Caldimore, died in the final assault on the Ashen Hierophant's domain, as so many others did. As did the Marquess's brother, his wife, three of his four sons, and indeed most of the Caldimore line. Their house suffered grievous losses that day, even by the standards of an assault against a Cataclysm Monarch."

Despite her suspicions and general disapproval of Duke Caldimore, she winced at Rafael's words. "Three of his four sons. And the one who lived?"

"A certain Damon Caldimore. Duke, now, elevated for his years of service both during and succeeding the Cataclysms. A man who dragged his crumbling-but-respected house from the brink of extinction into dukedom."

She grimaced. It had been easier to automatically dislike Duke Caldimore when she hadn't known he was a war veteran whose entire

family, or near enough, had died in service of saving humanity. Then clawed his way back up not just to where his family had previously stood but further still.

“He’s high level, then, if he’s that old.”

She had assumed Duke Caldimore to be a man in his forties or fifties, but that had been founded on nothing. It made more sense that he was old, considering his importance.

“Middle orichalcum. Respectable, but not particularly high. Enough to slow that inevitable fate of humanity. He has a number of decades left, though he’s well beyond his golden years. Hm. Other background you should know: Duke Caldimore has scant few direct relatives. His eldest son died fighting an undead horde that surged out from a dormant Crypt of the Regent. His eldest daughter fell to a similar fate—a naga raid. His first wife passed from sickness before either of them. His second marriage was for political purposes; he and the Duchess have a professional, allegedly cold relationship and little else. His youngest daughter and only living child, Isabella, he sees a few months out of the year. They are not close, according to my intelligence.”

Vivi closed her eyes. Having a bleak past—and this went beyond bleak—didn’t forgive a person’s actions, but still. It could explain plenty, having nearly his entire family die not just once, but twice.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“This is the man you are at odds with, no matter the yet-revealed reasons, or whether his actions are justified. It would be unwise not to have a cursory understanding of his history.” He leaned back in his chair, frowning. “The following, however, is a warning. The Caldimores are important enough that I was keeping tabs on them as a matter of routine already, but they were not under any particular scrutiny of mine. While their house had a number of questionable dealings and events of minor to moderate political drama, all houses do—especially a ducal one with heavy mercantile ties. I have been looking into Duke Caldimore’s affairs more closely and have grown… uneasy at what I found.”

“Uneasy?”

“I despise presenting suspicions rather than evidence,” Rafael replied, grimacing. “But I have had very little time to pry. Duke Caldimore’s behavior has changed over the past months. Large loans made without

investments to justify them, erratic traveling patterns, and though I can't imagine what this implies… the Wardens' vault has been frozen."

"Frozen?"

"Apparently, their adventurers have not been allowed to access it for the past thirty-six hours. I genuinely have no idea what that could mean, but it is… strange. Very strange. And strange is always worrying." His brow furrowed, and he shook his head. "I fear I have nothing concrete, as I said. But my greatest evidence, ironically, is you."

That caught her off guard. "How am I evidence?"

"For better or worse, my lady, where you tread, the world trembles. And you have somehow thrown yourself into the midst of intrigue with a major ducal household via your apprentice—an apprentice you claimed rather suddenly, I might mention. I have long wondered whether Fate truly twists Her long fingers into that grand tapestry for the raucous amusement of Her fellow gods, but if She does, these coincidences have all the warning signs of a brewing catastrophe. Just earlier, Isabella Caldimore 'found' your apprentice in the library. What a lovely happenstance, that."

"I was thinking that myself," Vivi said.

"So yes. Something has my skin prickling, however little *true* evidence exists. Aberrant behaviors and inadequate methods of guarding them by a normally careful man speak to me of plans coming to fruition. Of less *need* to obscure his actions. And a plan by one of the most powerful men in the Kingdoms is something to fear—not that I will insist any such thing is truly happening, or that Duke Caldimore is a villain of any sort. There are no concrete indicators… but equally so, he is a capable man and may merely have hidden them carefully. I am not all-seeing and all-reaching, my lady. And thus, I will implore you one last time to treat this meeting with caution. Even if you may not come to an amicable solution with the Duke, do not escalate until we better understand what these omens mean."

"Yes, yes. I know. I won't curse the entire Caldimore bloodline; I wouldn't have to begin with."

In the worst of cases, she would take things into her own hands and break William out of prison. That would have fallout, but not on the level of assaulting a respected Duke.

"Very well. I won't insist further. I do have a request, though."

"What is it?"

"Might I oversee the meeting while masquerading as your attendant?"

Vivi paused. “If the Duke finds out you’re wearing an illusion, that won’t end well.”

“I think it worth the risk. I need to observe him in person. That way, even if this meeting ends poorly, I will have gathered information. So much can be gleaned from so little, if you have keen eyes.” He flicked his hand dismissively. “Besides, it’s not an illusion I will use.” He withdrew a purple potion and waggled it. “Transmogrification is a much more reliable deception. I would know.”

“*I* would still sense the lingering magic in your blood,” Vivi pointed out. Though maybe not passively… she might have to cast an analysis spell. That was a high-level potion, definitely made by Mae, and thus subtle even to Vivi.

“Our opponent, though formidable and well-connected, is not the Sorceress,” Rafael said dryly. “There is a risk, but a small one. You will want to conceal yourself as well. I doubt you had personal dealings with Duke Caldimore before your disappearance, but your face, while obscure relative to your name, is far from unknown. Much of your anonymity stems from the sheer unlikeliness of you being who you are. The Duke is intelligent enough to ignore that instinct and accept the possibility that the Sorceress has returned—and is indeed standing in his office. Best to come prepared.”

Vivi wrinkled her nose. “Fair enough.”

“You have no objections to the plan?”

“No.” That Rafael would be with her alleviated some of her concerns. Her interactions with important people so far had either been trivial, or had been with friendly faces. That wouldn’t be the case for this upcoming talk. “Let’s go see the Duke and find out if we’re being paranoid,” she said with a sigh.

Going by size and ostensible wealth, the guildhall of the Wardens—and thus the guildhall of the most successful human guild in the world—put Vanguard’s to shame.

Striding through the large, swung open double doors, Vivi was met with a staggeringly grand lobby.

The space reminded her more of a bustling high-class bank foyer than a guildhall. Maybe because Vanguard was her standard—which had catered to a sum total of five adventurers, eight craftsmen, and a steward—the nearly corporation-sized lobby took her by surprise. There were more people inside than in the main Adventurer's Guild back at Prismarche. Nearly a hundred at least, and that was just the lobby. How many more in the various facilities or members-only common rooms?

There were no less than four orichalcums scattered throughout, and several times that wearing blue badges. The Wardens weren't just numerous; the guild clearly sported *strong* adventurers too. Even the green badge Vivi wore didn't draw much attention. The gazes she did pull were probably because her face was unknown; nobody was impressed by her rank itself, even though orichalcum *should* be impressive.

Before she could gawk—not that her face betrayed her interest—at the vaulted marble ceilings, extravagant paintings, velvet seating, and masterfully carved receptionist desks, she caught sight of a woman hurrying over.

"Lady Keresi?" asked the black-haired woman clad in a professional-looking blouse and skirt, a clipboard in her hand. Apparently the Wardens had been expecting her, since a high-orichalcum demonic noble of the First Blood was someone worth posting a lookout for.

"I am she," Vivi responded.

"We are so honored to host you." The woman curtsied. "I'm Hazel. Please, Duke Caldimore should be available. Can I take you to him?"

"That is acceptable."

The woman curtsied again, then led Vivi and Rafael through the expansive interior of the guildhall. Though the building fit easily in the plot next to Vanguard's, the spatial expansion magic allowed for a veritable campus inside. They were walking for a solid minute before they reached their destination.

The receptionist slipped inside, and a brief exchange followed. She returned and ushered them in.

There, Vivi laid eyes on Duke Caldimore for the first time.

He was tall—imposingly so. Everyone made *Vivi* feel short, but Duke Caldimore especially so, halfway between six and seven feet. He was well-built, too, with broad shoulders and thick arms, which stood out even more since Vivi's first encounter with a Caldimore had been the portly Barnaby.

Vivi’s expectations had inevitably been colored by that, but well-groomed, serious, with dark hair and intelligent eyes, the older man struck a stark and immediate impression. And he *was* an older man, however healthy and hale his figure. Late sixties by appearance, though she knew he’d acted as a warrior in the Cataclysms Wars—so over a hundred and twenty in reality.

Notably, his appearance and demeanor didn’t instantly invoke some ominous, villainous atmosphere. She felt rather silly for having thought it would. Rafael had said this man had a good reputation—he was a respected war veteran running the world’s most powerful human guild. Even if he *was* a villain, Vivi wouldn’t be the one to sniff him out the second she met him. She had average instincts or worse when it came to people.

Internally, Vivi grimaced at the idea he might *not* be some ultimate villain. Duke Caldimore had some condemning stains on his record so far as she was concerned, considering how he had thrown William in jail, but even she had to begrudgingly admit that was how things worked in this time period. The action didn’t speak well of him, but she knew that viewed objectively, neither had he behaved in a manner that went against the current social standards. *Of course* high nobility were prickly about their image.

“Lady Nysari Keresi,” the Duke said smoothly. “A pleasure. I have long heard of the fearsome House of Keresi, and I am honored to meet one of their most promising scions in the flesh.”

Distracted, Vivi returned a much less flowery greeting. Because there was another man in the Duke’s office, and her eyes had drifted to him, dispelling whatever focus she might have mustered for what should have been much more important.

This other man was shorter than the Duke, though still tall. He had dirty-blond hair underneath a black tricorn hat. A leather coat dropped down to his knees, worn over a gray tunic, and his black pants were tucked into scuffed boots. Something about him pinged those embedded, passive senses of hers, warning her of danger.

Not *real* danger, of course, not to her, but definitely not someone to take lightly. She couldn’t even say whether it was because she had intuited that he was Titled—though he wore no adventurer's badge—or whether it was his appearance that had struck an immediate, uncomfortable chord: the look in his eyes, and the way he held himself. She didn’t have a way to detect a person’s level, unfortunately. That came down to a best guess even for her.

Even that interesting impression was not what had drawn the bulk of her attention. Because her gaze had caught on his belt and found something much more fascinating.

A dagger hung there.

A dagger.

A… normal, sheathed dagger. Nothing unusual about it whatsoever.

She sensed no enchantments through the leather holder identifying it as a high-level piece of gear, but that wasn't strange. When a person didn't want their equipment appraised, even Vivi couldn't bypass that without a spell or skill.

But while it wasn't odd for her to look at an object and sense nothing aberrant about it, this was different. Completely. Because when she looked at the dagger…

…she sensed that there was nothing strange about it.

The bizarre, blatantly contradictory thought briefly inspired panic, and she checked her mental defenses. [Mind Fortress] remained active, and unless some rogue element had applied twentieth-tier mental magics to the item or her—which nothing short of a Cataclysm could have managed—she definitely wasn't compromised.

And yet the dagger was normal.

Mundane.

Regular.

She sensed *nothing strange about the dagger.*

But not in the way of any other piece of gear. Not like every other bland object anywhere else in the world.

"Lady Keresi?" Rafael asked.

She tore her attention away, skin prickling all over. It took her a second to come back to reality.

Am I going insane? *Why is the dagger so* normal?

She checked her mental defenses a second time, and a third. She *was* fine. Something else was going on, yet she had no idea what.

"My apologies," Vivi said to Duke Caldimore. "Who is your guest?"

Duke Caldimore watched her steadily. Vivi realized she'd probably ignored whatever he had initially said to her. Whatever he made of her lapse in attention, though, he didn't show on his face. "This is Tobin. He was just leaving."

The man didn’t respond right away, his gaze on Vivi, and not in the appraising way of Duke Caldimore’s. His dark green eyes sparkled with interest—and there was something in them that unnerved her. He had either sensed something about Vivi, or found her reaction to his dagger *very* interesting.

“So I was. It was lovely meeting you, though.” His lips pulled up in something that couldn’t quite be called a smile. Vivi’s skin crawled.

Duke Caldimore watched Tobin depart, eyes narrowing slightly. When the door closed, the Duke spared a quick glance at Rafael, who’d quietly moved to the side of the room and made himself invisible, fitting of an attendant. The Duke’s gaze didn’t linger; it turned straight back to Vivi. There was nothing odd about an attendant being present for this meeting, as nothing particularly sensitive should be broached during it.

“This will be brief,” Duke Caldimore said. “It was impressed upon me how busy you are. I am not a man flush with leisurely hours either. So, to the matter at hand, Lady Keresi. It seems there was an incident between us that you would like to bring to an amicable conclusion, yes?”

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NICETIES

Distracted by the incident with the strange man—and more importantly, his dagger—Vivi took a second longer to respond than she should have. She forcefully shook away the uneasy feelings and refocused.

She tried to remember the advice Rafael had given her leading up to this meeting. He'd had plenty to say, both about how the Duke might act and how she should.

"Yes. I wanted to apologize on behalf of both my apprentice and the man known as William Trent. I hope we can set aside those unfortunate events and come to a mutually agreeable solution, one that benefits both of our houses."

The words—crafted by Rafael, of course—grated on her to say aloud, but she wasn't here seeking pointless, vindictive satisfaction. She wanted to solve the feud between Duke Caldimore and William, and hopefully Saffra too, with minimal headache and fallout. Though depending on whether the Duke truly believed Saffra had attacked his daughter—and whether or not Saffra *had*—that might be impossible. So getting William out of prison was her real goal.

"Indeed," Duke Caldimore said. "I'm sure it is in neither of our interests for a feud to break out between two families of our standing." He watched her carefully while walking out from behind his desk to stand beside it. "Particularly, it would be unwise of me to quarrel with a woman of your personal strength. I understand that my family has already offered you insult during your passage to Meridian."

His family. Meaning Barnaby. So the Duke had learned about that. Rafael had informed her, prior to this meeting, that the odds would be high. Enough time had passed that an event as significant as the Convoy's derailing had reached properly informed ears; it had involved too many civilians to *not* spread like wildfire.

How much did he know, though? The intelligence Rafael himself had received through his information network was an accurate reporting of events—though the mage in question had simply been an 'unknown demonic archmage.' That the Sorceress had returned certainly wasn't what people had assumed.

Vivi didn't know how to respond, because she had little positive to say about Barnaby Caldimore. He had antagonized her and refused to allow his White Glove to aid in the battle, instead staying holed up in the Lounge. But bringing up her distaste of that man wouldn't help settle current matters with the Duke.

She chose her words as tactfully as she could. "I would, indeed, prefer no further conflict between us," she reiterated.

He seemed pleased that she didn't try to deny his suspicion that it had been her back on the Convoy. She might have, had she been here on her own, but Rafael had insisted otherwise. The Duke was too intelligent to not make the obvious connection. There were only so many demonic archmages going around… as in two total. A third *and* fourth—if she tried to pretend she and the Convoy mage were different—both matching the description of 'short female with curled horns and long straight white hair' didn't strain credulity so much as break it entirely.

"I must congratulate you," the Duke said. "Your long sabbatical evidently proved fruitful, considering the strength you displayed during that event. To climb a hundred levels at your rank would be an achievement, even across a century. Three hundred is breathtaking."

Three hundred added to nine hundred… he believed her to be somewhere in the twelve hundreds. That was likely an underestimate of the power she had displayed. Thankfully, mages at twelve hundred and higher were so rare that their strength was poorly understood. She had one-shot the Ghul-Feather, but mages with proper preparation were the most likely class to do something like that. Lifting the Convoy and placing it on its tracks was a more telling feat, but even another archmage might struggle to quantify what it revealed her as, especially when specialties and skills

muddied the water. Perhaps she possessed a high-level System-granted skill that specifically improved [Greater Telekinesis]. Strange, but not outside the realm of possibility.

Rafael had told her to expect to be labeled as between twelve and thirteen hundred. Fourteen hundred would have put her on equal footing with Aeris, so that would be too unbelievable—people would default to reasonable explanations first, and a lower-level mage with a telekinesis specialty was much more probable than a peak-strength archmage appearing from nowhere.

Also possible was that the reports were dramatized. Who knew what had *really* happened at the Convoy? Even Barnaby, Damon's relative, could only be trusted to a degree.

Still, she didn't want to give the Duke any ammunition, and being vague about one's level was wholly standard; nobody would think twice if she refused to acknowledge how strong she was.

"Your congratulations are appreciated," was all she said.

The Duke studied her. "I must admit that seeing such monumental success in others has always stung my pride. I have long striven to reach that lofty achievement of a Title but have fallen short, despite all my efforts. What is it, do you think, that separates us?"

Interestingly, there was a hint of frustration and even suppressed anger in his voice.

Not for the first time, Vivi appreciated the aloof mask this body provided, because she once again had no idea how to respond. "It changes by the person," she eventually settled on. "There is no universal path to growth."

The response felt underwhelming, and the Duke's expression indicated he agreed—though not because the words lacked insight. "I suppose truth is often unsatisfying," he said. "Alas, I digress, even after I said I wouldn't waste your time. William Trent, and your… apprentice. I do so wonder how that came about, but it is not my place to question."

He waited for her to explain. She didn't.

After a moment, he continued, "I am not a man to suffer disrespect, and far less one to meekly ignore an assault on my own flesh and blood. Yet I recognize the follies of youth. There are, however, mistakes that cannot be forgiven. Would you not agree? This young woman you've taken under your wing—she was given a privileged spot at the Institute, her tuition and

supplies paid, provided an education that boys and girls across the world only dream of. And she returns that generosity by attacking a fellow student? My *daughter.* Perhaps she has grown with her time away and whatever hardship she faced following her expulsion. I can appreciate, even admire, a growth in one's character. But to brush aside such grave offense merely because I was offered a token of apology? No, I do not think that will happen, Lady Keresi."

Vivi stilled at the firm disgust in the Duke's voice. Rafael had said it was unlikely the man would give much pushback, and that he might end up ignoring Saffra's involvement entirely. That the sum of coin they had offered would almost certainly sway his opinion in what was ultimately a debacle not worth feuding with a notable demonic house over. This was far more direct and dismissive of the bribe than Rafael had told her to expect.

"I don't demand forgiveness for what transpired between your daughter and my apprentice," Vivi said, her tone a shade colder than she knew it should be. "I merely wish to extend an apology. And bring a certain imprisonment to an end."

"Hm. Yes. William, then. Do you personally find it outrageous, Lady Keresi, the demands I made of him? An apology for the slanderous words he offered me?"

Vivi knew not to answer that question honestly, even though she really wanted to. That it was the social norm of this time period, and that he could have acted *worse*, did not absolve him in her eyes. She just acknowledged the complexity of the situation, and that she couldn't view his actions in the same light she would if they'd taken place back on Earth.

Thankfully, there was nothing keeping her from lying.

"I do not," she said.

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow. "I see." Vivi suspected he had easily seen through the falsehood, despite her stoic mask. "Nevertheless, I must say that I find myself insulted by the offer. Not just for what it represents, but the sum itself. It is a paltry offering to sweep aside such a grave offense, no?"

Rafael had been nearly certain this man would go to lengths to avoid bad blood—essentially roll over, though in a way that preserved his dignity. Had Rafael's appraisal of this man been so incorrect? She found that hard to believe.

So why? What did this behavior mean?

She wasn’t cut out for politics. Not at all. Because she genuinely didn’t know where to start when it came to untangling this mess, much less identifying the deeper motives of Duke Caldimore.

It took strength to muster her words, considering her growing irritation, but she managed. “If you find the sum paltry, I can double it. Triple it. I will repeat: I simply want us to part on amicable terms.”

The Duke froze. That confirmed her suspicion: Rafael’s offer had most definitely *not* been paltry, and tripling it was obscene. Vivi didn’t care. She could earn nearly any sum back in a few hours or less. If throwing money at a problem could solve it, she would always attempt that first. Or at least she would in this situation.

But if the sum had been significant even to the Duke, why was he refusing? Even she could tell it wasn’t some attempt to extract more—he’d just wanted to goad her. *This encounter isn’t going anything like how Rafael said it would.*

“I see. That is generous indeed,” the Duke said stiffly. “But my concerns remain unaddressed. Do you make it a habit, Lady Keresi, to throw coin at your problems until they disappear?”

She felt a frown tugging on her lips. She didn’t quite succeed at smoothing it away.

“It is not a habit, no,” she said flatly.

“Ah. I am uniquely honored, then.” He didn’t sneer—the man clearly wouldn’t escalate to outright hostilities with someone of her station, no matter *what* had happened to have him acting like this. But his tone made his thoughts clear. “I will consider your offer, Lady Keresi. Allow me two days to deliberate. Despite our differences in opinion, I do wish for our houses to remain on friendly terms.” Even Vivi could tell he wasn’t trying hard to sell that statement. “Thank you for gracing me with a conversation. It was illuminating.” He gestured at the door for her to leave. She suspected that was a snub in itself—how he didn’t offer to see her out.

Vivi knew there was nothing she could say to convince him, though she was tempted to double or triple the offer once again, just to see whether drowning him in coin could help. But she felt like she was on unstable footing at the moment; something was off about this whole encounter. Retreating and reformulating her plan was clearly smarter.

