

RITA-AUDREY CRAWFORD

Cities

Book 1

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First edition

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I dedicate this book to all the trans femmes who want to see a badass lead. To all those who grew up loving magic and hated being told what was for boys and what was for girls. And I dedicate this book to all the lovers of fantasy.

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Foreword

The world of *Requiem* is one of death and rebirth; bones built upon bones. Long ago, the world was shattered and has been rebuilding for many years since. Most of the old world is lost to ancient history, people are too concerned with the days ahead than those behind. The last hope for people, the Cities, were founded centuries ago. The beings known as the Founders rule from on high, and oversee the last remnants of order.

The spires, the upper levels of clean and wondrous creations are not for the masses. The slums and gutter are the providence of the many. And it is here that the many crime families vie for power. They control every part of the lower levels, carved into a long dead carcass.

It is here that these stories take place, centering on one of the cities, Forthiron. Adriana Cosmili is one of the citizens of Forthiron. She is a witch, a magi, a rare-touched soul that can wield the now-awakening forces of magic. With her severe mind and sharp eye, Adriana might be the key to a new world, or she could be its unmaking.

Acknowledgement

I would just like to thank my partner for all of her amazing support and work she does maintaining my sanity. To Wren, my best friend and sounding board. To Serena for starting me on this journey and to Benjanun Sriduangkaew, who has been an amazing supporter for trans writers. Lastly, but not least, I would like to thank ALL of my Patreons who helped make this possible. Thank you all.

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Long Haul

Curtains of frost greeted Adriana as she stepped into the streets; the autumn air refreshing as a slap to the face. She flexed her hands and tried to shake off the blanket of sleep she was still wrapped in. Muscles sore and protesting—Adriana knew she shouldn't have slouched over so much. She turned her head at an angle then cricked it, reaching up to stretch her shoulders and arms out. Adriana had only gotten a handful of hours of sleep. The documents her office received last evening were far too fascinating to put down. Well, that was the price she was more than willing to pay. Another night spent up in the office was more than fair in her eyes.

The city greeted her with its usual rain soaked, miserable splendor. The high-arched roofs towered over her, far-flung from the steel and glass of modern buildings. They seemed to sag down to bow to her, not out of supplication, but pity. She was far from the newer core of the city. No, she was nestled in the middle of the old downtown: ancient buildings of stone so red they seemed to burn with it. That brilliance now caked in

filth and worn down over the ages. Old beauty now forgotten. She sucked in a breath of autumn air, ignoring the stink of pollution.

All she needed was coffee, a few energy drinks (if we're being honest more than a few), and to get back to work. Once that was taken care of all she had to do was make it home and let herself crash. Actually it was far more accurate to say that she also required the family not to ask her for work tonight. Oh gods, if she had to run an investigation in this state, especially after a day of work? She might easily make an ass of herself. The last thing Adriana needed was to make an ass of herself.

Again.

Therefore, she only needed this one day to relax and rest. It was not a terribly complex affair, in her eyes. Speaking of eyes, they were dry. Well, it to be more accurate to say 'eye' seeing as one was forcefully removed a few years back. Adriana rubbed her intact ocular orb with the back of her hand, sighing as she tried to wake herself.

Adriana walked into the cafe': her favorite spot among few favorite spots. It was all furnished in dark wood paneling—warm accents of creamy tones. Tasteful art hung on the wall. The way it was laid out was to evoke a kind of homeyness. It really did say something about the decorator that they can invoke such a sense to someone who never had a home. Comfort was universal, Adriana assumed. The other appeal of this particular cafe was Lina, one of the workers. She mixed and served the drinks, offered a kind smile and was, in

Adriana's opinion, gorgeous.

Lina worked from opening to noon most weekdays. Adriana tended to wander in whenever she was working (Ok, that sounds mildly creepy) and she only ever came here on days she knew Lina was working (Ok, very creepy). Then again, it's not like Adriana would be capable of anything approaching normal with another woman. She sighed at her foolishness, rubbing her eye again as she shuffled into line.