And honestly, the needling, while not nearly as aggressive as it could’ve been—and not half of what Barnaby had given on the Convoy—had left her

in a mood not particularly *eager* for finding a happy solution. Better to disentangle before she lost her temper.

Rafael opened the door for her, and they left. After they had departed the Wardens' Guildhall and found privacy, he said immediately, "This is extremely concerning, my lady."

"That didn't go how you said it would."

"No, it did not. But Duke Caldimore is certainly a cautious and politically keen man—or has been, his entire life. He even acknowledged you as potentially a fresh Titled returning from a long training sabbatical, yet all but insulted you to your face. With no knowledge of how you might react, or an accurate profile of your character. That goes beyond recklessness to near idiocy. Duke Caldimore is not an idiot."

"So what does that mean?"

"Either that the offense offered by your apprentice and William is true, and so grave that his honor refuses to allow him even the mildest and most necessary of concessions"—Rafael's tone made it clear how unlikely he thought *that* was the case—"or, and this is a rather unsubstantiated theory drawn merely from instinct, he no longer cares about the potential consequences, and was enjoying that for once in a very long career, he needn't bother with the pretense."

That idea hadn't even crossed her mind. "And that means?"

"Nothing good," Rafael said grimly. "I need to contact some associates. I am unnerved by what I have seen this evening. We are lacking key information—that I am certain of."

Vivi stayed silent for a moment. "That other man. Tobin."

"A killer, and one who takes pride and enjoyment in his work," Rafael said distractedly. "I have seen men with eyes like those before. As you have as well. I didn't recognize him. Assassin? Or is that too much of an assumption?" He sounded like he was talking to himself. "Another missing piece? Mm, too much is unknown. I dislike this."

"His dagger," Vivi said.

Rafael paused, then looked at her. "He did bear daggers on either hip. What of it?"

Vivi pursed her lips. "You didn't feel anything… strange?" She knew he hadn't, by his reaction.

"I have little perception when it comes to the arcane, my lady."

“No. It wasn’t magical.” She hesitated, and almost didn’t want to continue because of how strange she knew the words would sound. But not mentioning it would be beyond ridiculous; it might be crucially relevant to the Caldimore situation somehow. “The dagger he wore on his right hip felt odd to me. Or rather, normal. Too normal.”

He waited for more, but that was it.

She grimaced. “Like it was mundane in some sort of… supernatural way.” She shook her head. “I don’t even know how to describe it, genuinely. It was disturbing.”

“An illusion or mental enchantment?”

“It was not magical in any sense,” Vivi contradicted instantly, with complete certainty. “The impression was bizarre enough I double-checked my defenses; my mind wasn’t influenced in that interaction. I wish I could have cast analysis spells on it, but my passive perception indicated no enchantments.”

“Then it was not magical,” Rafael said simply, trusting the instincts of the world’s most powerful mage. “Hm. I will think on that too, my lady, but I have little idea how it could relate.”

She didn’t either.

But whatever was happening, she had a bad feeling about it all.

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KERESI

Damon came away from the brief meeting with Nysari Keresi not nearly as pleased as he'd expected.

It *should* have been satisfying for once not bending to the whims of men and women he'd formerly needed to placate. Perhaps his frustration stemmed from how utterly unperturbed that woman had seemed despite his attempts to aggravate her. Or perhaps it was how little he had gleaned from the brief interaction—his main goal in the first place. But since something had itched at his instincts, he'd dismissed the woman early and not pushed her as hard as he'd intended.

Most likely, it was because he knew he was being childish. There had been little reason not to accept the bribe, and plenty of reasons to avoid irritating a Titled of unknown strength and personality. Especially so near to his plans coming to fruition. He had simply been vexed at the unnecessary complication, and for the first time across a long career had been in a position to dismiss an arrogant woman who had no doubt expected him to bend over and accommodate her.

Ultimately, the disrespect he'd shown wouldn't result in meaningful consequences. While he might have offended the Keresi family and Nysari in particular, their response wouldn't come immediately, and thus it wouldn't matter. In two days—the same deadline he had given Nysari—his venture would either succeed or fail. And failure in proceedings such as these didn't end with disgrace or embarrassment. Only ruin. One of two extremes: that was what awaited him.

And upon deeper consideration, maybe *that* was the reason he had come away from the meeting annoyed. Despite knowing the odds were nearly nonexistent that he would face consequences for insulting the Keresi to her face, he had hedged his bets. He *should* have told her that her coin was unwanted, and her presence as well, and thrown her from his guild. Called her apprentice a mongrel as well, simply to gloat. Instead, he had gone so far as to leave the door open to accepting her offer. Just in case. Had told her he would give his response in two days, a*fter* his fate had been decided.

As much as he wished to put the Keresi woman out of his mind and focus on final preparations, something about both her and the situation didn't sit right with him. She had been too taciturn to deduce much, and something had stayed his hand from pressing too hard. He did not *actually* want a furious Titled mage storming through his guildhall when a ritual to make the Shattered Oracle shiver in delight neared its finalization deep within the Wardens' vaults. Too much was on the line. His plans were too important to risk ruining in even the most unlikely of ways.

And yet… was it truly a coincidence an unknown Titled had appeared to entangle herself in his business so near the final moments of decades of planning? And through such an unimportant and unrelated loose thread: that beastkin girl that had been nothing but a pointed lesson to his mawkish and wayward daughter.

Perhaps. But perhaps not. The uncertainty, however small, was what set him on edge. A grain of sand could ruin the internal workings of delicate machinery, and an unknown Titled was no mere grain of sand. Nothing should be beneath his notice at this crucial juncture, so it was worth looking into further. Hence, he had. Both through meeting the woman herself and also through arranging a scrying session with the head of the Keresi family.

Nothing demanded his attention right this moment regardless. He was awaiting the Fell Apostate's work; Damon himself had little role to play until the ritual's preparations were complete.

After striding out from his office, he tracked down his steward. "The Keresi scrying?" he demanded upon finding the man.

"Primus Mizar Keresi will be available in no later than an hour, I was assured," Archibald responded smoothly. "The scrying table is ready for my lord's usage. You were requested to make yourself available at your earliest convenience."

Annoyed, Damon nodded. He had requested the scrying, so it was reasonable that he be the one to idle near the table until the head of the Keresi family could speak. Still, he disliked waiting upon another person. It grated. Even after so many decades, so much effort, there were seemingly endless figures he had little choice but to bow and scrape to. For all the height he had climbed, he remained so *low*.

But not for long.

Damon supposed he was fortunate that the demon was present at his estate at all. Mizar Keresi, like nearly all demonic high nobility, often excused himself from his responsibilities for weeks if not months at a time, delving deep in the wilderness to pursue level advancement.

He wrinkled his nose at the idea. There was a reason demonic society was so chaotic and disorganized, always at one another's throats, and it wasn't simply because of the deadliness of their lands. A noble could make for a fine warrior, but not all fine warriors made for proper nobility. Calling down heaven's wrath or cleaving a building in two did not somehow grant a person the ability to manage an estate, levy taxes, or organize a functioning society. Administrative tasks could be delegated, yes, but a head of house needed strong judgment to determine *who* was worth delegating to. A lord needed skill in leading men—not simply into battle, but in all matters. That those savages survived at all was impressive considering the battle lust and lack of political savviness that so many of their high nobility possessed.

Striding through the guildhall—his irritation growing that he needed to deal with this unwanted development at all—he descended into the vault and headed for the scrying table. As Archibald had promised, the smooth, liquid-silver surface had adopted the image of the interior of some opulent waiting room within the Keresi estate. A demonic woman on standby noticed him, and they exchanged the necessary frivolities. He was assured that Primus Mizar Keresi would 'be there shortly.'

A lie, he discovered. He waited for nearly an hour. Damon was seething when the man finally appeared. The emotion touched neither his face nor voice. He had vast experience masking his true thoughts.

When Primus Keresi had stridden into sight, the first thing Damon had noticed, as anyone would, was that the man was shirtless and his torso, arms, and face were smeared with blood.

"Apologies, Duke Caldimore," the tall, bone-white man boomed, uncaring that he was presenting himself in such an indecorous manner.

“The duel went longer than expected. Tenacious boy. Wouldn’t stay down. Perhaps I’ll consider that promotion after all!” He laughed raucously.

If this had been a lord from the human lands, Damon would have assumed the display a calculated way to throw him off or intimidate him. In reality, Primus Keresi likely found nothing strange about meeting a high-ranking foreign noble shirtless and covered in blood, laughing about beating one of his subordinates to a pulp. *That whole continent is insane,* he thought disdainfully. *I’m blessed that I’ve never needed to visit.*

“It is of no concern, Primus,” Damon lied. “I thank you for meeting on such short notice. As I’m sure you’re aware, I wouldn’t have reached out if I didn’t find the matter of sufficient importance.”

Primus Keresi paused, amusement slipping from his face and morphing into concern. As if only now realizing: of course. A human duke would only contact a demonic house so suddenly for events of rather significant substance. Along with being insane, the entirety of demonic society—from what Damon had seen and heard—was as intelligent as the ground they tread upon. He could only assume it came from the repeated head trauma spawned from their systems of constant dueling and their expectations to be ruthlessly climbing ever higher the ladder of advancement.

“I see,” Primus Keresi said, expression much graver now. “What is it I may aid you with, Duke Caldimore?”

Despite how the man was now taking the meeting more seriously, he continued wiping himself down with a towel, staining the white linen red. Cleaning himself while discussing potential matters of state with a foreign Duke… Damon suppressed his feelings of disgust. The Primus didn’t seem to find the behavior inappropriate in the slightest.

Savages. That their ruling class called themselves nobility rather than the reality of *warlords* offended his sensibilities.

Nevertheless, he had some amount of respect for the man. Demons held by far the highest average level among the common races. Though demons were dwarfed twenty times over or more by population, humanity barely equaled their numbers in Titled. Savages they might be, Damon acknowledged the strength of Mizar and his people.

“A member of the Keresi family appeared in Meridian earlier this week,” Damon said, launching into the explanation without preamble. “And by happenstance, we were forced into minor conflict. Of course, I saw fit to reach out to the head of your esteemed house to confirm that this woman is

who she says she is—she did have a seal, and it did not appear to be a forgery—and also to assure you I am taking steps to come to an amicable conclusion. I would not want to offend a house of the First Blood, especially one I have had cordial dealings with in the past."

Obviously, those reasons weren't Damon's true intentions for scrying the Primus. He was fishing for information on a matter that had raised his proverbial hackles. Mizar Keresi could choke on his own blood for all he cared.

The demon paused. "A Keresi? In Meridian?" He looked confused, searching his thoughts. That a member of high nobility would wear his emotions so plainly provoked another wave of revulsion—naturally, not so much as a muscle in Damon's eye twitched. He, after all, knew how to hold himself in the manner of someone *deserving* his title.

"Indeed. A woman that has not been seen for some time, by my understanding. On a long training sabbatical. Nysari Keresi. Third daughter to your brother, yes?"

All expression melted off Mizar Keresi's face. His red eyes snapped to Damon in pure, unbridled shock. He froze with an arm halfway raised in the process of scrubbing it of blood, and it would have been an undignified-enough position to bring forth even more disdain from Damon. But not now. Because the Primus's reaction went far beyond what he had expected. Why did he look so utterly dumbfounded?

"Nysari. *Nysari* Keresi is in Meridian?" the man demanded. "You are certain of this? Her seal was verified?"

"By my own assistant," Damon replied slowly, caught off guard by the intensity of his tone.

The demon stared at him. Only after several seconds of his mouth working soundlessly did his arm drop.

"I see." His eyes sharpened on Damon. "And you are in *conflict*?" He nearly growled the words. "How so? Explain yourself, human."

The idle, uncaring Primus in an ostensibly humorous mood was gone. His voice and posture signaled nothing but intense aggression. He'd tossed aside the towel to stomp up and grip the edges of the scrying table.

It was a telling reaction. But telling of *what?* Damon had no idea. Had Nysari been assumed dead, and thus her return was far more significant news than he'd thought? Was she a favored scion of the Keresi household?

That felt fitting to the reaction. A favorite of Primus Mizar's specifically? Sentimental of the man, but hardly strange.

But even that didn't seem to fit perfectly. The shift in attitude suggested something else—or something more. Mizar hadn't seemed overly bothered that Damon was in conflict with a Keresi until he'd specified Nysari. Why?

"A minor matter, and only through proxy—not with the woman herself, I assure you," Damon said, internally frowning as his thoughts rushed forward. "She has taken an apprentice, apparently, and that young woman is the source of grievance. We are not at odds ourselves."

Mizar reeled back and, bizarrely, focused on what Damon would have thought was a rather irrelevant detail. "She's taken an *apprentice?* Who?"

What were these reactions? What did they *mean?* Damon understood that Nysari had been a promising member of this house and had recently climbed even higher, to the point she might rival Mizar himself in level now. But even with that context, Damon was missing something. Why would this man be so shocked that Nysari had taken an apprentice? The demon seemed genuinely floored. Astounded. Had seemed so at just the mention of Nysari, too.

Damon considered his response. Normally, he would avoid lying to foreign high nobility on such an inconsequential matter. But with his plans coming to fruition, recklessness on such a small scale fazed him little. If he thought it useful here, he would have lied.

In this instance, however, a truthful answer seemed like it might yield more information. "A young woman who was expelled from the Institute for assaulting my daughter. They met in the north and traveled to Meridian together."

"Who?" the man demanded. "Her name, human. What is her *name?"*

Damon stopped his eyes from narrowing. "Some orphaned commoner of moderate talent and irrelevant family name. I assure you that neither you nor any other would recognize or know her."

"An orphaned commoner?" His brow furrowed, and finally he remembered what Damon had said earlier. "One who… assaulted your daughter?" He sounded bewildered.

"Indeed."

The Primus stared at him through the scrying table for a long moment. Finally, Mizar shook his head to clear it. A serious, unyielding expression settled on his face, and his jaw tightened. "I am unsure how Nysari has been

occupying her time recently. But in all matters, House Keresi stands behind her. You *will* accommodate her or face the full might of our collective ire, Damon Caldimore. I swear this on my honor."

Damon passively watched the man. In another circumstance, he might have been intimidated. That was a significantly harsher rebuke than he'd expected. Even for a famously blunt and hotheaded demonic house, it was disproportionately aggressive.

"We have all but settled matters amiably already, Primus," Damon said, now seeing benefit in a falsehood. "I merely contacted you to confirm that she is who she says she is, and to keep the head of the Keresi family informed as an act of good faith."

The demon relaxed slightly, though seemed far from pleased. "She is, so long as her seal identified her. And good. You are wise to act in such a way. That is all I will say on this matter. I… must go. I have business to attend to."

Damon got the sense that said 'business' had come about because of what he had just revealed to the man. Clearly, Mizar hadn't known Nysari was in Meridian… or perhaps that she was alive at all? Did he know that she had ascended several hundred levels since leaving the demon lands at the end of the Cataclysm Wars? That, based on the feats she had performed during the Convoy's assault, she was certainly beyond the thousand-level-mark if not one of the *stronger* Titled in the world now?

He was pleased that he had listened to his instincts and scried the Primus. Knowing that he lacked information was many times better than being unaware of his cluelessness. He could account for the fog of war; ignorance of one's ignorance, however, spelled doom.

"Thank you for your time, Primus."

"You as well, Duke Caldimore." The demon's words were curt, despite Damon's attempt at friendliness. He noted that quite pointedly. The demonic man was frowning at him as he cut off the scrying spell.

The mere implication that Damon had been at odds with Nysari had offended the Primus. Deeply. Why?

Before, Damon's instincts had merely suggested that something was off—a slight prickling of unease. Now, his skin all but crawled.

Perhaps he would be accelerating his plans. He no longer felt like he was on steady footing.

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APOSTATE

Unfortunately, Damon’s plans primarily hinged upon another’s work and not his own. Whether or not they *could* be accelerated depended on the mage preparing the ritual.

Thus, still carrying his growing concern over the Keresi situation, he wound through the Wardens' vault to the room where the Titled ritualist was bringing his most recent, and likely greatest ever, arcane working to life.

Damon’s eyes passed across the dense magical runes encircling the huge room. Laid in the center of the designs were piles and piles of gear, materials, and items of all variety. Enough to form a small mound of treasure. The vast majority of the Wardens’ wealth, pilfered from its members and soon to be put to use as sacrificial catalysts.

The Fell Apostate was not laying down further spellwork; in fact, the intricate designs seemed complete to Damon’s half-trained eye. He knew the broadest, most basic fundamentals of most magical disciplines, as any adventurer, guildmaster, or high noble should, but this was a ritual crafted by one of the foremost experts in the world, so he wouldn’t make even the most tentative claims. Perhaps the ritual *was* near completion. Perhaps the Apostate had days of work left.

Damon had only interacted with this man thrice, so the beastkin’s strange appearance still unnerved him. The blindfolded mage wearing gray robes stood taller than even he. Unlike Damon, though, the Apostate had no muscle to balance his tall frame: he was stick-thin, like a man unnaturally

stretched out. Wicked-looking antlers capped the beastkin's skull and made him seem even more towering—almost monstrous.

The Fell Apostate's sightless gaze turned to Damon the moment he walked in. He had to fight a chill going down his spine. So much about the man made Damon uneasy: the sharply angled antlers, the long black hair dropping to the man's calves, the white blindfold covering his eyes… and most of all, the knowledge that he was a professional of the most esoteric and profane magics in existence. The Fell Apostate was a founding member of Morningstar, and of such considerable power that he held few peers across the entire world. Yet so few knew he existed, even by Title.

"Damon Caldimore," the Fell Apostate rasped in acknowledgment. The man never spoke in a higher volume than a whisper. Damon wasn't sure he could. "Good. I had a matter to discuss with you."

'Damon Caldimore.' Not Duke or Lord. The Apostate never used honorifics for either ally or foe, only their Title if they had one, and if they didn't, then simply their name.

He tried not to let the lack of deference agitate him. At least the ritualist was consistent with the omission; it wasn't disrespect shown specifically to him.

"And I as well," Damon replied. "You seem to have made good progress. More than expected?" He gestured at the complex circle drawn in red and black *something* encompassing the room. "Are you nearly finished?"

"Yes," the Apostate forced out hoarsely. "I have hastened my efforts. I seek to complete our contract this night, rather than the morrow."

Despite that being exactly what he'd come to ask for, Damon paused, then frowned. "Why?"

"I am called to the north. Events of great importance have transpired. Events that draw my eye."

To the north?

"Where? For what?" Anything that caught the Fell Apostate's attention had to be borderline cataclysmic.

"That is not for you to know, Damon Caldimore."

He frowned, though he could hardly insist. He racked his brain for any recent major events in the north, but besides the Convoy—and Nysari Keresi's involvement in it—he came up with nothing. Could they be related somehow? He doubted that. Not everything was intertwined.

“The work will not suffer?” Damon asked.

“The Contract is sacred. I will never threaten a Work.” His head tilted, and an icy finger tickled down Damon’s spine. There was something deeply unnerving about that blindfolded gaze. “If anywhere, failure will come from you, Damon Caldimore. Have you reconsidered the extent of your sacrifice, as I have advised?”

A cold anger settled into Damon. His jaw clenched, and a second passed as he pushed away his first vitriolic response. He knew he was working with monsters, but the constant reminder agitated him.

“I am not a madman to spend the lives of my subordinates in such a bloody and indiscriminate manner,” he said curtly. “The name of the Wardens, and the wealth within, will suffice. You assured me of this.”

“Yes. But half measures speak poorly of you,” the Apostate whispered. “It is an interesting Work you have provided. The Work is all that matters. Only men of unyielding vision will bend the world to their whims, Damon Caldimore.” A weak, one-shoulder shrug, and the Apostate turned away. “But if you have so decided, it shall be. I will push past the deficit. The theory is sound. The sacrifices heavy, though lesser than you could provide. I merely distaste the…” He was silent for several seconds. “…*lack of resolve.*” There was total condemnation in the phrase.

Damon fumed silently, holding his tongue lest he rage at the man. He had no intentions of testing the Apostate’s seeming unflappability.

Eventually, the Apostate scraped out, “You had a matter to discuss as well?”

“No,” Damon said tersely. “No longer.”

“I see.” The Apostate turned away, uncaring of what had changed. “Make the necessary arrangements, Damon Caldimore. Send away the excellent kindling littering your halls. I shall conjure a great pyre nevertheless. Tonight.” His voice took on a curious tone as he said, “I admit I await with great fascination how this Work will manifest.”

Damon nodded toward the man, then stiffly walked out.

To his immense displeasure, outside the door and leaning against a wall, likely having listened in on the entire discussion, stood the Red Tithe. Or Tobin, as was the offensively innocuous name the man was using for his current assignment.

“With a look like that, you’ll make me think you missed me,” the man said, smirking in that nasty way of his. “And no, I wasn’t *eavesdropping*.

That implies I heard something I shouldn't have. I'm merely keeping myself in the loop, like any good helper bee. You ought to thank me."

Damon barely kept the disdain off his face. He settled for addressing the man in a way he knew would irritate him. "Tithe. Good. I needed to speak with you as well."

"*Red* Tithe," the assassin snapped, amusement vanishing. "Antlers there might not care, but he doesn't care for much of anything besides splitting open souls." The obnoxious smirk returned. "Good taste, I do admit."

"Red Tithe, then," Damon returned smoothly. "My apologies."

The assassin stared at him, then snorted. "Yeah. Sure. You know, sometimes you get under my skin, Caldimore, but then you go and do something like that"—he thumbed at the doorway leading into the ritual room—"and I remember why we're such good friends. I've always had a special place in my heart for hypocrites."

Damon's eyes narrowed at the man, despite his efforts to remain aloof. The needling was hardly new. He despised the Red Tithe, even if he could acknowledge the man's efficacy. The title of 'Morningstar's personal killer' wasn't an easy one to claim. Though not as dangerous as the Apostate, he was still an upper-Titled, and perhaps more *immediately* dangerous, if just because of his instability.

"Hypocrite?" Damon asked frostily. "I'm not sure what you mean, *Tithe*."

Irritation flickered across the assassin's face once again at the repeated shortening of his Title, and his hand drifted to his sheath. Damon stiffened, unable to help himself, and the Red Tithe glanced at his hand, then at Damon, and laughed. He patted Damon on the shoulder.

"Relax! No killing clients. Not until the Contract is over. Even I wouldn't break a Contract."

Damon couldn't tell whether that had been a threat, a possibility worthy of great consternation. Even if his plans succeeded, this was a man he would still need to fear. He met the Red Tithe's gaze evenly, though, not showing his unease.

"And yes, hypocrite. That moral outrage!" The man took on a dramatized, childish tone and began gesticulating and flailing his body like an especially bad theater actor. "'No, I won't sacrifice the lives of my subordinates. I refuse. It's wrong! I am a man of stern moral fiber; I do what I must for a great purpose. I am nothing like you monsters!'"

Damon didn’t rise to the bait. His contempt for the man did, however, grow, which he hadn’t known was possible. And he knew he’d finally lost control of his expression. He had no doubt he was looking at the man like excrement found on his boot.

The Red Tithe dropped the act. “But maybe you even believe it. Wouldn’t be a first. Still. You won’t sacrifice your minions, but your *daughter* is fair game?” He belly-laughed, clearly finding genuine glee in the concept. “Good gods, man. Even I hold some things sacred. I’d never stick a dagger in family.” He paused, then shrugged. “Well, I probably wouldn’t.”

“I’m sure I don’t understand what you imply,” Damon said between gritted teeth. “My daughter is not, in any conceivable manner, a sacrifice.”

The Red Tithe paused. “Did I… miss something? Plans haven’t changed, have they?”

“She will be a main proponent of the ritual, and there are associated risks with that, but that is her duty as a Caldimore. She is *expected* to contribute to her House’s success. As I did, and as all her forebears have. She is no more a sacrifice than my father was when he led the 27th detachment into the Ashen Hierophant’s domain.”

The Red Tithe stared at him. The assassin’s mouth opened, then closed.

He burst out laughing.

Damon only barely refrained from pulling out his sword—half thanks to how he knew he could try a thousand times and not so much as scratch this bloodstained creature.

“Right! Of course!” the man gasped, slapping his forehead. “Using some thirteen-year-old girl as a breaching missile into a dimensional boundary. That’s definitely not a sacrifice. Are you an idiot?”

“Hold your tongue, you *rat*,” Damon finally snapped.

A dagger appeared in front of his eyeball before he could so much as register movement.

“Ah, ah,” the Red Tithe warned, waggling the blade a fingernail’s width away. “Let’s not be uncivil. That’s no way to speak to a working associate, is it?” He slowly pulled the weapon down, dragging the tip across Damon’s nose before he sheathed the weapon fluidly. “I hardly said anything to warrant such *rudeness*.”

Despite the rage boiling under his skin, Damon reined himself in. He didn’t have a choice in the matter. “The Keresi woman.” His words were

cold as ice, but at least controlled once again. “You reacted to her strangely. Why?”

As always, the Red Tithe was easy to distract. Damon never should have entertained his goading in the first place; the previous interaction had been his own fault, truthfully. Though this assassin could cut his way through most high-Titled, he was not a particularly intelligent man. It felt like no one Damon worked with was.

“The Keresi? Ah, yes.” His eyes narrowed. “Fascinating woman. I think she noticed something about that dagger of yours.”

“Impossible.”

The Red Tithe reached into his other sheath and withdrew a blade of dark violet, slightly transparent material. He held it up and turned it side to side, briefly losing himself in his captivation with the object.

The weapon was far, far more dangerous than the Red Tithe’s personal blade. It had, at one point, belonged to Damon himself. It was his family’s legacy, a project of many decades. Forged from a material taken from the Shattered Oracle’s own workshop, and now a payment to Morningstar, it was the only item of such immense value that he had actually drawn the organization’s attention.

His ultimate goal was, of course, to gather more of the otherworldly substance. That was what all of this was for—what all of his work these past many decades had been for. He needed a weapon to stand on equal footing with the worst terrors of the world, despite his damnably low level.

A way to end an Eighth Cataclysm, whenever it surely arrived.

“‘Impossible,’” the Red Tithe murmured, tilting the dagger to point it at Damon. “Only fools use that word, I’ve found.”

“Spare me the platitude,” Damon sneered. “You know what I mean. She couldn’t have identified it. Or interacted with it in any way, with a skill or spell or artifact or anything else.”

“No,” the Red Tithe agreed. “Even Antlers couldn’t make heads or tails of this… this *voidglass* of yours.” He sheathed the dagger. “And I’ll take a gander and say there’s no one in the world as capable in the esoteric and otherworldly as that old monster. So yes. She couldn’t have.”

“Then what was that reaction? We both saw it.”

The assassin shrugged. “Maybe she was admiring a different weapon of mine,” he leered, grabbing his crotch.

Somehow, this man continued setting new lows. Damon didn't hide the disgust on his face. The foul man laughed.

"Should I question her?" the Red Tithe asked more seriously.

Damon considered the offer. "She is level twelve hundred or higher."

"Kill her, then?" the man retorted, a smile twisting his lips. He even leaned forward, clearly hoping Damon would give the command.

Damon considered that too. A thrill went through him, knowing he could order the death of a Titled, simple as that. Eventually, he shook his head.

"There is no reason to involve her further. Whoever she may be." Nysari Keresi was the reason he had wanted to accelerate his plans in the first place. The Primus's reaction still bothered him; he couldn't put the pieces together. Unless a revelation hit him—and that seemed unfortunately unlikely—he would avoid that woman until the ritual had succeeded.

He turned and began walking away. "Go and fetch my daughter." He enjoyed delivering the petty command. The task was far beneath someone of the Red Tithe's importance. But for all his insolence, the assassin *was* under contract, and in that regard, he always acted the professional. He would obey.

"Yes, Duke Caldimore," the Red Tithe said, tone dripping sarcasm. He flourished a bow. "One ritualistic sacrifice, to be delivered."

Damon spun to rage at the man, despite his wisdom urging him not to… yet he was gone. The hall was empty.

He took a breath, then released it.

Necessary, he reminded himself. *This is all necessary.*

In pursuing an end to an inevitable Eighth Cataclysm, all actions were just.

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GARDEN

Saffra was too frazzled to practice.

And that was saying something. Practicing magic had become her solution to *dealing* with bad feelings. It was like saying she was too hungry to eat. Yet after returning from the Institute's restricted archives—even though getting to look through those shelves should have been the highlight of her year—she felt too confused and anxious to do anything but excuse herself to her room upstairs, drop into bed, and stare at the ceiling.

She didn't understand. In every scenario in which she'd envisioned confronting Isabella Caldimore, Saffra had only imagined marching up and delivering scathing condemnations to that prissy blonde. She'd conjured all sorts of self-righteous tirades in her head. Some were mortifying in retrospect, clearly formed from long nights stewing in hurt anger.

It was only upon seeing Isabella Caldimore—aloof, regal Isabella Caldimore—in such an obviously concerning state that a horrible, black dread had sunk into Saffra. An anxiety far worse than what she dealt with on a daily basis. Because a simple question popped into her head. One she knew she should've asked herself far sooner.

What if her friend *hadn't* betrayed her?

Or what if there had been good reason? Saffra had seen some of the worst humanity had to offer. She knew that people loved to divide actions by 'good' and 'bad,' but surprisingly little could be organized in those boxes—as much as Saffra herself wanted, and tried, to do so. Everyone had reasons for what they did, even if she didn't agree with them.

So that was why she felt sick to the stomach. She *knew* things could be complicated, and yet because of how hurt and confused she'd been, she hadn't once considered that maybe Isabella's sudden betrayal could be explained by something other than that her friend wasn't who she thought she was. That their sometimes-strange friendship had been fake and the girl had just… decided to turn on her.

And if that was true—well, Saffra didn't want to imagine it. Because in her eyes, it would make *her* the villain. A good friend would have realized the truth of the situation. A good friend wouldn't have assumed the girl she had otherwise respected would stab her in the back on a whim. A good friend would have *trusted*. And Saffra hadn't… or at least not as persistently as she should have.

She felt like she was going to be sick. She wanted to reject the idea, but once it had taken root, she couldn't tear it out. It sounded so plausible. At least combined with what she'd seen at the library. That gaunt, sickly image of Isabella, when all Saffra remembered was a stiff-backed, chin-always-lifted, ever-prideful scion to a major house.

How could she have been so stupid?

Or was she repeating her mistakes like the biggest of idiots? Trusting again when she shouldn't, without any real evidence?

Saffra rolled over in bed, clutched her pillow into her face, and groaned. She felt like she was going insane. Rolling back over a moment later, she studied the patterns swirling in the wooden beams overhead.

She had to know.

She *had* to know. But how? What was she supposed to do? March up to the Institute, track Isabella down, and demand an explanation? As if Isabella would give one, when she hadn't back then. Although this poisonous idea had infected her, *that* clearly wasn't a solution. But she still needed some sort of proof. Something to dispel this horrible feeling.

An idea struck her.

If Isabella *was* still a friend, and since they had bumped into each other at the library, would she go to that meeting spot of theirs, hoping Saffra would have the same idea?

The Institute's garden. Both of them, it turned out, had had a tendency to roll out of bed late at night and sneak out when they couldn't sleep. Saffra intruding on Isabella's preferred scenic garden alcove on the ninth-

floor annex had been how the two of them first met. Or seriously met; they'd had a few classes together before that, though they'd never spoken.

And remembering that—how Isabella sometimes had difficulty sleeping too—Saffra's dread grew. How hadn't she made that connection earlier? Why was *Isabella Caldimore* the one girl she had related to? In the swarms of spoiled students without a clue how the world worked, it had been *her* that Saffra felt comfortable around. A natural kinship, of sorts. Why would that be the case?

Possibly because their experiences were more similar than she'd thought. Saffra might have assumed the girl spoiled and clueless like the vast majority of other students, but that was just an assumption. And considering Saffra's history, if they shared many similarities, that boded nothing good.

Saffra sat up.

She had to know. She wouldn't go and hunt Isabella down if the girl had stayed in her dorm room, but that spot in the gardens… if she showed up there… if she had the same idea as Saffra and was waiting for her… that meant something, right?

The question was how. The Institute had a curfew. The elevators to the campus were monitored after nightfall. She was neither a student any longer, nor important enough to be allowed in by passive merit of rank like Lady Vivi.

So, sneaking in. Not an easy ask for a random high-silver mage. Security might not be the tightest, but unauthorized guests couldn't waltz in as they pleased. In fact, racking her brain, she couldn't come up with any way to do so. Not on such short notice.

She grimaced. There was an obvious solution. She couldn't sneak into the Institute using her own magic, but borrowing another's would make the task trivial. The thought just didn't sit right with her, for obvious reasons.

After pulling out a [Scroll of Invisibility], she frowned at the complex runes inscribed in looping black ink. One of many duplicates in her inventory, and one of a small library of scrolls that Lady Vivi had dumped into her arms for no other reason than 'to be safe.'

Even if Saffra had many of them, that didn't diminish the scroll's worth. Especially scrolls holding seventh-tier magic like [Invisibility]. Never mind the sixteenth-tier-and-higher ones. Saffra's brain still seized up when she

remembered those, the same as with all the gear and the Titled-rank summoning artifact.

That she'd been given priceless items didn't change how the more reasonable ones were still worth more coin than she could scrounge together in a year. Using a [Scroll of Invisibility] just to *go and check* if Isabella was sitting in that garden spot of theirs? It was such a monumental waste, with no promise of a payout. She hadn't even been comfortable taking Lady Vivi's gifts in the first place; using them frivolously made her ten times as uneasy.

She couldn't conjure up an alternative, though. And she felt like she might go insane if she didn't do something to relieve this anxiety inside her. At least if she went to the gardens and didn't find Isabella, she would… what? Be relieved? Not really. The most likely scenario was that the bench under that gazebo would be empty, yet even that wouldn't guarantee that Isabella *hadn't* had her reasons.

Before she could think better of it, she activated the magic inside the scroll, and the paper burnt to ash. She blinked out of existence as [Invisibility] settled over her.

Sneaking onto an elevator with the next passenger and catching a ride up posed little challenge. The Institute's security wasn't particularly rigorous. The campus had a constant stream of visitors, and while the important locations were guarded against basic spells like [Invisibility]—though maybe not one of Lady Vivi's quality—simply getting onto the island wasn't hard.

Neither did she struggle ascending to the ninth floor and entering the garden annex that was her destination. Her stomach tied itself into more elaborate knots with every step. She almost turned around twice. The only reason she didn't was because she'd already wasted an extremely valuable scroll. One that hadn't even belonged to her. She also felt increasingly terrible about that, but compared to the current mess her thoughts were in, it was a distant concern. She would feel much worse later, she was sure. Especially if this turned out to be pointless.

Soon—too soon—she stood at the corner of a hedge. One more step and she would find Isabella sitting underneath the gazebo, or she wouldn't. She had no idea which she hoped for: for Isabella to potentially be innocent—meaning Saffra had failed *her* rather than the other way around—or for that hope and terror to be squashed and to face reality for a *second* time, learning that she'd been turned on and tossed aside so easily. Not that Isabella's absence would guarantee anything at all. That was why this whole trip was idiotic.

Taking a breath, she forced her feet to move. She stepped around the corner and braced herself.

There, head in one hand and slumped over the table, sat an exhausted-looking Isabella Caldimore.

Saffra's heart sank into her shoes. Proof? Not really… though it felt like it. After so many months stewing in misery and building Isabella up as a monster, recognizing the possibility that she might not be to blame had Saffra genuinely nauseous. Her palms felt clammy, and for a moment she worried she wouldn't keep her dinner down.

Closing her eyes and forcing her breathing into its regular pattern, she wrangled back control of herself. She didn't know anything. Not yet. Even this might not be proof. Isabella showing up to their old meeting spot after that encounter in the library might just be… curiosity. Nothing more.

That didn't feel right. But still, maybe?

She needed confirmation. From Isabella herself.

It took her nearly a full minute to work up the nerve, but finally she dropped the [Invisibility] and announced herself with, "Isabella?"

Her voice was loud in the otherwise silent garden annex. The sudden noise took Isabella so by surprise that the blonde-haired noble almost jumped out of her seat. She spun and faced Saffra.

Unlike last time, Saffra wasn't wearing an illusion. Besides how she'd trimmed her hair shorter and wore her adventurer's gear rather than an Institute uniform, she looked roughly the same as when she'd left. So Isabella recognized her instantly, without that moment of hesitation like back at the library.

Isabella took a step backward in pure shock, bumping into the bench behind her.

"Saffra?" she whispered.

“That’s… me.” It felt like her heart was trying its best to escape her rib cage. “What are you doing here?”

“What are *you?”* Isabella asked, horrified.

She had already been pale, but now she’d gone ashen—just like back at the library. She looked over her shoulder, eyes flitting around as if looking for an escape.

Panicked. If Isabella’s betrayal had been anything like what Saffra had assumed these past many months, Isabella wouldn’t be reacting to her appearance with *panic*.

Saffra had already had a suspicion, but now she knew for a fact she’d been a terrible friend. How had she just *assumed* Isabella had turned on her with no apparent reason? Obviously something more had been going on. Even if she’d failed to get an explanation out of Isabella back then, she should have had more faith.

“I’m sorry,” Saffra blurted out, feeling like dirt. She took a step forward, wringing her hands. “I—I shouldn’t have…”

Shouldn’t have what? She *had* tried to talk to Isabella. To sort things out. But she’d been stonewalled. And Isabella hadn’t looked like… this, back then. Whatever mask she’d been wearing had been fully intact. Convincingly so. She hadn’t flinched no matter how much Saffra begged for explanations.

But still. She blamed herself.

“I should have helped, somehow,” she finished.

Isabella stared at her. Some mix of emotions crossed her face that was too complicated for Saffra to pin down. Her features twisted one way and another before settling on something that scared Saffra: fragility.

“You… are apologizing… to *me?”* Isabella whispered.

Then she did something that confirmed Saffra’s worst fears and banished whatever shreds of doubt had remained. The girl’s lip quivered, and she started crying.

Saffra had never seen Isabella cry. She hadn’t known it was possible. That was why Isabella looking so feeble earlier had thrown Saffra’s thoughts into such catastrophic disarray in the first place. Isabella had always seemed so steady. Maybe not perfectly composed all of the time—she was surprisingly easy to get a rise out of, which was why Saffra liked poking her and arguing—but even so, something about ‘Isabella Caldimore’ and ‘crying’ didn’t fit in the same sentence.

But here it was. She didn’t sob, collapse, and begin wailing. Even in this, she kept a regal bearing. She stood there, shoulders hunching forward as if she was folding in on herself, tears quietly streaming down her cheeks.

“Why are *you* apologizing to *me?*” she repeated, voice quavering.

Saffra was hurrying over before she was consciously aware of it. Isabella didn’t shove her away, or even flinch at the contact as Saffra pulled her onto the bench. She rubbed the girl’s back, trying to assure her with panicked, pointless words, which only seemed to make the muffled sobbing worse.

It took a while for Isabella to pull herself back together. And even then, she looked nothing less than crushed.

“Tell me what happened,” Saffra said quietly, but firmly. “Why do you look so…” She didn’t finish the question. “I’m not leaving without an answer this time,” she said adamantly. “Tell me. I’m not giving you a choice.”

Perhaps because the past eight months had been even harder on Isabella than Saffra herself, the girl didn’t protest being ordered around.

She answered.

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FAMILY

Eight Months Earlier

Isabella Caldimore had a plan. Or more specifically, she had a goal, and any goal worth pursuing deserved a sufficiently foolproof plan. Working toward something without a guiding strategy was nothing short of idiocy; Father had taught her that. And he wasn't one of the most important people in the Kingdoms without reason.

Still. *Having* a plan and working up the nerve to execute it were two different things. Father had also taught her to always account for the human element. In this case, her. Well. Her, and Father himself.

Which was precisely why she was so nervous. Yes, Father had been less prone to his… mood swings as of late. These past few months with regular dinners together were the most she'd seen of him… probably ever. But that didn't mean she was *looking forward* to broaching a topic he might not approve of. She could never really tell when she would accidentally set him off.

Still, she had to try. Because it wasn't *that* outrageous, what she wanted. If she'd convinced herself, how hard could convincing Father be?

Sitting straight-backed at the long dining table, Isabella idly shifted the remnants of her plate around with her fork. She needed to force the words out before dinner came to a close. He might disappear on another of his trips any day now. Best to take advantage of his good mood while she could.

“So. I’ve been thinking about the upcoming summer expedition,” she announced tentatively.

“Is that right?” Father returned absentmindedly. His meal lay to the side, half-eaten. He’d gotten distracted with a stack of papers, tapping the edge of his pen on the table as he looked down at whatever accounts lay within. Father would normally never breach etiquette by working while eating, but he’d been more lax recently.

She needed to sound casual. If she acted like her request was insignificant, then Father might not think much of it either. Framing was everything. Take a vagrant from the streets, throw him in king’s finery, and everyone would treat him as he seemed. Father had impressed upon her many times how much power stemmed from appearances. And not even just social power, but in combat too. Presenting oneself as either weak or strong could be the difference between a victory and a loss.

“Nothing too important,” Isabella said, voice sounding pleasingly unbothered to her ears. “This year’s will be at the Pinehollow Plains, as I believe I mentioned, and we’ll be working in pairs. I think you recommended Vincent Blackmoor for the expedition?” She wrinkled her nose, though Father didn’t glance over to see it, so the performance was pointless. She recalculated her plans and voiced the complaint, even if it was more blunt than she’d have preferred. “He isn’t the best mage I’ve ever seen, is all.” She hoped her tone conveyed how much of an understatement that was.

She didn’t actually have anything against Vincent. But if she wanted to change Father’s mind, then step one was tearing down his initial suggestion. Implying that the Blackmoors weren’t worth their time. Father had no doubt made the suggestion idly, which was the only reason she dared go against him in the first place. Yes he’d been in a better mood recently, perhaps related to whatever business was keeping him in Meridian, but that didn’t mean she was foolish enough to outright contradict him. Not with how he might react. How he *had* reacted in the past, often to comments Isabella had thought were completely innocuous.