"Adri?" The melodious voice snapped her out of her sleepy reverie. She smiled and walked up to Lina; she was absolutely splendid today. A woman of supremely cute features: Her crimson skin complimented her blazing orange eyes. "Your usual?" She chirped at her, with growing horror, Adriana realized she was staring. Shit. A numb nod to confirm her order, and Adriana shuffled to the other clerk to pay for her drink. She still felt like some kind of flesh construct rather than a person. The coffee might help; it often did.

The sweet aroma of the shop gave way to the ceaseless stink of the city air; Adriana gratefully stepped into it. The vision of Lina's adorable face was a tapestry woven in front of Adriana's sleep-lacked vision. She called her 'Adri'. It was such an adorable nickname. Only one other person called her Adri; that was ages ago, a lifetime ago, really. 'She was such a cute girl' thought Adriana, 'but such thoughts aren't for someone like me' the reminder stood in stark contrast to the warm thoughts. But it was correct: Adriana could never give in to those dangerous feelings again. Perhaps others can, but she could not.

She sighed and sipped at her warm drink as she stepped into her workplace: A small office space with the usual wood floors and neutral walls and paneling. There were six desks here, each worker's station. This space had been converted from an accounting office into an appraisal business. Clients brought in whatever artifacts, Magitech or any other odd objects here, and the staff here broke them down and identified them.

The majority of Adriana's job was document appraisal and verification. She was the best the place had at it. And even if this was a cover business, she still loved it. Oftentimes, in the middle of a busy day, Adriana would daydream. She'd dream that this was her actual life, that she had a home with bills and real worries. If the daydream was extensive, she'd dream herself up a wife. Someone warm and supportive; someone for whom any thought or desire was not a terror for Adriana to express to her.

A silly dream—nice, but silly. In the end, she would snap awake from her idle wandering and be back here: A fixer for the Nummari family. An orphan found in the gutter, shaped and molded into their tool. Set into the world to pretend she had a life, and come at their beck and call.

It was not as if she had a problem with the family; on the contrary they treated her very well. Adriana never wanted for money or other material needs. She was well-cared for. She was also able to practice her craft at her will. And the means by which she has grown were entirely because of them. Even among her peers, Adriana knew she was a cut above. Her skill with the arcane arts greater than what it seemed like she

should know in her twenty odd years of life. For that, she was very thankful to her masters.

Yet still. Being a person she had feelings, emotions, and needs. Adriana still wanted things; and that desire to want—it was hard to ignore. However, Adriana was very good at ignoring things. She's been doing very well at it so far. She sighed again and sat at her workstation: A desk piled with papers, tomes and scrolls. She barely cleared enough space to put her coffee down.

Her mind was still caught up in less mature thoughts— in her desires of the heart. After a few moments of discomfort she decided this was simply a sidestep; a small malfeasance that can be relegated to less urgent thoughts. The body is a machine—it requires certain things. Adriana's body was screaming at her a bit; this is nothing really serious to worry about.

Setting those thoughts aside, Adriana felt just a bit better. Her head felt clearer as she went over her duties for the day. Despite her late night, and subsequent early morning, she was feeling more energized. Stay the course, do your duty and survive:

This was her mandate.

The day was a long, syrupy mess. The lack of sleep didn't help at all, and led to a few wrinkles Adriana could have

done without. The most egregious of them was that she had snapped at Hana, one of her co-workers, over a misfiled document. It was not that much of a problem, and Adriana should not have chewed xern out. Thankfully Adriana was able to smooth it over with a mumbled apology but it still led to irritation. She purpose of this job was to keep a low profile—not cause scenes.

Somehow, with the grace of the founders, Adriana got through the day.

Adriana leaned back in her chair, stretching out the kinks that had worked their way up her spine. She could really use some of that high-end magical healing only the rich could afford; a mystical massage would work wonders right about now. With a sigh and a grunt, Adriana turned to leave the office. She barely remembered to grab her coat and fling it over her shoulders before making her escape. Luckily, the manager had not asked her to file everything away and close up shop. He was probably not wanting to invoke her bad temper as well. Fair to him.