“The Blackmoors have always been unimpressive,” Father snorted in response. “That their scion follows in their footsteps is a surprise to no one. But they are useful through their connections nevertheless.”

“That’s true,” she said hesitantly. “Hm. I just worry it’ll slow my own progress, having him as an anchor during such an important event.

Especially with how many promising students there are this year. I wouldn't want to sully the Caldimore name with anything less than a stellar performance. There are even a few commoners who might take first place."

"Hardly unusual," Father replied in a surprisingly bland manner. "A commoner would only gain entry to the Institute to begin with if they showed significant talent." He paused, then finally seemed to become aware of the conversation, shifting his attention away from the stack of papers. "Wait. Is this about that girl again?"

Isabella froze. "That… girl?"

"That beastkin. You mention her every other week, it seems."

Father frowned, and Isabella was too disconcerted to regather her thoughts and respond right away. She didn't mention Saffra every other week. Did she? This had to be… well, not the first time, but she'd hardly made a pattern out of it.

"Is this what's had you twisting around in your seat all dinner?" Father continued, his frown deepening. "You want to partner with her instead of the Blackmoor boy?"

Had Father seen through her that easily? Her plan to remain cool and aloof was severely faltering. She forced herself to rally; it wasn't like she had a choice. It was now or never. She just wished she hadn't bungled things so quickly.

"Not her specifically," Isabella said airily. "Simply not the Blackmoor; he really is lacking, and I don't want to place *too* low in the rankings. Though now that you mention it, Saffra's scores *are* impressive. Especially when you consider her late entry. She's nearly equal to me."

Father's eyes narrowed, and Isabella knew right away that she shouldn't have phrased it like that. But rather than exploding, Father only shook his head in annoyance.

"Perhaps she scores similarly, but that does not make her your *equal*, Isabella. Your great-great-grandfather was a commoner and established the Caldimore line through earning a Title. It is not wrong to acknowledge the talent of another, regardless of their station, and perhaps the day will come in which this girl earns similar acclaim. I would acknowledge her for that. But *potential* counts for nothing, and one's strength is not the sum of a person. You are the daughter of a duke; she is a commoner. Do not refer to her as your *equal* so glibly."

"Yes, Father."

Her heart slammed in her chest. But… that was it. From his initial reaction, she'd expected much worse than a simple lecture. He really was in an unprecedented mood.

Did she dare keep pushing her luck?

She didn't want to. But now was the best chance she would get today, maybe ever. Though she was moderating her expectations, she really would prefer to partner with Saffra over Vincent. The girl was so… unlike all of Isabella's other acquaintances. Saffra could be irritating at times, to be completely honest, yet she found the girl's blunt, principled, and unyielding attitude rather refreshing.

"I apologize for misspeaking. I meant my equal in magecraft only, of course." She cleared her throat. "She really does seem talented, in that regard. And a diligent worker. Perhaps it's worth my time—our house's time—to allow her to accompany me on the summer expedition. She might be useful to the family a decade from now. Seeds are best planted early, as you've always said."

"Your plotting is as clumsy as always, Isabella," Father said dismissively. "But I do not disagree. Do as you please." Slightly irritated, he muttered under his breath, "It's not like it will matter."

Isabella paused. That was… rather cryptic. She didn't understand what he meant by the statement. Maybe she'd misheard?

More importantly, she'd gotten permission? To drop Vincent and instead team with Saffra? Had it really been that easy?

"Well," Isabella said, briefly at a loss for words. Interactions never went this smoothly with Father. "Excellent. I'm pleased you also see the sensibility of separating myself from the Blackmoor."

Father grunted, no longer paying even half attention to her.

She considered her options. She was playing a dangerous game. Her main goal had been achieved. Should she disengage? Accept her victory? But when else would she have a better opportunity to lay the groundwork for other, greater hopes? As she had just quoted to Father, seeds were best planted early.

She decided to take her chances. "She clearly intends to become an adventurer, rather than a full Institute mage," she added as off-handedly as she could. "I've been wondering what that would be like myself. Toying with the idea only, of course. Following in your or Lydia's footsteps."

Her intention had been to use Lydia's name to cast the concept in a favorable light. Father talked about Lydia often… though usually to allude to how completely Isabella failed to measure up to the older half-sister she'd never known.

But clearly, where Father was allowed to make that comparison and use Lydia's name, *she* wasn't. Even in a respectful manner. Because Father froze. His gaze turned slowly to Isabella, and her skin went cold in response to the anger that appeared in his eyes, as suddenly as it always did.

It seemed Father was not, in fact, in a good-enough mood to save her from too large a blunder.

She had been hoping so desperately to navigate this conversation without incident. *Why didn't I stop while I was ahead?*

She opened her mouth to correct herself, but faltered, unsure how.

Father took a deep breath, then released it.

"I have been a neglectful father," he said.

The ominous statement hung in the air for several long seconds. Isabella's thoughts rushed as she desperately tried to come up with a response, yet she didn't truly know what mistake she had made in the first place.

Father sighed. "I will begin rectifying that now. Stand up, Isabella."

"Stand up?"

He rose, and Isabella did as well, not foolish enough to hesitate. Her heart slammed in her chest as he walked over with long strides. She tried not to show any consternation—much less fear—because that would only make things worse. She forced a picture of mild confusion onto her face. He didn't *seem* as angry as some of the previous times. Perhaps he wouldn't—

He slapped her in the face.

Father rarely hit her. Mostly, when she set him off, he ranted about how much of a disappointment she was. That was what she'd been expecting. And when he *did* hit her, the blows were always controlled. Only enough to sting.

This wasn't that. She went reeling sideways from the force of the hit, stars filling her vision. She found herself on the ground, disoriented and blinking at the ceiling, elbows aching from where they'd struck the floor.

Then Father's hands were around her neck, crushing her windpipe. The shock of the action surged through her viscerally, and though still dazed, her body responded instinctively: she began thrashing.

What? What was this? Father had never hit her so hard, and he had certainly never done *this*. Her fingernails scraped uselessly against his hands as she tried to claw them away. She couldn't breathe.

His face was so calm. He didn't even seem angry.

What was happening?

She couldn't *breathe*. Terror coursed through her so thickly that she couldn't think at all. She flailed like an animal, kicking and clawing, but accomplishing nothing. Father's grip was like iron.

Her vision blackened at the edges. Her impotent struggling grew weaker. Losing consciousness.

Why?

What had she done?

Father released her. The sudden freedom was almost as shocking as the attack itself. She rolled over and started gasping.

"Are you a moron, girl?" Father asked. "Were you dropped as a child?"

The air wasn't coming in right. Her head still spun from the blow earlier. She tried and failed to swallow down gulp after gulp, her own hands now clutched around her throat.

"You didn't even *try* to cast. Your barest, middling talent is in sorcery, and when someone attacks you, you don't so much as *attempt* to use it?"

Despite the terror and panic coursing through her, she realized… he was right. Nothing she did would ever make a man of Father's rank so much as flinch, but even so, a spell had a better chance of helping than struggling *physically* against him. Casting even low-tier magic in such a frantic situation seemed like an impossible feat, but she still should have *tried*. Why hadn't she?

Father looked down at her as she continued sucking in gasps of air. Shame and embarrassment joined the terror. He watched for a long moment, then sighed.

"The lesson, Daughter, as it always is, is that you are a disappointment." There was genuine disgust in Father's words. "You wish to become an *adventurer*? Like *Lydia*? Is that some jest? You have no instincts *whatsoever*. That has been clear since you could so much as walk—why do you think I set you on the path I did? If Arthur and Julian fell in battle, if my father and his brother and my brothers, sisters, and cousins all—" He cut off, the rising heat in his voice dissipating all at once. "You would die on your very first mission, idiot girl. Where do these frivolous desires come

from? This utter lack of sense? I have been too busy to deal with this… this waywardness of yours. I have always had more important tasks to attend to. But this?" He laughed, then the expression shifted to a grimace. "As I said, I have been a neglectful father, and that is not something I should make excuses for. It is unbecoming of a man." He sighed. "It is time I begin delivering lessons that I should have long ago."

Lessons?

A horrible dread suffused her. She knew how Father's mind worked. Considering what they had been talking about right before she had set him off… she knew how he would 'teach her a lesson.'

"Please," she croaked out.

He sounded almost amused. "Please what, Isabella?"

"Please don't hurt her."

The words stunned him. Isabella faltered. Had she been wrong? She'd been so certain that he had a particular punishment in mind.

His face twisted in fury. He dropped down and grabbed her by the hair, shaking her. She cried out at the spike of pain.

"This has nothing to do with that *girl*," he growled. "Have you listened to *nothing* I've just said?"

He yanked her sideways, and she went sliding across the tile floor.

"This is about *you*. *Your* inadequacy. How utterly *you* fail to deserve the name you were born with."

He fumed for several long moments. Isabella stayed silent.

"But," he said, "I will admit that is an excellent idea. You will remove this… *distraction* from your life." He crouched down, bringing his face close to hers. She didn't dare pull away. "And you will do so swiftly, and thoroughly, or I will handle it myself. Do I make myself clear, Isabella?"

She nodded.

He stood and stared down at her. Then grimaced and turned away.

"You are not a child anymore, Isabella. It is not forgivable, this mawkishness of yours. This frivolous attitude you carry around. What have you done for your house? That is what you should ask yourself, every day without fail. Have you, even once?" He shook his head. "The failing is mine. A child is a parent's responsibility. But I never needed to guide Lydia or Nathaniel in such a manner. *They* were talented. *They* were deserving. Without need for such extensive instruction."

A long silence passed. He sighed.

“It is time, I think, that I involve you in the family business. Correct you from this erring path. Unfortunate as it is, you bear the name Caldimore. I will make you worthy of it.”

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HELP

The halting, mumbling explanation Saffra received wasn't easy to follow—bordering on incoherent. Clearly not rehearsed, either aloud or in Isabella's head. Still, Saffra pieced together the big picture, and it was as bad as she had feared.

Saffra herself hadn't even done something to draw Duke Caldimore's ire. The Duke had simply wanted to punish Isabella, or 'remove a distraction' and 'test her'—the specifics were somewhat unclear, since Isabella wasn't being particularly articulate—and Saffra had been an available target. Although primarily furious for Isabella, she took a moment to be indignant for herself too. Once again, her own actions weren't even to blame. She had simply been a victim of fate. Caught in a noble house's twisted drama.

Saffra made sure to point out quite vocally that Isabella shouldn't be feeling guilty about this at all—*she* was hardly to blame. Saying so just had the girl's eyes watering again, though, so she didn't push the point like she might have otherwise. Even if by Isabella's expression it didn't seem like she agreed.

Guilt clearly wasn't exclusively what had put Isabella in this miserable state, though. In her stumbling explanations, she had mentioned how her father had been 'involving her more in the family business.' But what did that mean? Was simply being around her father more doing this to her? Where the girl had willingly spilled answers as to why she'd turned on Saffra, she was far more tight-lipped when it came to those questions.

“You don’t understand,” Isabella mumbled. She no longer looked so brittle, or like she was one wrong word from bursting into tears, but where those emotions had departed, more exhausted ones had replaced them. She slumped over the bench table, head in her hands, her voice no louder than a whisper. “My father… he isn’t the kind of person everyone thinks he is.”

“I think you’d be surprised what people think of Duke Caldimore,” Saffra said dubiously. But maybe that was her personal experience speaking. Other than through William, most of what Saffra heard about Duke Caldimore tended to be positive. “Just tell me. I can help.”

Isabella let out a hollow laugh. “Be serious, Saffra. There’s nothing anyone can do, much less you. You shouldn’t even be here. If my father knew I was speaking to you…” Her hands clenched into fists. “He made it very clear that if I didn’t take care of it myself, *he* would.”

Maybe on some other day, Saffra would’ve tensed at that. Having a duke’s ire was a terrifying thing. Yet Saffra’s indignation and anger carried her forward.

“Whatever he’s doing, and dragging you into, is bad.” Isabella wouldn’t look like she was coming apart at the seams otherwise. “And maybe you’re right, that *you or I* can’t do anything, but that doesn’t mean no one can.”

Saffra hated asking other people for help. That went double if that person was Lady Vivi, who’d done way too much for her already. More than she could repay in ten lifetimes. So if this had been her *own* problem, she wouldn’t have even considered it.

But for Isabella? She would. Saffra could hardly stand against a duke herself, so she had no other choice. Even if it ruined her apprenticeship by continuing to make herself a massive nuisance to the woman, she would go and ask. Beg, if she needed to. It didn’t matter that she hated the idea to her core.

“No,” Isabella mumbled. “I’m serious. *No one* could. It doesn’t matter who.”

“Not even a Titled mage?”

Isabella hesitated, turning to give her a curious look—but not one with any hope in it. “You met a Titled who would stand against a duke of the Central Kingdom for you?”

Surprisingly, there was only a small hint of dubiousness in her voice, when the claim deserved a bucketful.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but yes.” Saffra didn’t understand why, but the proof was there. “And not for me. For anyone who needs help, I think. She’s… not a bad person.”

Isabella considered Saffra with a furrowed brow, then slowly shook her head. “This is my father we’re talking about. The Duke. He has several Titled just in his own guild.” Her tone dropped. “And those aren’t even the ones to worry about,” she mumbled.

Saffra opened her mouth to insist, but Isabella talked over her.

“Even if she’s high-Titled—even if she was as strong as Archmage Aeris himself—she wouldn’t be able to do anything. My father… he’s always been obsessed with the Cataclysms. How couldn’t he be? His father, his brothers, most of his family. They all died in that final siege. Even his children, just to what was left behind.” She bit her lip. “So that’s what he’s been working on. A way to fight back against monsters that should be beyond him. Monsters beyond all of us… ‘helpless mortals.’” She repeated the last words in a way that told Saffra she was quoting her father directly. “And he’s succeeded, in some manner of speaking. Even a high-Titled wouldn’t stand a chance now. It’s better that I don’t say more. You need to leave, Saffra. Meridian. Maybe the Central Kingdom entirely. Just forget about me.”

Saffra poked the girl hard enough that she pulled sideways. “Don’t say that,” she said angrily. “I’m not leaving you. And I understand that this is serious. That your father is dangerous. It doesn’t matter. She *can* help. I promise.”

It didn’t matter if the Duke was working on some kind of project that could threaten even a Cataclysm. It certainly didn’t matter that the Duke had connections to other Titled. Through her apprenticeship status, Saffra had irrevocable proof that her teacher was, at a very minimum, a peer to some of the Cataclysms. Quite likely the daughter of the Dragon King, a creature that everyone feared might *become* the Eighth Cataclysm—and if so would stand among the worst of them.

Saffra was nearly certain that Isabella feared her father more than he deserved—because if Cataclysms were so easy to destroy, they wouldn’t have survived for millennia against all of the strongest mortals of history. But even if Isabella was right about how dangerous her father was, then Lady Vivi could *still* help.

Despite the firmness of Saffra's voice, not so much as a spark of hope appeared in Isabella's eyes. Though the girl did study her curiously. Saffra supposed she should be flattered that Isabella was considering the ridiculous statement without laughing at her.

"Who are you talking about, Saffra? Who did you meet while you were gone?" She hesitated. "Where have you even been, these past eight months?" The girl crumpled in on herself. "I hope things weren't too hard for you," she whispered. "I wanted to try to help somehow, send coin maybe, but it was too dangerous. If my father found out…"

"I've been fine. Honestly, it wasn't that bad," Saffra lied. "I went north. Got an early start on my adventuring career. I did just fine."

Isabella stared down at her clenched fists, not seeming comforted. Saffra squeezed her shoulder. She wasn't a touchy person by nature, but if there was ever a time.

"And yes," Saffra said. "You need to believe me. She's… she's stronger than Archmage Aeris, or the Headmaster, or—" She cut off. "I shouldn't say more. I don't want to break her trust." Maybe she already had. "She wants to keep a low profile. But if your father is planning something awful, she can help. And she will. Just because she can." Saffra was surprised by how much she believed that.

Isabella looked at her strangely. To be fair, it was a very bizarre thing to claim, that she'd gone and made allies with someone more powerful than the strongest living human archmage.

"You're making it sound like you went and found the Sorceress herself," Isabella said.

Saffra's brain briefly stopped working. She stayed frozen for nearly five full seconds before she jerked and responded, "What? Don't—don't be ridiculous." She rejected the idea with her whole being. Refused to even entertain the words that had come out of Isabella's mouth. "It doesn't matter *who* she is," she said, shaking her head furiously to clear it. "Only that she's strong enough to do something, no matter what you think. I promise."

Isabella turned her gaze back to her clenched fists once again. She silently stared down at them for a long time.

"Okay," she said.

Saffra paused. "Really?" She hadn't expected Isabella to agree so quickly.

Then again, after the breakdown Saffra had just watched, was it *really* surprising Isabella would seize the first opportunity she could? This had obviously been weighing on her for months.

"It's better to try something than nothing," Isabella said, shrugging weakly. "And if you say she can, despite what I've told you…" She trailed off. "I trust you."

Saffra flinched. Trust. Something she hadn't mustered enough of herself, apparently.

"Okay. I can… I can go get her." She would have to burn through another valuable scroll to escape the Institute unnoticed. A problem to feel awful about later. "If she wants to help—and she will—and she proves she *can*, you'll explain everything? And we'll figure out what to do?"

Another weak shrug. It wasn't a promise, but she suspected she wouldn't get more out of Isabella. Despite claiming to trust Saffra, the girl clearly wasn't daring to hope.

Saffra didn't want to leave Isabella alone, but by the way the girl was talking, whatever her father had planned was serious—and probably happening soon.

"Stay here, okay? She can teleport, so it won't be more than half an hour." She squeezed Isabella's shoulder. "I'll be right back. Promise."

Isabella shouldn't have agreed. She knew that. She should have insisted that Saffra flee Meridian. Get as far away as possible. They should have pretended that they'd never seen each other at all today. For that matter, Saffra's safety had been one of the only things she'd taken comfort in these past several months. How, despite the fact she'd ruined Saffra's life, at least she'd left Meridian, and possibly the Central Kingdom entirely. And thus was in less danger.

Father hadn't told her exactly what his plans were, but she'd seen and heard a lot, and more importantly, she knew the man. More now than ever. She'd seen that dagger of his, the one that cut through even Titled-rank enchantments like they didn't exist. That armor, reinforced with blasphemous material taken from the Shattered Oracle's own workshop and improved upon at costs Isabella didn't want to imagine.

She knew her father wasn't trying to bring ruin to the world. But few magical disasters of historic scale had been intentional. How could a man as intelligent as him—and he *was* intelligent, however much she'd grown to hate him—be so blind to such an obvious fact? This ritual, whatever it was, wasn't going to end well. She should have insisted on Saffra leaving. Told her to get to safety. Isabella wanted to warn *everybody*… but if she could save just Saffra, that was something. A small payback. Inadequate, but something.

"What am I doing?" she groaned into her hands, shoulders slumping forward. "Why did I say yes?"

"That's a great question," a familiar voice quipped from her side.

Isabella's skin went cold.

For a long moment, she refused to believe she'd heard what she had. She tried rejecting reality with her entire being. But that strategy had never worked in the past, and it didn't now.

"I mean, colluding against your own family?" the voice continued. "What kind of horrible person does that? You really are your father's daughter."

She turned slowly around, and found a nightmare waiting for her.

The Red Tithe winked.

Isabella tried not to hyperventilate. How much had he heard? Clearly enough.

He'd seen Saffra.

Oh, gods. She was going to be sick. After everything she'd put that girl through… she'd gone and gotten her killed too, at the very end.

"Please," she whispered. She didn't even know what she was pleading for.

"Stupid plan, too," the Red Tithe said. "Seriously, you agreed to that? What's the girl's *master* going to do? You really think I can't cut down one demonic Titled?" He waggled a finger at her. "A slap in the face would've been less of an insult. I'll forgive you just this once, since I'm a good guy."

Isabella stared at him.

Saffra had described the woman as a lot more than a regular Titled—like some kind of hidden immortal. She racked her brain for how the conversation had gone. What had been said, and in what order.

Maybe… the Red Tithe hadn't heard everything, then? He must have arrived to listen in *after* Saffra had insisted this mysterious stranger was

stronger than Archmage Aeris. He wouldn't be speaking so dismissively about the demon otherwise. She didn't know exactly what level the assassin was, but she doubted even the Red Tithe would treat the prospect of fighting someone on equal footing with Archmage Aeris so casually.

And it seemed like he knew the woman already? Because he'd said 'demonic,' yet Saffra hadn't mentioned the woman's race. Had he been watching Saffra already, for some terrifying reason? Did that mean her father knew the girl was in Meridian?

What was going on? She was so confused.

And… this mystery woman is a demon? Isabella's thoughts flickered, of course, back to the Sorceress. *But Saffra rejected that idea. If… very strangely?*

She cut all of those thoughts off, merely because she *wanted* to look distraught. To not give anything away. It might not matter, hiding what little she could, but better to do so than not.

"Not even a thank you? So ungrateful," the Red Tithe tutted. "Though maybe I'm the one who should be saying thanks. I wanted to kill that Keresi woman the moment I saw her. There was a… special spark, I guess you could say." A disgusting grin stretched his lips. "Your father seemed on the fence about it, but he'll definitely let me now. They've become loose ends that officially need tying up. Let's go ask daddy dearest." He held a hand out to Isabella. "Sometimes things just work out, don't they? This really is my lucky day."

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TITHE

Vivi woke to banging on her door.

"Lady Vivi?" came Saffra's muffled voice. "Lady Vivi, are you awake?"

She sounded… distressed?

It was embarrassing how much adrenaline immediately dumped into Vivi's veins. She didn't even bother rolling out of bed. She [Blinked] past the doorway, materializing next to Saffra with staff raised. After finding nothing but a startled red-haired catgirl, Vivi realized she might have overreacted. She dispelled her weapon and, after an awkward pause in which Saffra gawked at her, she prompted, "Yes? What is it?"

"Um. S-sorry. I know it's late."

However unwilling Saffra was to share her thoughts, Vivi appreciated how easy the girl could be to read at times. Her flattened ears and drooping tail told her everything she needed to know: that Saffra didn't want to be here, asking whatever she was about to ask. So it was important.

Which had her hackles raised. Her apprentice wasn't someone to go requesting things frivolously. And considering Vivi's previous encounter with the Duke and the uneasy feelings she'd been left with afterward, she was primed to expect a disaster.

"I'm not sure how to go about this," Saffra mumbled, looking down at the floor. "Can I ask you a favor?"

"You can."

Saffra seemed startled at the quick response. “Do you remember that girl we ran into at the library?”

Having not entirely woken up, Vivi almost responded with ‘Isabella?’ But she caught herself at the last second.

“I do.”

“I think she needs help.”

The adrenaline was well deserved, then. Her attention sharpened on Saffra. “How so?”

Again, Saffra looked caught off guard by Vivi’s intensity. Wide-eyed, she responded, “That was Isabella Caldimore. Of the Caldimore family. Like on the train, if you remember?”

Vivi had to remind herself that Saffra thought she didn’t know much about anything. This girl had been very unwilling to talk about her life prior to Prismarche, and so everything Vivi had learned about the Caldimores had been through other channels.

She tried not to sound impatient as she replied, “Yes, I remember. She needs help? With what? Where is she?”

“Not, like, *immediately*. Just—” Saffra bit her lip. “I went and talked with her.”

Vivi digested that admission. That her apprentice had snuck off in the middle of the night to go and find her prior friend. She couldn’t say she was surprised. She should have accounted for the possibility. Her thoughts had been too preoccupied with other matters—with the Duke, the strange dagger, and the dimensional fracture.

“I… couldn’t get much out of her,” Saffra admitted. “But I think her dad is planning something bad?” Her voice tilted up at the end; she sounded unsure. But then her expression firmed. “He definitely is. I just don’t know what. She sounds really worried. It’s the Caldimores, so anything they’re planning has to be big. She seemed to think even a high-Titled couldn’t do much to help. But I told her… I told her you could? She’s waiting back at the Institute right now.” She clenched her fists to her side. “I know I don’t deserve to ask anything of you, considering how much you’ve already done, but… can you, please?”

In that moment, Vivi was extremely tempted to summon her staff and give the girl a solid *thwap* on the head. But that wouldn’t be appropriate considering the circumstances—even her inadequate social skills told her

that. She took a second to moderate her reaction, watching Saffra squirm uncomfortably.

“If you, or anyone else, needs help,” Vivi said, “ask. That’s a command from master to apprentice. And don’t see it as a favor. Okay?”

Saffra seemed bewildered. “O-okay…” she stammered.

“Where is she?”

“The Institute. The ninth-floor garden annex. I can show you?”

“Please do.”

Vivi [Blinked] into her room, got dressed, and [Blinked] out. She held a hand out, and Saffra accepted. A warp took them to Osmian’s office. In her discussions with the archmage’s ghost, the man had shown her how the challenge door shifted throughout the Institute. Not to be helpful, but to brag about the obscenely complex mechanisms in the creation—which admittedly *had* impressed her. That meant she knew how the artifact worked in advance; she didn’t need to puzzle it out.

She adjusted the destination to the ninth floor. Osmian, sensing a presence in his office, extruded his spectral self to crankily demand what was going on, but she ignored him. She strode out into a nondescript hallway and, tone more demanding than she’d intended, prompted Saffra, “Where?”

The girl oriented herself, then stalked in the proper direction.

Departing from the magical door—she would apologize later to the soul fragment who was sputtering about her rudeness—Vivi followed her apprentice through the interior of the Institute and to an enclosed garden.

After turning several corners around lush foliage, Saffra slammed to a halt. Her ears flattened. Vivi hurried past, staff in hand, sensing something off about the reaction. There, lying lengthwise on a bench under a gazebo, was not Isabella Caldimore. Instead, it was someone that Vivi recognized. The man who Duke Caldimore had called ‘Tobin.’ For some reason, she doubted that was actually his name.

She tried not to jump to conclusions, but even the most optimistic person in the world would make the obvious assumption.

“You two sure took your time.” The man huffed and rolled up, spinning on the bench to face them. “Cute spot you have here.” He smirked at Saffra in a way that almost had Vivi erasing him on the spot. He kicked his feet back and forth. Everything about his nonchalance, his expression, and his tone of voice made Vivi’s skin crawl. “Very scenic.”

“Where is she?” Saffra demanded—Vivi didn’t think she’d ever heard her apprentice sound so distraught. “Who are you?”

‘Tobin’ laughed. He pushed himself into a standing position, cartwheeling his arms as he steadied.

“Where’s who? Pay attention to me, please. We’ve only just met. That’s no way to talk to a stranger.” He tutted, and his gaze turned to Vivi. “Kids these days, am I right?”

Vivi didn’t think her voice had ever been so cold. Even she was surprised by how clipped her words came out.

“Answer her.”

The man tilted his head. “And who do you think you are, to order *me* around?”

“I won’t ask so nicely the second time.”

His grin widened. “You look different, Nysari. Illusion? Transmog? Why are you showing up to a meeting with a duke under an illusion? That’s so *interesting*.” He breathed in deeply, then released. “Doesn’t matter. Tell me this before I kill you: my dagger. Why did you look at it like that?”

Vivi relaxed. Which was probably a strange reaction to a death threat. The assassin paused.

But she’d been given a clear-cut indicator that this man needed to be dealt with. He had erased any ambiguity. Now, she could do what she wanted.

…within reason.

That brief moment of reprieve was erased by the very concerning reminder of Isabella Caldimore’s absence.

“Where is she?” Saffra asked, now shrill. “What did you do with Isabella?” She pulled on Vivi’s sleeve. “Who is this, Lady Vivi?”

“The adults are speaking, sweetie,” the assassin said. “Be quiet, now.”

“I’ll get answers,” Vivi told Saffra. “But I don’t think he’s going to be cooperative. So move back, please.”

Saffra hesitated, then did so. “Stay in sight,” Vivi told her. The truth was, the safest place in the world was near enough to Vivi for her to instantly respond.

“Not cooperative? You shouldn’t make assumptions,” the man said. “I’m more than happy to chat. You won’t be leaving here alive, after all. So what’s the harm?” His lips curled up. “That girl’s coming with me after I finish with you, unfortunately. The Duke’s *really* not happy with his

daughter. I'm excited to see what he has planned for the two of them. He can get so *creative*, sometimes. For all his faults, he's quite the visionary."

So Isabella was with her father, then? That was what his words implied, if this man intended to take Saffra to them. Vivi further relaxed at learning that. As long as Isabella was alive, everything was salvageable. Her reaction had the assassin's brow furrowing. She clearly wasn't responding how he had anticipated.

"What is that dagger of yours?" Vivi asked, nodding at the sheath on his right hip.

She was tempted to ask questions *after* thoroughly battering the man around. But she didn't have time to play. And despite all justifications present, she would prefer if he started the violence. Abusing the immense power she'd been given was a genuine worry of hers.

Still, he'd threatened Saffra, so he wasn't going to walk away unscathed. It didn't matter who this man was, or whether he was acting with the Duke's authority. She no longer cared about political consequences.

Surprisingly, the assassin seemed willing to oblige the question. He pulled the dagger out of its holder and held it up. Vivi's attention locked to it. It was a thin, simple weapon, not longer than six or seven inches, and made from a transparent black-and-violet material. That same sensation from earlier struck her: the sheer *mundanity* of the object.

"Just your normal everyday dagger, obviously," the man said, sounding amused. "An antique. Not special at all."

"That's not true."

"And how can you tell?" Underneath the man's feigned relaxation, Vivi detected suspicion, maybe even nervousness. He was treating her as a serious threat. Ready to respond at the slightest provocation.

Vivi considered him. "I don't know. But I can. What is it?"

"Why don't you tell me? Here, take a look."

He threw the dagger.

As whenever necessary, her perception of the world slowed to a crawl. But while her natural speed might be outrageously high compared to most people in this world, this was undoubtedly a *very*-high-level assassin. The sheer momentum he threw the item with made the blade dart forward even to her eyes. Not quite a blur, but hardly the luxurious pace she could slow other events to. She didn't have all the time in the world to react.

More importantly, her first instinct wasn't to dodge physically. She was, for better or worse, a mage, and those inclinations had seeped into her: she responded with magic by reaching out and trying to halt the weapon using [Telekinesis].

Her metaphorical hands passed straight through the object.

It was the strangest sensation she'd ever experienced. Spells and enchantments and more esoteric anti-magic effects existed, but this… wasn't that. There was a ghost of a flicker of contact—or maybe she imagined it? Regardless, the spell failed to properly grasp the weapon.

Then, because she'd only had enough time to respond with that one spell, the dagger impacted her shields.

Vivi walked around with heavy-duty defenses as a matter of sensibility. Why wouldn't she? They weren't the strongest she could bring to bear, since there were plenty of ways to supercharge spells—and she wasn't wearing her power-oriented gear set at the moment either—but the suite of magic she had layered over herself could tank a direct hit from the Ashen Hierophant, and he was supposedly the strongest monster this world had ever seen.

However this strange material interacted with magic, the dagger couldn't outright ignore her shields. The sharp point did, however, cut through the dense layers of interwoven mana like nothing she had ever seen. Sensory information *exploded* through her brain as she watched the black-and-violet glass slice apart spell after spell of twentieth-tier-and-higher defensive magics.

The spells created just enough of a buffer—slowed the momentum of the attack just enough—that Vivi's physical body finally responded. Her left hand snapped forward and grabbed the dagger's hilt, stopping it just as it punctured but didn't fully shatter her final shell: the ever-reliable [Prismatic Barrier]. The spell in question was throwing off distressed multi-chromatic sparks of such intensity that any nearby mage studying the effects would probably have gone temporarily blind.

She couldn't even be upset by the sneak attack. It had provided far too riveting a demonstration of the dagger's alien nature. The ways in which her magic had interacted with the material made for one of the most fascinating and engrossing displays she had ever witnessed.

Then she came back to reality and remembered the danger everyone, possibly even she, was in.

The assassin stood with his arm still extended in a throwing motion. He gaped open-mouthed at her.

“You stopped it. With *magic*? Impossible.”

An artifact of this strength had surely been tested quite thoroughly. And if even *her* heavy-duty shields had struggled to fend it off, any magic others had access to wouldn’t have so much as slowed it down. Maybe this man had thought it completely immune to magic.

But no. Not immune. Just ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the way there.

“Fascinating,” Vivi breathed. “Where did you find this?” She held the weapon up and tried to [Inspect] it. The skill bounced off, failing to seize hold of it just like her previous [Telekinesis]. Not like a denied [Inspection] request—just ignored. “What is it made out of?”

A slight twinge on her chest made her look down. Just then, she realized that the dagger had penetrated deep enough through [Prismatic Barrier] to poke her. She pressed a finger to the stinging spot, and a tiny dot of red came away. She frowned at it. He’d drawn blood.

“That’ll do,” the assassin said. “[Phantom Retrieval].”

The dagger blinked out of her grip, teleporting back to the man. She frowned at that too. Skills were much harder to dispel or prevent, since they weren’t actually magic. To the point it could often be impossible. In either case, she hadn’t been prepared enough to try.

“Well,” he said, pupils dilating in excitement. “This is going to be a *lot* more interesting than I thought. I knew you were something special when I saw you. Let’s see what we’re working with.” He breathed in. “[Blood Tithe].”

Energy gushed out of the pinprick wound on her chest, flowing in great rivulets toward the assassin. With her passive perception, she easily read what was happening: he’d activated a skill, a siphon, conditional on drawing blood.

A skill that had stolen a percentage of her own stats.

That… might complicate things.

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CARVE

Vivi watched as, for the second time, the assassin's face went slack with shock.

The assassin whose Title she finally knew, based on the skill he'd activated. She couldn't always remember what Rafael told her, but the Red Tithe had been on a short list of 'most dangerous individuals in the world.' For Rafael to have mentioned him at all in that conversation yesterday meant she was surely dealing with the assassin equivalent of an archmage.

"What kind of *mage* has physical stats like these?" Interestingly, the man sounded equal parts horrified and overjoyed, both without reservation. Maybe the first emotion was feeding the second. Vivi could tell she wasn't dealing with someone who could be considered fully sane. "You're some kind of… mage-brawler? I would not have guessed that."

She most definitely wasn't. In Seven Cataclysms, she had specialized so deeply and solely in magic that it was kind of embarrassing how low her physical stats were. To the point she knew it wasn't ideal from a general optimization standpoint. She had been a true purist in that regard. No compromises: magic was all she cared about.

But natural accumulation still put her strength and agility—which were clearly the only two stats the assassin had stolen, else his reaction would have been *far* more pronounced—at a level he had perhaps never seen. Hence his astonishment. Because in a general sense, he'd deduced how strong and fast she must be.

“That dagger ignores skills,” Vivi said. “Yet still interacts with them, selectively. You teleported it. How?”

Maybe a normal person would’ve focused on more important details, like how someone was trying to kill her. But she couldn’t wrench her attention away from the astounding material. Just remembering how it had cut through her shields had her shivering with excitement. *I want to study it. Really badly.*

“Nifty little thing,” the Red Tithe agreed, watching her carefully—and with poorly restrained bloodthirst. “Never mind that, though. What kind of old monster *are* you? I’ve killed high-Titled *warriors* that gave me less of a strength boost.” He brought his free hand up to his face and repeatedly clenched and opened it, naked fascination on his features. “I underestimated you. My deepest apologies.”

Despite acknowledging that, he didn’t sound worried. Perhaps because her base strength and agility were obscenely high, but still within the realm of believability. He just saw her as an extremely potent threat—a higher-order Titled than he’d expected, but not some being of legend.

If he saw her magical stats, which were more than a hundred times higher than her strength, he would probably already be fleeing, no matter how bloodthirsty.

“I’ve been stuck running errands for *weeks*,” he went on. “I thought I’d go this entire Contract without my services being needed in earnest. Then you showed up.” He bowed at her. “My savior, truly. Don’t die too fast, now; I want to savor this.”

That was apparently all the discussion Vivi would be getting. The man lunged, a twisted grin on his lips.

“[Quick Reflexes],” Vivi incanted.

Spellcasting didn’t rely on her agility; she could effectively cast instantly—minus her base reaction time. Still, the Red Tithe was obscenely fast, and so he closed nearly a third of the distance before she’d finished the spell, probably aided by a movement skill.

With [Quick Reflexes] settling over her, the Red Tithe’s blazing progress toward her slowed, but not by much. Because in that same instant, red rivulets slammed from her into the man, confirming her suspicion: the Red Tithe’s siphoning effect was ongoing, and applied to her *current* stats, not what they were at the time of activation. That was why she hadn’t cast a

top-tier buff like [Perfect Form], her standard for when she wanted to truly boost her agility.

And unfortunately, she couldn't shatter the siphoning skill outright using magic. She might be the world's most powerful mage, but there were fundamental laws she couldn't circumvent, like how long-range teleportation would always need a [Warp Anchor]. Skills and how they behaved were often included in those 'fundamental laws,' since they were granted by the System.

She could still cast [Perfect Form], which would massively widen the gap in their reflexes—since the Red Tithe was only stealing a portion of them—thus giving her all the time in the world to react. The problem was how dangerous it would make the Red Tithe in return. She didn't, in fact, want to empower the insane assassin with level 1800 stats. It would make controlling the collateral damage difficult.

So, she would allow a much smaller gap in their stats instead, simply to prevent the fight from tearing up the entire Institute.

She wasn't worried anyway. Her back was hardly against the wall. This was a mildly trickier scenario than she'd have thought she would run into, but far from truly concerning. She had plenty of cards to play, and she doubted she would even need to.

The Red Tithe closed the distance, and they exchanged several blows too fast for any non-Titled to follow. Vivi barely paid attention, body responding reflexively. Her mind was elsewhere, thoughts rushing forward as she deliberated over what to do.

She didn't want to end this fight as quickly as possible. That would be foolish. Because she had a sneaking suspicion that the dagger wasn't the only piece of equipment she needed to worry about. It was not unique in the world, which meant that even if she subdued the Red Tithe, the greatest threat—that of the material—wouldn't have been dealt with. She needed to understand how to counteract it.

In fact, the material didn't even seem to be unique on the Red Tithe. While the carved shard of black glass provided the most *acute* sensations of mundanity, paying closer attention to the man himself and every piece of his armor gave off a diffuse sense of confusion that mirrored how she felt about the dagger.

Confusion that she now knew stemmed from the material's supernatural resistance to magic and skills. When Vivi's keen passive perception slid

uselessly off the immune objects, it invoked a sensation of overwhelming normality. Because she was so accustomed to her skills always giving *some* insight on objects from this world, that not having *any* disoriented her.

She wasn't surprised the Red Tithe had come with similar defensive artifacts. Why else would he be so confident? He hadn't even attempted to properly ambush her. He thought he was invulnerable, thanks to his weapon and armor.

What explained the material's properties, anyway? Her thoughts went to the dimensional fracture. Did it relate? Perhaps this dagger didn't belong in this world *at all*. Maybe its nature was truly alien—or rather extra-dimensional, and thus somehow resistant to effects of this world? How had Duke Caldimore gotten his hands on such a thing? That was the more concerning part.

Sidestepping an attempted teleportation-backstab, she pointed her staff and incanted, "[Greater Telekinesis]."

It was her first spell targeted on the man. And it responded as she'd suspected. Sentient creatures were always more difficult to lift with telekinesis, scaling with their level and how much they struggled, but Vivi didn't find resistance so much as her metaphorical fingers made contact against a slippery surface and glided away. The sensation was less distinct than against the dagger, in which it had felt like she'd tried to grab air, but she had put her best effort in and still failed to hold him. An improved failure, but still a failure.

She frowned. That meant even if she *did* want to, she couldn't end this encounter instantly. Or rather, not without risking his life by going overboard. She could always cast a truly ludicrous spell, but that would almost certainly kill him. Like slamming a giant hammer into an iron cage holding something fragile within. And as awful as this man was, Vivi didn't want to *murder* him.

If she *had* to… well, she would deal with that when she got there.

Ending this instantly wasn't in her best interest anyway. Isabella's fate concerned her, yes, but Vivi could only assume the Duke had more of this substance on hand, and perhaps deadlier and more potent versions of it. She simply didn't know, which meant she needed to study its effects and develop a counterstrategy. It didn't seem impossible to force her spells to work against it—she could swear she had *almost* closed her hands around

the Red Tithe with that previous attempt—but she just couldn't figure out how.

Taking a minute to decipher these secrets might be what allowed Vivi to save Isabella, should she assault the Duke's estate and find the girl with a similar dagger at her throat.

Between several rapid slashes which Vivi intentionally dodged with only fractions of a second to spare—though she didn't have nearly as much of a speed advantage as she usually did—she layered her shattered shields back onto herself and refreshed [Prismatic Barrier]. The Red Tithe's frenzied grin was growing wider with every attack, though she barely paid attention to him. He was inconsequential in that moment. Her attention was fully on the wonderful, enrapturing way her magic fell apart wherever his glass-like blade slashed or pierced. It was so *fascinating.*

He'd drawn another weapon in his free hand, a dagger of blood-red metal, but that one scraped and bounced off even her weakest shields. The stats he had stolen couldn't close the gap, not considering how massive the gulf truly was. Rather than being discouraged, the Red Tithe seemed energized by his inability to pierce even her outermost defenses without aid from his otherworldly weapon.

Vivi sympathized. She was also getting rather absorbed in the exchange, and for once not simply for the thrill of the combat itself.

Like when observing the dimensional anomaly, the principles on display were too foreign for her to make sense of instantly, and wondrous to behold. Over and over, the assassin slashed, lunged, evaded, and maneuvered, and she danced with him. The garden ripped apart all around them, but nothing like during her fight against Constance. The Red Tithe was a far more subtle fighter, and Vivi took pains to be careful too.