The clatter of the door closing behind her seemed to be the only sounds on the street. Echoes smothered by evening fog, even her footfalls were wrapped in silky ghostly hands. Seeing as it was dinner time, these smaller streets were all but abandoned. Adriana stifled a yawn as she tucked her jacket's fur collar up close to her neck, the chill was impossible to ignore now. Fall was in full swing, nights were becoming chilly and foreboding. The city never slept; but it sure went into hibernation now and then.

Thankfully, the trip back to her apartment held no significance. She had no intention of it doing so; however, she was glad the universe saw eye-to-eye with her on this matter. As much as Adriana wanted to protest that she had no time to pick up dinner, her stomach offered insightful counter arguments. Try as she might to push the demands aside, sometimes the body had to win. After a quick stop to grab a street pastry, she was on her way home. Her bed was so close—so tantalizingly close.

With a bit more effort than usual, Adriana clambered up the stairs to her apartment. The click of the lock opening was more gratifying than any church bell she ever heard in her life. Slipping inside, she locked the door and leaned against it for a moment. After a moment of composure, she stripped off her jacket and hung it on the hook. Adriana carefully removed her shoes and loosened her tie with a sigh of relief. She barely unbuttoned her shirt before Adriana simply collapsed into the bed.

Ordinarily, she'd be right asleep. After staying up the entire previous night, expending much of her arcane energy, and barely eating—She'd be completely sapped. But something tugged at her, urged her to stay up, or at least not give in to sleep. There was something; a presence, a movement, that sparked those ancient voices. They screamed at her to rise.

Adriana rolled over and sat up in her bed. Her gaze darted around the dark room. The lights weren't even on. She hadn't even washed her face, she was so tired. Her vision had already adjusted to the dark, so spotting the figure sitting in her

armchair was easy once she actually thought to do it.

“You must be drunk, Adriana. Usually you’re not this stupid.” Came a familiar voice from the shadows—silk on a blade. Adriana reached over to click on the lamp beside her. The light spell flared to life and bathed the area around the bed in warm, flickering illumination. She could barely make out the form sitting in the chair, but she already knew it was her ‘co-worker’ more akin to a handler. Mia

Mia was smaller than Adriana, but meaner. Better with a blade. Though they were the same age, Adriana was to treat her like a superior. She didn’t.

“Please tell me you are just here for a social visit, Mia. Please tell me...” Adriana mumbled and rubbed her face.

“We have a scene to get to in thirty. Thirty minutes being my generous gift to you; as you are a fucking dumb ass who can’t not read musty old tomes all through the night...” Adriana glanced up at her, locking eyes with the far more impressive woman.

“How did you-?”

“I always know...it’s my job.” She cut Adriana off with a wave of her hand. “Get showered and changed, I’ll be waiting.” She rose from her seat, graceful as always; reminding Adriana of a bow drawn. The click of her heeled boots cut through the dull quiet, Mia leaned against the wall, her red lips pulled into a mean smirk. “Go?” She gestured to the bathroom across

from them.

With an indigent huff, Adriana got out of bed—her muscles screamed at her for rest. She walked over to her wardrobe and grabbed a new outfit, then scuttled into the bathroom. The cold tiles did not feel good at this hour of the night. It was a cramped room, with barely enough space for all the things required of a bathroom: A dingy sink with a mirror that stayed smudgy no matter how hard Adriana scrubbed it. The floor and walls were tiled with black and white alternating patterns. It was not much, but it was hers; Besides, it's not like Adriana needed much counter space. With an irritated grunt she slipped her eye patch off and hung it over the corner of the small mirror.

The shower started up with little protest from the pipes and she sighed a breath of relief over the water being hot this time. Acting quickly, she stripped off her dingy, day-old clothes and stuffed them in the hamper, noting the smell with a growing dismay. How much of a vagrant did she look like in the office? The coffee shop? What did Lina think of her looking and smelling like that? She noted with a worried frown that it explained many of the looks she got through the day. The worries flooded away, melting out of her psyche and down the drain as she stood in the hot water for a few minutes. She barely had the ability to keep track of time; and even with the blazing hot water on her back, she could have easily fallen asleep standing.