She made a show of seeming like she was being pressed. She wasn't, though with that said, she wasn't able to *completely* disregard the flow of combat. He was quite fast. Still, she feigned weakness; she didn't want the Red Tithe to flee. Every bit of information she gathered on how this void material worked might be the difference between saving Isabella or not, thwarting the Duke's plans or not.

"You can't keep this up forever," the Red Tithe panted in glee, sweat slicking his forehead. "But I appreciate you trying. Very much so."

She barely heard him. He probably didn't realize only a fraction of her attention was on the fight itself. She was repeatedly casting dozens of

[Greater Telekinesis] spells on him, one after the other, slowly tweaking and iterating on the design. However he had reinforced his armor with the alien material, the anti-magic effect was feeling less and less slippery to her mental grip. Similarly, with every shield or effect that fractured or melted when contacting the dagger, she gleaned a spark more insight on why—and how to work around it. The blade paused for a millionth of a second longer, then two millionths, ten, a hundred.

Horrible as this situation was, Vivi felt very, very alive as she danced with the frenzied assassin.

His dagger slashed just in front of her eyes, wind rustling her bangs as she craned her neck back to avoid it. Some spell covering her face dissolved just like hundreds of other shields had over the previous minute, so she didn't pay it a second thought.

Yet after that swing, the Red Tithe's eyes immediately widened, and he disengaged, throwing himself back for the first time in the chaotic fight.

Vivi paused, her mind still on the analysis she had been running, but the man's reaction was so jarring that it had startled her out of her trance.

As a matter of habit, she glanced over at Saffra to check on her. The enclosed garden meant the farthest the girl could get away was a few dozen feet, but she'd stayed in sight, as Vivi had told her to. On their eyes meeting, the girl reacted even more dramatically than the Red Tithe. She jerked a step back, face going white.

Vivi racked her brain, confused. The Red Tithe had disengaged immediately after slashing at her face. Some spell had shattered under contact with the voidglass just like the others had, but that was normal. So why…?

Vivi's stomach dropped.

Ah. The [Illusion].

The one she wore around so constantly she sometimes forgot about it. *That* was what the Red Tithe had cut. The alien dagger had shredded the disguise, and she'd then turned over to Saffra and given the girl a good look.

Her very distinguishing red tear trails were on full display for both her apprentice and the assassin trying to kill her.

"Oh," Vivi said.

She wasn't sure what else to say. Worse, she couldn't properly focus on Saffra's reaction, nor formulate a response to the extremely poorly timed

reveal, because she had a psychopathic, high-Titled, semi-magic-immune assassin to worry about.

"I'll explain, I promise," she told Saffra.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," the man breathed. "Vivisari? That explains *so much*."

This development was unfortunate for more reasons than just Saffra seeing her face. Would he even be willing to fight her, now that he knew who she was? She'd been learning a lot. She didn't want him to stop.

"You were toying with me, weren't you?" the man asked with fascination. "Of course you were. I thought I had you on the back foot. That you were just barely keeping up." He wiped his forehead of sweat and flicked the liquid off his fingers, then laughed. There was a full-belly, unhinged quality to the sound. "Gods above. This is a first, even for me. I've killed dukes, bishops, and even a prince once. But savior of the world?" He shivered. "Never. The honor is mine, my lady. Truly."

She tilted her head slightly. *He still intends to fight? That's… a silver lining, I guess.* She was getting close to bypassing the material's effect.

The man looked at the blade of violet-and-black glass, and a wry expression crossed his face. "I suppose this *is* the sort of thing you would show up for, after a century of silence. It's a rather monumental artifact. I shouldn't be surprised." He gripped the hilt tightly and faced her again. "No more playing around, then."

Either he was a great actor, or he really did have another trick up his sleeve. Considering the caliber of his previous trick—a dagger and a set of armor near-immune to all skills and spells—she watched him warily. A slight tensing of his muscles promised that something was coming, and Vivi's attention sharpened.

He disappeared, so Vivi twisted, expecting him to teleport behind her. Unfortunately, her senses registered him appearing in a different location. A fair distance away.

Right next to Saffra.

Vivi panicked. The shields on her apprentice could *probably* survive a direct blow from the dagger, but she couldn't say that for certain—it had pierced her own, after all, if just barely. And thanks to the Red Tithe's stat siphon, she didn't have all the time in the world to consider her response. Logic dictated he would try to hold Saffra hostage, not kill her, but she couldn't confidently determine what this psychopath had planned.

If his blade cut into the shield and so much as scratched Saffra, who knew what skills or effects or poisons he could apply? Or did he have some means of laying hands on her and teleporting them both away, then conceal himself, leaving Vivi without a way to track him down?

More than with any rational train of thought, Vivi responded how anyone would to an unstable killer ambushing someone she cared about. She finally took the fight seriously.

And returned instinctual and absolute prejudice.

"**[Carve the Firmament]**."

Once again, she borrowed magic taken from the grimoire of a cautionary tale. She hacked and sawed at that fundamental fabric surrounding the Red Tithe—then, before she collapsed the entirety of Meridian with the insanity of what she'd done, tore and threw the bleeding handfuls of voidstuff into the ether, sealing off what she could.

Some magic, as she'd suspected from the start, was beyond even the Red Tithe's alien armor.

The assassin disappeared. A jagged, gaping wound in reality, a black-but-not-black spatial rift, replaced him.

She [Blinked] next to Saffra, grabbed her, and [Blinked] them far away. Then immediately teleported back, now alone in the garden, to the horrifying mistake she'd just made.

It… was stable.

She hadn't accidentally erased an entire city.

She was, however, pretty sure she'd just killed a man.

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UNLEASHED

Eventually, Vivi forced her gaze from where she'd torn a hole in the spatial fabric. It wasn't nearly a disaster on the scale of the dimensional anomaly, but where that was a *theoretical* branch and thus even less known, spatial spells were still bleeding-edge and not perfectly understood even by her. Casting a spell pioneered by the Shattered Oracle in the middle of Meridian had been… reckless beyond reason. She just hadn't thought about what she was doing. She'd reacted. Upon seeing the man lunge for Saffra, she had crushed the Red Tithe as thoroughly as she was capable of.

And it had been thorough indeed.

She [Blinked] back to where she'd dropped Saffra off. Very little time had passed, because Saffra still seemed like she was getting her bearings from being teleported. Vivi wondered if she even registered the sequence of events: the Red Tithe appearing next to her, Vivi responding, then grabbing the girl and [Blinking] her away from the spatial rift.

Saffra's eyes met hers, and again there was a slight jerk of surprise. Vivi's tattoos were still on display. As much as she wished it weren't the case, the image of the Sorceress provoked primal responses in those who only knew her by legend—and even in some who had met and spoken with her back in the days of the Cataclysms. Archmage Aeris himself had nearly fainted… though that was hopefully only because of the bloody future she might have represented.

Saffra's attention tore away from Vivi quickly, though. Even her magical senses must have pinged the spatial anomaly, and it provoked a

more immediate, visceral response. Despite the distance Vivi had dragged Saffra—into a random hall of the Institute—the girl accurately locked her gaze in the direction of the catastrophe.

"What *is* that? What did you…?"

"I'm not sure what I did," Vivi said darkly. She had torn out a chunk of spacetime, but she didn't know if it still existed somewhere, untethered, or if everything within that pocket had been… erased. A man—a horrible man, but a person nevertheless—gone with it.

Saffra sobered at the tone of Vivi's voice. She studied Vivi, cat ears flattening down even further.

"Vivi. Nysari…" Saffra whispered. "It was kind of obvious from the start. I just tried not to think about it."

Vivi didn't know how to respond. She rarely did, in serious situations.

Saffra hunched in on herself. "I definitely knew a while ago." She closed her eyes for several seconds, then shook herself. "That—that doesn't matter right now. Isabella. What happened to her? Who was that man?"

Vivi supposed that with the biggest secret revealed, the smaller ones should follow.

Despite the chaos of the last several minutes—and the dawning dread at how she'd shunted the Red Tithe off into some anomalous section of unstabilized space, or more likely, killed him outright—relief washed through her. She hadn't liked lying to Saffra, even by omission. She'd just thought it better to get used to each other without the titanic shadow of the Sorceress looming over them.

"The Red Tithe," Vivi said. "I met him earlier, when I was speaking with the Duke."

There were two rather huge announcements inside those short sentences: that the assassin had been an infamous high-Titled aligned with Morningstar, and that Vivi had met with Duke Caldimore. Saffra, already overwhelmed, digested them the same way she had everything else. Which was to say, a look of shocked anxiety, then a full-body shake, correcting herself to what mattered most.

"But Isabella?" she insisted. "Where is she?"

"I'm not sure." The Red Tithe had merely implied that the girl had been taken to the Duke, but she didn't know where the Duke *was*. His estate? The Wardens' guildhall? Some other staging area for whatever he had planned? All were plausible. "But I'll be finding out."

Even if she had to tear Meridian up to do so.

“The Red Tithe is dead,” the Fell Apostate rasped.

The words were so unexpected, borderline nonsensical, that Damon didn’t immediately register them. He slowly straightened from where he’d been inspecting a section of the obscenely complex, finally completed ritual.

“What?”

“Or is beyond my means of reading his fate,” said the Fell Apostate. “The distinction is irrelevant. He has been defeated. We begin now, or our preparations have been for naught.”

“Dead,” he repeated. “The Red Tithe. How?”

“It does not matter.”

He stared incredulously at the man. “Nothing matters *more*. That Nysari woman, it has to be. He lost to *her?*”

“It does not matter,” the Fell Apostate stressed. “He is gone. Too much has been invested in this Work. We must begin.”

Damon tried to orient himself to the abruptness of the development. “You said midnight. For the conceptual significance.” He understood little of why the timing would be so important, but the Fell Apostate had impressed upon Damon the necessity.

“I despise compromises but recognize their necessity. It is this or nothing.”

Damon met the blindfolded gaze of the Fell Apostate. A growl escaped his throat. “We begin, then.” He stormed off. “I will fetch my daughter.”

“Be swift. There is much potential that could be squandered here, Damon Caldimore.”

He stopped himself from biting off a retort: a reminder of who had employed whom, and who had orchestrated what. Such pettiness was pointless. After passing through the doorway and taking two turns down the hall, he arrived at the room that held his daughter.

“Who is she?” he demanded. “What do you know?”

The traitorous girl was tied to a chair with a mana-suppressing artifact clamped around her neck. She looked up, startled, as Damon entered.

“You know something. I know you do,” he snarled. “You’ve always been transparent, girl. *Who is she?”* He grabbed her by the jaw and squeezed. “I would accuse you of *planning* this, but that would be giving you too much credit. You could never. Still, you know something. I see it in those insolent eyes.”

“She won, didn’t she?”

Nothing had ever infuriated him so much—that relief in his daughter’s voice. His own flesh and blood. He’d paid more attention to her than she deserved these past eight months, and for what? She’d only strayed further off the proper path. At this point, he couldn’t even blame himself. Some were simply born rotten.

He wished he had time to force an answer from her. But he didn’t. He felt the same urgency the Fell Apostate did. Anything that could kill or disable the Red Tithe wielding both a voidglass weapon and armor was a threat of monumental, and worse, unknown proportions.

Now. The ritual needed to be completed *now*.

He untied the girl’s bindings and wrenched her to her feet before dragging her roughly along.

“It matters little,” Damon said. “You will secure the future of your house and of humanity, by volition or not. It is the least I can make of a Caldimore.”

Vivi was tempted to [Blink] across the city and storm the Caldimore estate without delay. She had been willing to take a more diplomatic approach earlier today when the situation had been ambiguous. But while Duke Caldimore’s guilt hadn’t been proved beyond *all* doubt, it had certainly been proved beyond *reasonable* doubt. Sending an assassin after her and her apprentice was as condemning an action as she could hope for. She had plenty of excuse to retaliate now.

The only reason she didn’t immediately head for his estate was because she wasn’t sure Duke Caldimore was there, since he might also be at the Wardens’ guildhall, or some third location. How would she know?

She wished divination magic weren’t her weakest branch. Supernatural information gathering would be a blessing from the heavens right now.

Though even if she were better at it, the Duke surely had wards, and divination was many, many times weaker against such defenses than other magic. To the extent even her massive mana pool might not make up for the difference.

So, rather than immediately bringing hellfire to the Noble's District, Vivi teleported the two of them to Vanguard's guildhall. A [Detect Presence] alerted her to an individual despite the late hour, and she wasn't surprised to find Rafael in his office.

"We have a problem," Vivi told him.

She was impressed once again by Rafael's unbreakable composure, because the man saw Saffra, stood, smoothed his coat, and addressed Vivi without the slightest hesitation or surprise. Not even for her apprentice, whom he surely remembered Vivi was trying to keep in the dark.

"Indeed we do." He nodded at Saffra. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, young lady." He faced Vivi. "I was moments from contacting you myself. The Wardens have emptied their guildhall. Even their highest officers. None remain. I believe—"

"Something bad is about to happen."

"That is the concise summation, yes."

"I might have killed the Red Tithe," Vivi told him. "That dagger from earlier felt strange because it's resistant to magic and skills, borderline immune, and not in any standard way. I believe it's extra-planar, somehow tied to the dimensional anomaly above Prismarche, though I have no clue specifically how." She breathed in and continued, "The Red Tithe attacked Saffra, and I wasn't sure I could contain him with normal means, so I ripped out a chunk of the spatial fabric surrounding him. It worked; he's gone. The weapon and armor with it. I might be able to fix it, but I don't know that for certain. He's probably dead."

Was that everything? Those were the big events her steward needed to know about.

Even Rafael had his limits. Several moments passed as he digested the rapid-fire announcements and worked through the implications. "Tobin was the Red Tithe. Duke Caldimore is working with Morningstar." Some immense calculus played out within seconds behind the cool eyes of Vanguard's steward. "I suspect the Wardens' vault has been prepared as a staging ground for a ritual led by the Fell Apostate, then. Perhaps drawing on the conceptual weight of Damon Caldimore having dominion over his

own guild and sacrificing it to some end. It would be a powerful catalyst indeed."

That made sense. *The Fell Apostate, though?* Vivi wondered. *Who is that?* Like the Red Tithe, the name rang a bell, but only a faint one. "Isabella Caldimore was brought to her father. I think she's in danger. I'm going to break into the Wardens' guildhall and save her, if that's where you think she is right now."

"Under normal circumstances, I would consider that course of action inadvisable," Rafael said. "But I can see events have escalated beyond containment. I suggest, at least, that you—"

Rafael cut off, his head tilting. The demon had admitted to having poor senses to the arcane, not being an adventurer of even moderate acclaim. Yet even he felt the energy that had just begun suffusing the air.

Through Vivi's delicate senses? Goosebumps erupted all across her. A shiver went down her spine, she broke into a cold sweat, and her throat went dry.

"Oh no," she murmured.

In Prismarche, she had felt the boundary separating realities crack, and that had been a properly terror-inducing event, even to a mage as powerful as her. But compared to what she felt now, that had only been a prelude, a taste of what an *actual* shattering felt like.

"I'm not certain 'oh no' is a phrase I ever want falling from the Sorceress's lips," Rafael said. "What's taking place? Can you stop it?"

"It's already happened," she said grimly. "Now we just have to deal with the consequences."

For a brief moment, she wondered if she'd made a mistake by coming to Rafael. But no. She would have stormed the Caldimore estate first otherwise, since that seemed like the more natural place for Isabella to have been taken. True, the Wardens' vault had been mentioned in a passing manner, but his estate seemed like a far more private location, and thus had been more likely to be the final staging ground for whatever the Duke had planned.

The guildhall would have been the second location she searched, obviously. But she'd been doomed either way.

She didn't have time to think about what she *could* have done. Again, she just had to deal with the consequences.

The ritual had clearly taken place in the Wardens' vault, because the sense of wrongness emanated not more than a hundred feet away. The Wardens were Vanguard's neighbors. Perhaps that was *why* it had felt so potent. The proximity. Maybe it wasn't that bad, whatever it was?

Vivi snorted to herself.

"Let's go find out what he did."

She wrapped flight spells around Rafael and Saffra, then [Blinked] the three of them out of Vanguard's guildhall and high into the air.

What they looked down upon was a nightmarish scene.

Vivi had seen sights like these before, dealing with the Cataclysms, but that had been inside a game. Never in the flesh. She had never witnessed a disaster that might be beyond even her ability to contain without massive casualties.

The Wardens' guildhall was gone. The structure and the plot of land itself had sunk into a supernatural abyss. What remained was a pit of broken dimensional shards descending into an infinite darkness—beyond and through a boundary that should never have been touched, much less punctured so carelessly.

Down below at the very bottom gaped an open wound into some Other Side that neither she nor anyone in the world should ever lay eyes on. She tore her gaze away, feeling nauseous for having peeked in.

That would have been problem enough. But, of course, the opening itself wasn't all she had to worry about.

Denizens were emerging.

Crawling, slithering, and flying out in thick waves were monsters unlike any she had seen in Seven Cataclysms. Sleek, vicious-looking beasts of incredible variety… all coated in violet-and-black glass-like plating.

Vivi connected the dots in an instant. Regardless of how that dagger and armor of the Red Tithe's had been made, the base material had come from these: alien carapace from monsters beyond the dimensional horizon.

Instinctually, she tried [Inspecting] one of the creatures. It slid off, like always, but then something strange happened.

Inspection failed. Approximation provided:

Greater Voidling
Lv. 980

She startled slightly. *Approximation* provided? She doubted that was a standard response given by the Grand System. She may have been the first person to ever receive the screen.

Nine-eighty. That was fairly low. It even seemed promising… until she started using the skill on others within the horde.

Inspection failed. Approximation provided:

Lesser Voidbeast
Lv. 1340

Inspection failed. Approximation provided:

———

———

Voidbeast
Lv. 1423

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Inspection failed. Approximation provided:

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Greater Voidbeast
Lv. 1702

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“I presume Duke Caldimore’s ritual did not go as planned,” Rafael observed, looking down at the chaos below. The words broke her out of her rapid-fire [Inspection] trance.

“Most rituals of this nature don’t,” Vivi said softly.

She had no idea what the Duke’s plan had been, nor how he had intended to benefit from this venture, but unleashing hell into the center of Meridian’s Adventurer’s District was surely too senseless for a person who—while clearly not the man society had assumed him to be—had spent a long career developing a reputation for competence and rationality.

After all, it took more than a simple madman to manage the chaos incarnate that had been wrought below. He’d done the impossible. Whether

Duke Caldimore had intended it or not, whether he'd had help or not, he had arranged a ritual that had torn open the dimensional boundary. Something even Vivi didn't think she could do. Something that had probably never happened before.

For a long time—though it was only a fraction of a second objectively, slowed down as her senses were—she hesitated under decision paralysis.

What did she do next? The monsters needed to be dealt with, obviously, but what had happened to the Wardens? Where were Isabella Caldimore and her father? And, if Rafael was correct, where was the Fell Apostate, who had constructed and invoked the ritual?

Which did she handle first?

"[Detect Presence]."

She sorted through the immense amount of supernatural information the divination spell sent to her. Her eyes locked halfway down the dimensional pit. There, pinned into the wall by thick black spikes, was Duke Caldimore.

One easy answer, at least.

How he had survived the ritual going haywire and had ended up half-crucified to the abyssal pit didn't particularly matter. She had other things to worry about. Too many of them.

She scanned the surroundings looking for other humans, but it was only Duke Caldimore down in the extra-planar maw.

She [Blinked] in front of him. He was in bad shape. The largest spike had gone through his stomach, but smaller ones pierced his left shoulder, right thigh, and right calf, among other places. His head lolled forward; he was unconscious, but alive.

A spike of cruel satisfaction went through her upon seeing the man in the gruesome state, but an uncomfortable feeling of disgust, mostly targeted at herself, followed. Even if this man was a monster—and she didn't know the extent of his crimes or if he was simply a pawn—she didn't want to see people hurt, or punished in vicious and unusual ways. He would face consequences for what he'd done, but she wouldn't torture him or summarily execute him herself.

Unfortunately, with extra-planar monsters surging all around her, Duke Caldimore was in an inconvenient position to be interrogated. She needed to extract him somewhere safer.

She studied the black spikes. Though certainly made of the same material as the dagger, they didn't radiate nearly the same level of

immunity. The dagger had been something special. If she were to take a guess, the difference was the same as raw and refined iron ore. Or perhaps quality of ores, or even normal iron and *enchanted* iron? There was a lot she still didn't know.

"[Greater Telekinesis]."

Through her fight with the Red Tithe, she'd substantially improved her design of this spell, adapting it over and over again to better interact with the foreign substance. And indeed, though her fingers slid across the material as usual, when she poured more mana in—squeezing tighter—her grip clamped down for the first time. It wasn't even particularly hard; this material was much weaker.

She shattered the spikes and pulled Duke Caldimore out.

"[Greater Restoration]."

"[Blink]."

She brought the man up into the sky where she'd left Rafael and Saffra. Realistically, it had been maybe two full seconds; she was acting as fast as she could, considering how much chaos needed dealing with.

She cast a magical platform beneath their feet and lowered the man onto it, then summoned a field of invisibility around them, so they had privacy—they *were* out in the open air, after all, no matter how high up in the sky.

"I healed him. He should wake soon," she told Rafael. She cast a series of disabling spells on the Duke. "Find out what you can from him. *Especially* what happened to his daughter. Be quick about it."

She pulled out a silver bell and rang it. A black line sliced down the air, then opened into a doorway. Winston stepped through immediately, rapier drawn and alert, ready for a disaster and finding one. His eyes widened at the hellish sights all around.

"Mistress Vivisari?"

"No time to explain," Vivi told the butler. "Watch over everyone, please." She didn't want to leave the Duke near Rafael and Saffra without them having a powerful bodyguard, even if she'd cast spells to restrain him. "I have to deal with that." She pointed with her staff at the abyssal pit.

And, in ironic timing, the largest and most sinister-looking of the void-creatures yet emerged. A smooth eyeless head preceding a long, cylindrical, segmented body. Rising into the air without need for wings, it slithered into the sky in sinuous motions, the huge monster's body nearly as thick as the

pit itself. It was so large it blocked the flow of other monsters during the several seconds it took to breach the world.

———

Inspection failed. Approximation provided.

———

———

Greater Voidbeast
Lv. 1950

———

The monster didn’t even have a special name, and it rivaled the third strongest Cataclysm. A being capable of bringing ruin to entire continents, if the level was to be trusted. And she had no reason to believe the Grand System was lying to her.

“See what you can find out,” Vivi repeated gravely to Rafael, already drawing on her mana. “This might take some effort.”

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CLEANING UP

Frustration and worry had been mounting in Vivi since her meeting with the Duke earlier that day, and especially since Saffra had banged on her door in the middle of the night. Having something physical to vent on, especially a monster rather than a sapient being, was honestly a blessing. She might not know how to navigate sensitive discussions with a potentially insane Duke, but when it came to putting down city-erasing monstrosities from beyond the dimensional veil, well… that happened to be her specialty.

She had learned a lot during her fight with the Red Tithe. Combining that practical experience with an understanding of where exactly the material was sourced from, she thought she had a grasp on the big picture. These ‘voidlings’ and ‘voidbeasts’ were otherworldly fauna, and their bodies had evolved to be not only extremely tough and sharp physically, but also resistant to magic. All forms of it, including the effects the System bestowed on this world’s denizens like skills and stats.

Attack and defense in organisms had always been a game of escalating cat and mouse. She didn’t fully understand *how* these void-monsters’ glassy black armor resisted magic of all forms, but where they had evolved, she could too. They were deep-sea creatures with slick hydrodynamic bodies, parting water with ease—but Vivi could make the water thicker, introduce obstacles within. She had made strides even during her fight against the Red Tithe, and his dagger had been more refined than even this Greater Voidbeast’s armor.

Still, that had been a tiny dagger, not three hundred feet of building-thick alien-worm-dragon.

It would be a challenge.

And she looked forward to it.

Her staff fell casually toward the gigantic creature that easily matched the middle-rank Cataclysms. Red eyes sharpened on their target. She didn't register it mentally, but her lips pulled back in excitement, or maybe vicious anticipation.

"[Greater Telekinesis]."

The core of the spell had remained mostly the same. Before, the means of actually *grabbing* an object involved a uniform distribution of force suffusing the entire target. Vivi had made changes. She clamped down, stabbing hooks and barbs all across the huge beast.

The magic almost slid off despite all her efforts. She poured more mana in. Opened her channels fully. Sometimes, there was a quality in quantity. Not all problems could be solved by drowning them in mana, but the best ones could.

[Greater Telekinesis] settled across the beast, her slipping fingers finally catching hold. The corners of her lips pulled even farther up—by her standards, it was nothing short of a grin.

She knew this wasn't the most efficient use of her mana, and perhaps she was letting herself get carried away. But she was stressed, angry, and needed to vent. Moreover, she hadn't been allowed to cut loose, magically speaking, since arriving in this world. Everything broke too easily.

An inefficient method of killing and a highly resistant, nearly immune-to-magic, Cataclysm-level monster—the two combined were enough to actually strain her muscles. She felt like a caged lion released into the wild. She tore forward with glee, ripping through the open plains.

Or rather, she *pulled*.

The entire three-hundred-foot length of the Voidbeast shuddered, then locked in place as its flight was suddenly halted. Vivi began at its skull, prying its jaw open to reveal huge circular rows of jagged glass-like teeth. Pulling harder—leveraging her full power, leaning with all her weight—she forced its mouth as wide as it could go.

Then more.

She *wrenched*.

The sound was indescribable. Gruesome yet satisfying, even to her squeamish sensibilities. Incredibly durable material cracked and splintered and shattered all down its body, showering onto the streets below in huge chunks.

Segment by segment, she tore the creature in half. She savored each second of the sensation, as well as the oceans of mana coursing through her to make it happen. It was ecstasy in two parts: satisfaction in how she'd successfully adapted a spell to work against even one of the strongest of these monsters, and the more pure joy of having liquid power channeling through her veins in quantities she hadn't yet experienced.

When she finished, sagging in place, the huge corpse crashed down from the sky. She realized how deeply she was breathing and how thunderous her pulse had become. It had been viscerally satisfying to exert herself. She'd gotten a taste of something similar back at the manor when she'd rewound time, but even that hadn't compared.

Truthfully, she wished the monster had been *more* durable.

Coming back to herself, she realized Rafael—and the others—were watching her. Vivi reined in her expression, smoothing her face out. The whole process had taken ten seconds at most.

Rafael's eyes were coldly calculating. She couldn't say what he'd made of that… display… but he'd certainly come to a conclusion or two.

Duke Caldimore was finally stirring to wakefulness. She grimaced at him, then repeated to Rafael, "See what you can find out."

She [Blinked] away.

While the worst, most immediate threat had been cleared—she didn't want to know what that level 1950 could have done to Meridian, and she was glad she never would—the monumental task of dealing with the invasion as a whole remained.

Even with massive perception dilation, Vivi struggled to take everything in and make a plan. The good news was that the outbreak had occurred in the center of the Adventurer's District, near the most powerful guilds.

The bad news was that adventurers tended to be foolhardy and heroic sorts. With deafening alarm bells ringing across the city—which had begun nearly immediately—the streets of the Adventurer's District were filling with adventurers. Some weren't even geared up, having rushed to see what was happening without so much as donning their equipment.

A majority of the monsters, the voidlings, were approximated as weaker than Titled-rank. Thus, they should be containable by proper numbers of mithril and orichalcum-ranks working in concert. Vivi could wipe through quite a lot of those weaker monsters in an instant, even without specially adapted skills, but there were also dozens or hundreds of beasts that not even Titled adventurers could handle. Some were above seventeen hundred—Greater Voidbeasts, as the System called them. Those were the ones Vivi needed to focus on: the threats that could rip open guildhalls and kill even the strongest Titled with a single attack.

There were going to be casualties, she knew, looking down at the chaos from high in the air. There had been many already while her attention had been occupied with the Cataclysm-rank Greater Voidbeast. This wasn't like the assault on the Convoy, where she could cast a spell and erase the horde on a whim. Only [Greater Telekinesis] had been adapted so far, and while she could use what she'd learned as a template to adjust the rest of her grimoire, that would take time, and people were dying every second.

Without further ado, she began her own slaughter.

"**[Animus of Gaia]**."

A twentieth-tier earth elemental ripped itself out of the ground hands first, emerging with a roar to shake the entire district. Wasting no time, it slammed into the nearest of the Lesser Voidbeasts—the name given to void-creatures above 1000 but below 1400. The enormous power difference proved sufficient; the golem rained down repeated blows onto the monster, pummeling through highly resistant carapace and flattening its opponent in seconds. It charged for the next.

Summoning magic, she noted, *is just as effective as other types. Good to know.*

"**[Disintegration Ray]**."

A beam a finger's width in diameter sliced through a Voidbeast, the monster's insides glowing bright red before collapsing in halves.

Promising.

"**[Implode]**."

The spell struggled at first, but she poured more mana in, and a glassy-black wolf-like monster the size of a house went from blurring down the street toward a group of adventurers to collapsing with a *crunch* into a ball no larger than a cannonball. The condensed black material dropped onto cobblestone and shattered the road for meters in every direction.

“[Greater Telekinesis].”

She picked up that dense black ball and slammed it into another creature, testing a hypothesis. Would the material serve as an effective projectile—more so than regular matter? The answer seemed to be yes, but only because of how naturally tough it was, more so than even starmetal. But the moment the monster had died, she’d noticed something: the material had lost most of its magic-defying properties.

She demolished a few Lesser Voidbeasts with the sphere, then released her hold on it and continued experimenting.

Focusing on a single spell and adapting it might have been better from an immediate standpoint, but not a prolonged one. She needed to see how the different spells interacted with the creatures’ alien nature. With a more comprehensive understanding she could modify each spell faster than prior attempts, could develop more thorough counters.

Despite the horror of the situation, Vivi felt alive.

A column of brilliant orange fire falling from the heavens made her glance sideways. Nova had entered the fray. Accompanying a caw that echoed across Meridian, another sunbeam erased one of the weaker Greater Voidlings.

She hesitated briefly, since Nova was supposed to be *Saffra’s* guardian, but it was only natural the girl had called him out to help. As a level 1300, though, the bird could only do so much. Nova might match many of the creatures in levels, but the voidbeasts’ magic immunity made them stronger than their levels might suggest, each a mini-boss on their own. Nova would likely only be capable of harming the weakest of the Lesser Voidbeasts.

Mages seemed to be especially vulnerable, but the material’s physical properties were incredible too, and they ignored skills and stats as easily as spells. From what she saw down below, warriors were definitely not finding it *easy* to kill their opponents.

She didn’t disapprove of Saffra’s summoning of Nova, since any contribution might save a life, but she *was* concerned that having what looked like a phoenix appear in the middle of Meridian might cause problems. Few people were knowledgeable enough to tell a summon apart from a real one. But on immediate reconsideration, Vivi supposed events had escalated far beyond the point she should be worrying about complications of any sort.

As she fought, other powerful figures entered the fray. Meridian was the capital city of the human kingdoms, home to more Titled than anywhere else. Though the world had grown calmer in the wake of the Cataclysms, society had hardly grown lax or indolent. Even with those great threats purged, all men and women lived in fear of not just *other* monsters more than capable of ripping apart a city but also the looming threat of another world-rending Cataclysm.

So, like a kicked anthill, heroes of all levels swarmed to the defense of their city, ready and willing to push back the horde. Vivi was merely one of many, though definitely the only one ripping apart Greater Voidbeasts with a spoken word. If she hadn't been present, Meridian certainly would've been overrun.

Vivi recognized a few of the figures appearing, both through the game's lore and also from their Titles being exceedingly obvious—remembering them from Rafael's briefings. For example, a woman with thirteen swords of different colors, each hovering like a peacock's plumage behind her. The huge blades lashed out with lightning-fast slashes to sever limbs of even Lesser Voidbeasts with ease.

The Gale of Blades. A new hero, and one of the stronger ones. *1400 or 1500, I think? As powerful as Aeris.*

Rushing in on a floating white cloud with a full battalion of white-robed clerics around him was a man in white and gold, his tall hat boldly presenting a symbol of a golden star. The Archbishop. She recognized his face, though many wrinkles had accumulated over a century. Like Aeris, the man had been a great hero through the Cataclysm Wars, and he was the de facto leader of humanity's dominant religion. Vivi had not sought him out for a reason. His personality was one she would rather not deal with.

She couldn't fault the firepower he brought, though. The man raised a white staff to the sky and cried out:

"[Bathe in Heaven's Golden Light]."

Vivi watched the spell with interest, even as she was pulling together her own attacks. Every distracted moment was another surviving Voidbeast; she couldn't afford to simply spectate.

Sadly, divinity-infused magic did not work against the monsters better than other types. The Archbishop's column of golden fire impacted a Voidbeast and burned deeply into its armor, but didn't punch through the creature and kill it outright. Injuring a 1430 at all was impressive; Vivi had

yet to see anyone besides her kill a Voidbeast, much less a Greater Voidbeast. Only the Lessers were in reach of humanity's Titled.

There were many other figures fighting all around her, though she paid attention to few. The resident Institute archmages and grand magi had arrived, of course. She didn't even glance their way, because there was little information to gather about their abilities, unlike the Archbishop's divine-infused magic. Though exceptional specialists, they were simple mages like Vivi and thus had little to offer from a research perspective.

Vivi refocused on her own fights. The sheer flood of voidlings and voidbeasts was impossible to keep up with, swarming out of the dimensional hole in shoulder-to-shoulder waves. The flow was only stymied when something truly horrendous, another of the Greater Voidbeasts, emerged, blocking all others. In the case of these monsters, size seemed to correlate pretty closely to strength.

She had ripped apart four of those greatest threats so far, each easier than the last as she adapted her spells. Killing magic-resistant Cataclysms wasn't exactly easy on her mana reserves, though. She couldn't maintain this indefinitely, not even if she started quaffing potions.

The problem needed to be solved at its source.

She had assigned Rafael to the Duke's interrogation and had been keeping tabs on their conversation. She doubted that man could help seal the anomaly even if he wanted to. The Duke was no ritualist, and even the Fell Apostate, if he'd been present and willing, surely couldn't have salvaged this disaster.

She needed to study it herself, as she was likely the only person capable of closing it. But to do so would be to let the hordes go uncontested. To *not* do so would be to ignore the breach in the hull of a sinking ship and continue desperately scooping out buckets of water, as if that would save everyone rather than merely delay their fate.

Maybe… maybe she could buy them a moment of reprieve, then use that gap to figure something out.

She withdrew the [Codex of the Hollowed Sun]. She hadn't stored nearly as much mana inside as she had wished, since so little time had passed. Moreover, she'd wanted to save what did lie inside for an emergency. While the breach in general might qualify as one, she hadn't *truly* struggled yet. Even the Greater Voidbeasts had come apart with nothing but mild strain.

The Codex had been for a threat where the boosted output could help her take down something truly dangerous. Something on her own level or higher, if that existed.

But nothing of the sort seemed to be coming, so if she could buy herself a moment to study the gateway without mass casualties, she would.

She opened her senses to the artifact and accepted the bounty within.

For the first time since arriving in this world, Vivi *truly* put everything she had into her magic, spewing out the strongest spells she had access to.

"**[Balefire Eruption]**."

"**[Crushing Singularity].**"

"**[Lance of the First Dawn]**."

"**[Everfrost]**."

"**[Oblivion's Toll]**."

Titled-rank threats died by the dozens. Mithril and higher by the thousands. Wherever her staff pointed, the earth was scoured clean of extra-dimensional scourge.

Killing wasn't the hard part. *Discriminate* killing was. Minimizing collateral damage. Everything below her was so fragile, especially compared to the durability of her targets. There were so many mortals scurrying around, doing what they could against the waves of otherworldly monsters. The slightest lapse of attention could snap any of them, even Titled, like an unnoticed branch beneath her foot. She feared that despite her extreme caution, she had done just that, if not once, then dozens of times.

When she finished, much of the invading force had been cleaned away. She was vaguely aware of attention from all across the city on her, eyes looking up at the empty spot of air where her spells had originated. She doubted any could see through her reinforced invisibility, which she had thrown on herself early, but she suspected that the grand secret was out. Some, maybe most, would assume the Sorceress's return before they did 'wandering immortal.' Maybe the attempt to hide was pointless.

With a small reprieve bought, she [Blinked] above the dimensional anomaly and began to make of it what she could.

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INTERROGATION

Rafael watched Vivisari rip apart a Cataclysm-level threat like it was some insect she had found crawling around on the ground.

Nineteen hundred and fifty. He could read the creature's level; they all could. The Grand System was freely handing out approximations to even those who should have failed a regular [Inspection].

Seeing a person so casually end an extinction-level monster was sobering in its own right, even for a man as aware of what the pinnacle of power looked like as he. The expression on Vivisari's face, though? The fascination shining in her eyes, the gruesome satisfaction she had derived in tearing open her opponent?

Despite having total confidence in the moral character of this woman who could erase Meridian with a spell, Rafael felt a shiver go down his spine, and a clenching in his guts. Fear for what Vivisari *could* be, if she chose to be.

Or, more importantly, if the world shaped her that way.

She had definitely grown stronger in her time away. Much stronger. Could even the Dragon King or other mythical immortals face her now? Had she somehow reached the very top of that seemingly infinite mountain, as the greatest of Cataclysm Monarchs once had? Or had she gone further? Surpassed the limit he, and all others, thought a summit? It seemed almost obvious that she must have, considering the ease with which she'd bested the [Greater Voidbeast].

In a way, this overwhelming display of power simplified whatever events would follow. At least regarding Vanguard and Vivisari's return. Because people would not assume *the Sorceress* for what was happening. They would assume a god had appeared. That the heavens themselves had descended to aid in this battle of otherworldly origin. Vivisari was a legend, yes, but even she couldn't rip a Cataclysm in half with such casual disrespect.

The brief excitement touching her face faded into her typical look of boredom. She glanced at the stirring Duke Caldimore, then repeated to Rafael, "See what you can find out." Without waiting for a response, she teleported away.

Rafael stared at the empty spot she'd been occupying, then shook himself and, putting the harrowing display out of mind, focused on his own mission.

He frowned down at one of the wealthiest and most influential humans in the world. A man he had worked with on many occasions. Duke Caldimore had captained the most collectively powerful guild in the Human Kingdoms, and Rafael the Adventurer's Guild. Of course they had spoken often. He'd always had a mildly positive view of Duke Caldimore, if he set aside the man's pride. How shameful a lapse of judgment, in retrospect.

Had he recognized latent trauma in the Duke, no doubt born of those many tragedies he'd faced? Of course. All men who had been burned by the Cataclysms carried scars from those days. Archmage Aeris, with whom Rafael also met on occasion, displayed those concerning indicators far more clearly. Between the two—the Duke and the Archmage—Rafael would honestly have expected the latter to break in this particular way. To turn on humanity in desperation, by accident or not.

Though was that what had happened? Or was it greed? Ambition? Something else entirely? Rafael was unsure. The Duke's motives remained unclear. Rafael hoped he had not read the man *that* poorly. His blindness to this plot had already failed Lady Vivisari. But for him to so fundamentally misunderstand the Duke's nature would triple his already substantial shame.

Though Duke Caldimore's views were no doubt misguided, Rafael didn't believe that his goal had been indiscriminate ruin, even with the man's folly playing out around them. That he was some monster like Lucorius, seeking power at the uncaring expense of all others. This man had

had a greater purpose in mind, and likely one that could be presented as a net positive to the world.

Rafael assumed it was related to that dagger Vivisari had mentioned. A weapon that had pressed even her, apparently. Considering Vivisari's newfound strength, the magic-negating material must be fearsome beyond imagination.

Simple logic told him that the blade had been forged from the carapace of those creatures below. Perhaps Damon had intended to harvest them and create similar weapons in great numbers? Rafael had to admit, equipping mere foot soldiers with blades that could slice through a Titled-rank monster would do unimaginable good for the world.

But why had the man not taken his findings to a qualified council? Instead, he'd gone to Morningstar. Worked in secret. No, his motives had been nefarious or selfish in some way. Rafael needed to accept his failure: the Duke was not the man he had assumed.

The human was stirring awake, Vivisari's healing spell finally prompting him to consciousness. Winston stepped to the man's side, rapier sheathed but hand on the hilt. Rafael would admit that the butler's presence relaxed him. The Duke was only orichalcum, but that was far more powerful than Rafael himself was. He had artifacts, scrolls, and potions to defend himself, but even so, in a struggle of life or death he would not bet on himself against a man of Duke Caldimore's strength with total certainty. Power came foremost from levels, and Rafael had few of those. He had never been an adventurer.

The Duke jerked up, though neither Rafael nor Winston flinched at the abrupt motion. Winston, acting in direct service of his mistress, could challenge nearly all Titled across the mortal lands; Rafael had little to fear.

Though he worried there would be little useful to mine from the man. Except where his daughter had gone, and the general shape of his schemes. Rafael doubted Damon knew how to seal the dimensional breach. Only the Fell Apostate would, if even he, and that man had presumably either escaped or been consumed with the ritual.

The man oriented himself to his surroundings, head snapping side to side as he took everything in, eyes slowly gaining lucidity. He looked at them in turn. Rafael. Winston. A glaring red-haired beastkin. Then down at the abyssal pit beneath the magical platform.

At the end of the world itself. An infinite stream of monsters pouring out and into Meridian’s streets, monsters which couldn’t even be [Inspected] properly, each of the beasts ranging from Orichalcum to high-Titled.

‘High-Titled?’ A comical understatement, for a few of the monstrosities emerging.

It was a lot for the man to digest, reasonably.

“Rafael… Headmaster…?” the Duke said, slurring his words. “What is… the meaning of this?”

Rafael could forgive the confusion, the automatic response that bordered on nonsensical. The situation was rather extreme, and the Duke had just been the victim of a ritual that had run wild. That he lived at all, without having mutated into some cursed, apocalyptic beast, was rather incredible. The heavens had smiled on him; many worse fates could have awaited the man.