A knock at the door startled her from her potential somnambulism. "Stop yanking yourself off and scrub up, Adriana. Don't

make me come in there and do it myself.” Mia sounded very much impatient. A sly smile crept at Adriana’s lips and before she could stop herself, she replied with:

“Help with which part?”

“Funny. Actually funny. Well, you must be sleep-deprived. Regardless, hurry.”

Adriana scrubbed and washed herself; the soap and water helped just a bit to get her mind into a pseudo-wake state. Once she stepped out of the shower and toweled off, she began to feel more alive. Sleep would have to wait, time was not being generous to her, and that is simply how things were. Before another knock of annoyance could ruin things, Adriana stepped out into her room dressed and ready. She tied her tie as she watched Mia glare at her. “I can’t go out looking like a bum, Mia, give me a moment.”

“You seemed happy to do that all day today.”

Adriana snorted out a terse. “Shut up.” Before she headed over to get her jacket and shoes on. “You realize I have had no preparation for this!?” She took out her spell book and flipped through it, trying to analyze what might be best useful for whatever was going on. After a moment of thought, she paused and looked up from it. “Wait what are we investigating!?”

Mia pushed passed her, grabbing Adriana’s arm and pulling her out the swung-open door. She wheeled around on her,

pressing an arm against the wall to physically stop Adriana from looking away. Mia leaned in close, smiling a serpentine smile. "This is something special, Adriana: Not some dead snitch or leak that needs to be found." She pushed off, then started down the hall, leaving Adriana flustered and confused.

In the chaos she barely remembered to turn and lock her door, then rush off after Mia. Pocketing her spell book, she huffed and fiddled with her collar. "What in the blazes do you even mean, Mia!?"

"We found a body, but it's live. And it's something we're unsure of. Before you sputter out more incoherent questions, this is all I know. It just landed in our territory, and you are the one to figure out what the hells it is. Ok!?" Mia was speaking in a quick, clipped tone and she seemed overly concerned with her wording. This was bad. This was also irregular. And irregularities excited Adriana. She found herself smiling despite her weary state.

Mia had a car brought in for them; because of course she did. As a higher up in the family, Mia had more resources at her disposal than Adriana—the spoiled brat. Well, that was a touch mean. However, at this hour, Adriana could be excused due to the exhaustion. The truth of the matter was Mia was a lot like her: She clawed her way to the top from nothing. Just like her, Mia grew up in the slums and gutter, until a spark of divine intervention brought her to the attention of the Nummari family. Just like Adriana had. Except it was not

a magical spark Mia possessed, it was a body and soul of steel. She was a blade fighter. One of exceptional skill, as far as Adriana knew. Knife, sword, ax, or a piece of broken glass; it mattered not, Mia could use it to unmake any person she came across.

Adriana knew from a young age she had an—odd—relationship with violence. It was to be feared, but it also excited her. And thus, Mia was a bit of a vexing person for her. By all logical rights she should find her dangerous. Yet she found Mia..arousing instead. Many a night she'd been both frustrated by Mia's stubbornness but also needing to feel her. Another annoyance in her life—another object of desire—another avenue of destruction. That's two times in a day she felt her mind leaning to salacious thoughts. She huffed out a sigh of frustration at that.

With a knowing smirk, Mia adjusted the crimson scarf around her neck. "Look, Adriana, I'm not happy with this either, but we must make the best of it. Besides..." She paused, pursing her lips. "We'll grab a coffee and some sweets after this? Sounds good?" Adriana knew this was just a manipulation tactic to get her to do what she wanted; rather than a show of friendship. Part of her ached for it to be genuine; she hated that part. Regardless, she took the invitation with a nod.

She didn't like sweets and Mia knew it.