“I’m afraid we don’t have time for pleasantries, Damon,” Rafael said smoothly. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed, your plans, whatever they may have been, have not quite lived up to your expectations. I hold out hope that you are not a total madman, and that before the entire capital is overrun with this insanity you’ve brought to us, you explain what you’ve done, what your plans were, and how we might mitigate this disaster.”

“Isabella,” Saffra demanded. “What did you do to her, you—you bastard?”

Rafael’s attention flicked to the Sorceress’s apprentice. An imperceptible frown tugged on his lips. It was hardly unreasonable that a thirteen-year-old girl would respond in such a way, especially one who was apparently friends with the Duke’s daughter herself. But Rafael was trying to navigate this conversation as quickly and efficiently as possible, and the outburst didn’t help.

The Duke’s attention jerked to the girl, and his eyes narrowed, the man’s pride never one to suffer an insult. He took a second to find a response, still struggling to understand everything that was happening, but a sneer pulled onto his face.

“Know your place, commoner brat. I could have you strung up for those words.” He made to rise, but a gloved white hand fell on his shoulder, pushing him down like an anvil. He hit the ground with jarring force.

“I would prefer that you stay as you are, Duke Caldimore,” the ever-polite butler suggested.

“Please let me handle this, young mistress,” Rafael told the girl. “I assure you that I will find out what I can, as quickly as I can.”

Saffra almost flinched at the words, and she pulled back—though kept glaring at the Duke.

The Duke’s attention had slid away from them, despite the manhandling that should have had him sputtering. He gazed into the distance. This time to where the world’s most powerful mage—having draped herself in invisibility, appearing simply as an empty spot in the sky—was chaining eighteenth-tier or higher magics faster than Rafael could process, tearing apart high-Titled threats by the dozen and lighting the sky for miles around.

“Nysari,” the Duke murmured, his brow furrowed. He looked at Rafael, Vanguard’s steward. Then at Winston, Vivisari’s personal manservant. The more telling of the two individuals present, certainly. Though Winston had been more active in the years following the Turning, he was a private man, concerned predominantly with his Academy. “*Vivisari*.”

Rafael snorted. There was hardly a point in denying it. “Indeed. I arranged an alternate identity for my lady’s personal use, with the permission of the Keresi family. I cannot say I am surprised it lasted a mere two days before falling apart. This is unimportant. You are an intelligent man, despite everything, Damon. I assume that you have grasped the implications of your failure. Your only hope for mercy stems from complete cooperation.”

“Mercy?” Saffra erupted, looking like she’d been slapped. “What *mercy?”*

A glance at the girl had her going quiet again, but this time she met Rafael’s gaze angrily, fists clenched to her side.

Damon frowned at Rafael, ignoring Saffra’s outburst, and Rafael was pleased to see calculation churning behind his eyes. What Rafael absolutely didn’t need, right now, was a raving lunatic.

“This is the fault of *Vivisari*, not me,” the Duke spat. “The ritual was rushed. If not for her interference, this chaos never would have manifested.” He glanced over the ledge of the magical platform, face whitening at what he saw below, before turning defiantly back to Rafael.

“It is a rather unimportant hypothetical,” Rafael replied mildly, finding the man’s words ridiculous but understanding the desperate need for

delusion. “Considering where we find ourselves.”

The man fumed, deliberating over his next words. Again, Rafael found relief in that. He could shepherd the man where he wanted him, could extract information, but only if Damon remained rational enough to engage on an intellectual level.

There was torture, but that was startlingly inefficient, and he doubted Vivisari would approve even in this drastic a scenario. He disapproved of those interrogation techniques on principle too, of course, but if it were saving a city or breaking a few fingers on a man who deserved it… well, suffice it to say that his morals were less unyielding than his Lady’s.

There was mind magic as well, but Vivisari would never approve, not even with a city at risk.

He hoped that was the case, at least. As far as Rafael was concerned, a miniature god let loose on the world with *flexible morals* would be worse than even the roaming Cataclysms of yore. To some degree, he saw Vivisari’s accidental killing of the Red Tithe as the worst event to occur today. He would have much preferred Vivisari’s hands remain as uncompromisingly clean as they had in the old days. The first kills, as the truism went, were the hardest. And he wanted Vivisari to find killing as difficult as possible, even when it came to monstrous men like the Red Tithe.

“I do not regret what I’ve done,” the Duke said coldly, and Rafael observed with great interest that the man’s flinty eyes and squared jaw declared absolute earnestness. “I knew of this possibility. But for once, I was the architect of my destiny. I decided; I failed. Me.” He grunted. “It was necessary, besides. Some great threat *will* come, Rafael. You know it, I know it, we all do. I sought a way to stand against whatever does. Preemptively. Only the least and most foolish of men rely on a… savior.”

His attention flicked to the invisible Sorceress once again. The world washed briefly white as a gigantic beam of lightning tore through one of the sleek, alien creatures. A very complicated series of expressions flashed across the Duke’s face. The man likely revered Vivisari, just as most of humanity, and especially veterans of the Cataclysm wars, did. She was his savior. Everyone’s savior.

He tore his gaze away. “I did not believe she even lived,” he muttered. “That she does… it changes nothing. I would have acted the same.”

“The ritual, Damon. If you expect even a shred of leniency, explain. What were your goals? The broad shape, if nothing else? And more importantly, do you have any idea how this might be contained?”

A sneer pulled back the man’s lip. “Of course I don’t. You knew that without asking; I am no ritualist. But I will escape ultimate consequences nevertheless, *Guildmaster*. With what I’ve created—a process I can replicate—and with what I know, I am too useful to be executed. I know how the world works. My value is too high alive, and nonexistent dead.”

The unfortunate reality was that the Duke might be correct. About *ultimate* consequences, in any case. His best hope was an imprisoned life as a disgraced pariah—but his usefulness might keep his head on his shoulders, if what he was saying was true. That wasn’t for Rafael to worry about at this point. “The general shape of the ritual. Explain. And where is your daughter?”

The Duke mulled over his options for a few seconds. To Rafael’s relief, he reluctantly answered. “I know little of the implementation; again, I am no ritualist. It was fueled by the name of the Wardens and all the wealth within as the primary sacrifice. The designing mage—”

“The Fell Apostate.”

He paused in surprise, and irritation flashed on his face, which confirmed Rafael’s guess. “The *designing mage* insisted that to reach beyond the dimensional veil, a soul must be used as a breaching projectile to create an opening—or so was the comparison he drew. Nothing else would have the conceptual weight. My daughter met the criteria.”

“Where is she?” Rafael asked, pushing back the immediate disgust he felt. No, he had not fully misjudged the man. The cool rationality the Duke maintained even now fit the image Rafael had always held. But clearly there was a monster underneath too.

How was there so little concern in his voice? He didn’t even sound vindictive, or hateful: simply callously unworried about his daughter’s fate.

“Presumably beyond the barrier,” Damon said. “At least she served some useful purpose to her family, prior to her expiration.”

A prickling on the back of Rafael’s neck alerted him to a sudden influx of mana. A scroll had been burned… and by the name of the spell that the Sorceress’s apprentice spoke behind him, he knew what was about to happen before he turned.

The blunt end of a wooden staff lunged forward and crashed into Duke Caldimore's face. The man's nose broke with a *crunch*, head whipping back. A follow-up swing slammed into his side, breaking several ribs. It was only when the length of wood came cleaving down in an overhead blow that Winston caught the weapon with a heavy *thud* that had wind gusting in all directions.

The butler pushed the struggling girl backwards.

"Please calm yourself, young lady."

"She's your *daughter!"* Saffra screamed past him. "What's wrong with you?"

Rafael suppressed an enormous sigh. Again, he agreed on principle with the outrage—of course he did. But dealing with a time-sensitive disaster surrounded by such emotional actors pained him on a fundamental level. She *wasn't helping*. Couldn't she see that? Any delay in this conversation was *harming* their chances of saving Isabella Caldimore.

If the girl was alive at all, which Rafael thought rather unlikely.

Perhaps something was broken inside him. Perhaps he should be raging the same as his allies, logic notwithstanding. Winston himself had obviously lost his composure too. He could have caught even that first blow, much less the second and third, regardless of the scroll the girl had burned. The man had wanted to see the Duke punished, no matter how impassive he kept his face, and so consciously or unconsciously, he had allowed the young woman to vent her frustration on his behalf.

Rafael withdrew a healing potion and bent down to feed it to the Duke. Further scuffling ensued, the butler holding back the girl who was now wielding Titled-rank strength. This was why he'd wanted to advise Vivisari against the idea entirely. Children had no place carrying around scrolls of such incredible power.

"So you know of no way to close the gate? Not even a guess?" he asked in confirmation. With how distracted the Duke had no doubt gotten by having his face smashed in, Rafael had bluntly reiterated the point he was certain would have the highest chance of convincing the man quickly. "Any information given now that mitigates this disaster *will* have the powers that be look on you more forgivingly, no matter how much immunity you believe you have through your knowledge of this… void material, and where it comes from."

Before Damon could respond, a voice spoke from Rafael's side, startling him. Not that he showed it; he calmly glanced over his shoulder.

"It's fine," Vivisari said. "We don't need him. I've been listening in. I've finished studying the breach, it's actually healing on its own. That holds with what I saw at Prismarche: the dimensional boundary is resilient and self-repairing. They're already coming out slower. See?"

Even as she was speaking, she was casting spells and clearing away monsters with magic of such high tiers that Rafael tasted blood just looking at them too closely. Spells that made him feel like a very small man indeed, and he had spent many years surrounded by powerful individuals.

Ignoring that primal fear, he saw that she was right: there *were* fewer monsters coming out. Not that he found it comforting that Titled-rank threats were spewing out into the heart of Meridian merely by the handful rather than the hundreds.

"I'm certain the wound is scabbing, so to speak," she went on. "It'll resolve itself eventually. We just need to hold the hordes off until then. Speaking of, I should return—I was just updating you."

Without waiting for a response, she [Blinked] away.

Rafael stared briefly at the empty air, then turned back to Damon. He raised an eyebrow. "Your self-proclaimed value is rapidly diminishing, if the Sorceress believes she has no need of you."

Damon met his gaze evenly. "She does. The world does. I was unaware that voidglass originated from these… *creatures*… but it is logical in retrospect. I understand now why the material is useless raw. The monsters give it life, somehow. But it needs reactivation. Else it is little more than a very sharp and very durable metal. More importantly, I know how to bend it to my will, force it to respond to one's class and skills. Emit a short-range aura of immunity, and thus serve as functional armor. More. The knowledge I carry is too valuable to rid yourself of."

Despite the words, Damon's frustration and worry were plain underneath his attempted composure. He was not so confident as he presented.

"You did not make these discoveries yourself," Rafael observed. "You are no great inventor, of the arcane or otherwise."

Damon grimaced. "Another organization knows many of the same secrets, yes. But not all. I have worked with several great minds over the

years. Some more and some less aware of what I hired them for. I alone know everything."

More had slipped under Rafael's nose than he had feared. Then again, no information network could infiltrate personal dealings with a Duke who had been carefully covering his tracks. Or the highest echelons of Morningstar. Rafael couldn't truly be faulted… but he blamed himself regardless. It would be unseemly otherwise. He was Vanguard's eyes and ears in the world of politicking and scheming, yet he had been deaf and blind in this crucial regard.

Morningstar had been Duke Caldimore's primary contact through the decades. That was unfortunate. *Vivisari* seemed to have found a way past the material, but most people were not Vivisari. That particular group having access to weapons and armor so dangerous was… far from ideal.

Damon Caldimore's knowledge really might be too invaluable to allow for his execution. While Vivisari *might* be able to rip the information out of his head, she never would on a moral level. And even if she was somehow willing, the Duke no doubt had safeguards in place. He was an intelligent man, in spite of this madness that he'd hidden for so long. Rafael fully expected the Duke's retort to a threat of such nature to be, 'try it and watch the knowledge be erased forever.' That was what Rafael would have done: arranged for an effect to wipe his mind the instant it was invaded.

So. Some of the major players would be pragmatists and forgive the man's actions, so long as he aided them going forward, considering this Eighth Cataclysm lurking beyond the dimensional boundary, and this material he had had worked into weapons and armor that had forced even the Sorceress to struggle, however briefly.

But some would call for his head regardless. Vivisari perhaps among them. Conflict would ensue. Cascading complications. The brewing storm made Rafael's head ache. Perhaps he should kill the man now and end the conflict before it began.

But no… it wasn't his decision to make.

His eyes drifted across the sky toward Vivisari. The worst part was that she would be needed in the coming days, yet he had a strong suspicion of what the Sorceress had planned, having learned that Isabella Caldimore, a thirteen-year-old victim of a deranged father, was on the other side of that dimensional fracture, most likely dead but perhaps alive. Anyone could

make that guess. They hadn’t been called the Party of Heroes without reason.

To that woman and her prior party members, there was never such a thing as a lost cause.

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BEYOND

Vivi actually had to drink a mana potion.

Sure, she hadn't been as efficient with her killing methods as possible, particularly at the start of this whole debacle. Even so, expending enough of her magical stamina that she had to draw a potion out and quaff it surprised her. Considering the sheer number of corpses she'd created, maybe it shouldn't have. Even a bucket could empty a lake eventually.

Thanks to her experiments, her spells had grown remarkably more effective at penetrating and interacting with the void-material, though she was running up against a wall with new discoveries, progress slowing drastically. She'd squeezed out the easy revelations. Further adaptations would require more effort, and for less return. Progress often came quickest at the start, and this was no exception.

The extra-dimensional incursion lasted all of fifteen minutes. But extremely powerful skill- and magic-resistant monsters by the thousands could wreak a lot of havoc in a quarter of an hour. The Adventurer's District nearest the breach had been reduced to rubble. Only the guildhall doors and entryways remained standing, presumably preventing the spatially expanded interiors from collapsing. Guildhalls were apparently durable… though some of them had been flattened nevertheless. She hoped no one had been inside when that happened—she wasn't even sure what that would do and how exactly those System-governed spaces worked.

The rest of the Adventurer's District wasn't uniformly rubble, though nearly the entire division had suffered damage ranging from mild to

extreme. Corpses littered the streets, the vast majority void-creatures, but also plenty of adventurers. Vivi hadn't come close to being able to save everyone. She tried to take solace in the fact that if she hadn't been there, the entire *city* would've died, maybe the rest of the continent, but it simply wasn't a comforting thought. Couldn't she have done more, somehow?

As the flow of monsters slowed to a trickle, Vivi [Blinked] around, cleaning up stragglers, casting healing spells, and, upon handling what she could, teleporting back to ground zero. The monsters coming out were so scattered and weak now that she could throw up a newly modified barrier around the hole and seal the incursion off from the rest of the world. Including the rest of the Titled and other heroes. A vision-blocking spell followed, and an ongoing [Animus of Gaia] killed whatever came out of the pit without her having to pay attention.

She teleported back to the platform where she'd left everyone, grabbed them, and brought them down near the pit.

"It's nearly scabbed over," Vivi told Rafael bluntly. "Nothing will be able to get in or out soon."

"In?" Rafael said, his eyes calm and appraising. By how easily he addressed that slip-up, Vivi could tell he already knew what she had planned. "Who, I wonder, would try to jump *into* that eldritch membrane?"

The subtext-laden exchange was cut off by a figure suddenly rushing past them, sprinting as fast as her legs could carry her. Vivi's heart squeezed.

"[Telekinesis]."

She magically dragged the suicidal catgirl away from the mouth leading into hell. Vivi was both immensely unsurprised at what Saffra had just tried to do, and greatly saddened by it.

"Let me go!" Saffra cried out, thrashing wildly against Vivi's spell. "She's in there! She's *in* there!"

Vivi floated her closer. "Saffra. Calm down."

"Someone needs to help her!"

"Someone *will*," Vivi emphasized.

That startled the girl out of her struggling. A sigh—more resigned than disapproving—came from Vanguard's steward, and she tried not to grimace. She'd known Rafael would disapprove. Would tell her it might get even *her* killed. And that there might be no point; Isabella Caldimore had probably died in the ritual.

It was especially risky since Vivi had already emptied her mana pool once and would have to rely on potions to stay topped off. Going in would be a huge risk, and for a very small chance of actually rescuing the probably dead girl.

Saffra stared wide-eyed at Vivi. The shock on her face might have offended her in another scenario, but it was clear that Saffra simply never expected help. Vivi would eventually disabuse her of that notion. Saffra did have people to rely on. Vivi would drill that into the girl.

Setting Saffra down, Vivi told her, “Of course I’m not leaving Isabella to her fate. I’ll go in and bring her back.”

Rather than seeming assured, Saffra just seemed more panicked. “But that’s dangerous.”

Says the teenager who just tried to do the same, she almost pointed out. She barely stopped herself from bonking the girl with her staff.

Instead, she stepped forward and did something she had wanted to for a while: she dropped a hand on top of the girl’s head, between two cat ears, and ruffled her hair.

“Not for me,” she said simply. “It’ll be easy. I promise.”

Saffra stayed frozen for a second, then tears welled in her eyes. She surged forward and hugged Vivi, which maybe shouldn’t have caught her by surprise but for some reason did. Vivi was about as touchy as Saffra herself, she suspected, so she stiffened before tentatively returning the hug with her free arm.

“Take me with,” Saffra’s voice came, muffled by Vivi’s robes.

“You know that’s not going to happen.”

“Then… don’t die.”

“I won’t.”

As much as she wished she could reassure the girl more, they were pressed for time. Her attention drifted to Rafael, who had been watching the exchange with a calm gaze.

“I need to find out what we’re in for, regardless,” she tried, picking the one somewhat rational reason for throwing herself into a dimensional abyss.

Rafael snorted. “Yes, my lady, I suppose you do. I know the futility of convincing you otherwise, and I’m not sure I could in good conscience. I will manage your affairs while you are gone.” Dryly, he added, “There will be much to manage.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Winston, Saffra still clinging to her. “Please watch over her. I’ll be back as quickly as I can.”

“I shall, Mistress Vivisari.”

“I still want to meet your family, and everything,” she apologized to him. “I’ve just been very busy.”

The butler glanced at the gaping wound in reality. His eyebrow quirked, and he smoothed it out. “The delay is reasonable. I am aware of who I serve.”

Gently, Vivi peeled Saffra off of her. “It’s sealing. I might be able to get in, find her, and get out before it closes, but… I don’t think that’s likely.” She had absolutely no idea what she was in for and didn’t want to give anyone false hope for this being an overly quick endeavor. She fully expected at least a minor detour when she delved past the dimensional horizon. “I have to go now.”

Saffra squeezed her one more time, then stepped back. To say she looked distraught would be a massive understatement, an image Vivi had seen too often these past twenty-four hours.

Vivi’s resolve hardened further. She wasn’t particularly wanting to get herself killed to begin with, but considering what it would do to Saffra if she never showed up with Isabella in tow… well, failure wasn’t an option.

She crouched down next to Duke Caldimore, who had watched the exchange with various expressions—anger, confusion, disdain, among others—hidden poorly beneath an attempted neutral face. Throughout the battle, Vivi had listened in on his and Rafael’s conversation, and there were a few things she wanted to address before she left the Duke behind.

“You think what you know will save you,” Vivi said. “It won’t. I’ll decipher the secrets of that material myself. And I will do so better than you have. At which point you will have no leverage… as if that leverage would have saved you from me regardless. You will get the justice you deserve, Damon Caldimore.”

She stood and sealed his mouth with a spell, not wanting to hear his reply. Walking up to the edge of the pit and gazing in, she saw that the aperture at the bottom did, indeed, seem much smaller to her magical senses than before—and looking through it was as nauseating as always. Monsters were only trickling out now, and all were voidlings. The various adventurers of Meridian would handle them easily once she dropped the shield surrounding the pit, which contained the flow and hid her party.

“I’ll be back soon,” she promised everyone.

She teleported the four individuals to her estate and returned a moment later, floating over the dimensional hole.

In a way, she was almost relieved she needed to handle this first. When she got back to Meridian, there were going to be a *lot* of consequences to sort through. The total destruction of the Wardens, the largest and most influential human guild. The magic she’d displayed, throwing out tier-twenty spells in rapid succession, seen by half the city’s adventurers. And most of all, proof that an Eighth Cataclysm—one more fearsome than all the others combined, perhaps—was always one thin dimensional boundary away. Her brief stint of getting to be the Sorceress without truly picking up her mantle had clearly come to an end.

That was going to be complicated. *This* was straightforward. A girl needed saving—her apprentice’s friend—and so she would do just that.

What else was this power good for, if she couldn’t manage something so simple?

She took a breath.

Then flew in.

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THANK YOU FOR READING

I had a great time writing this first installment of Max Level Archmage, and I hope you've enjoyed yourself as well. If you could take the time to further support the book by reviewing, you will have my eternal gratitude. It helps more than you know.

The first draft of Max Level Archmage was published originally on RoyalRoad.com and will continue releasing chapter by chapter there until it is completed. So if you've caught up on the finalized releases and can't wait to see what happens next in the web serial, maybe check RoyalRoad out! We'd be happy to have you.

Regards,
ArcaneCadence

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