"Fine. At least we will both be able to celebrate a job well-done." Adriana stated with perfect calm. Mia had her arms crossed in front of her, her dark eyes scanning over Adriana.

She wasn't sure if it was amusement or held in those eyes. Mia grinned after a second of contemplation, after which she surmised: "Presumptuous of you." That elicited a scoff from Adriana.

"With you and I on the case? We're guaranteed a win." That little show of bravado only made Mia snort and roll her eyes.

"After all of the exertion, you are still full of pip; I appreciate a gal who can keep going." She grinned evilly, causing Adriana to wish for death "After all these years, you're still amusing; I'll give you that. Still, lately I have no idea what to make of you."

"You don't know what to make of me; bullcock, Mia. We've known each other since we were kids." Mia's rolling eyes made Adriana want to pluck them out, but at least she got a minor concession from her. Mia went silent, and she might have been seeing things in the shadows of the night; but she looked put out.

Adriana leaned back in her seat. They were nice, some kind of leather, it was soft and warm despite the chill of the night. She glanced out the window to see the grimy, older buildings give way to dark-bricked newer ones: The industrial sector. Many of the mana plants and forges lay out here. That oddly made her think of the cute blacksmith she met a few months ago. She had nice arms. 'Gods, Adriana, focus.' she snapped at herself.

It didn't take long to get to the location. There was no

barricade, no waiting enforcers. The area seemed to be have been cleared, that or it was the industrial district at night; no one is there anyway. Adriana tried to spot the guard's station near the entrance—it was empty. The family must have called ahead and told the guard to take a break. She sat back in her seat and frowned at that.

The warehouse in question was stationed in lot three, a large 'twenty-one' was painted on the massive green doors. Fenced off with what looked to be at least two meter high steel bars. This was one of the more secure ones in the Nummari family's holding for this area. Most likely used to store semi-restricted objects. She guessed at ores. Anything that housed the actual valuables (precious metals, artifacts, magi-tech) would have been closer to the family's strongholds.

The car came to a stop at the fence's gate, and Mia got out without a word. She didn't even wait for Adriana; getting the key out to unlock the gate. Adriana scrambled out and came up to her side, giving her an annoyed glare. Mia flicked her a devilish grin. She pushed the gate open and gestured to her. "Well then my dear. Let's get this..." Mia actually looked surprised as she glanced over. Adriana took advantage of her befuddlement and strode ahead of her, stones crunching under her feet. The sight that vexed Mia was, to be fair, rather unusual: There was, at the side of the warehouse—obscured by the other buildings—a body laying in a crater. Long wisps of smoke snaked up into the sky, it certainly confirmed what little Adriana gleamed from Mia; it dropped recently. As Adriana peered over the edge (it must have been about twelve feet in circumference), not too big, but enough to cause some

real damage to the ground. It sank in about four or five feet and in the center was a woman. She looked...large, with a wild mane of black hair. She was wearing what looked like prison clothes. No...they were a tunic and pants of some sort. With some black cloth hanging off of her (massive) shoulders. She looked like some old knight Adriana had seen in her books. A large sword was strapped to her back. How very odd.

Adriana felt a pressure on her shoulder, then the sensation of being yanked back. She was pulled from danger just in time, as seemingly in the blink of an eye this mysterious woman was up and charging her. She surged up from the small crater, weapon drawn, and let out a roar. She felt the wake of air brush her face, the sword having missed her by mere centimeters.

Now, a normal person roaring was an event; seeing as most people did not roar habitually. Adriana's mind flicked back to when she had to deal with a very drunk patron at a local bar. He roared, and howled like a monster, but the drink was doing that. No, this was different. This was as if a foul beast had been chained to this woman, bound to her, the two having scrapped and fought their whole lives.

She barely managed to block the follow-up attack. The 'knight' moved like lightning. Akin to a storm but without the impassiveness. No, this was like a storm that hated your guts and wanted to kick your ass. The magical shield Adriana materialized in front of her held the blade back, but barely. With a contemptuous sneer, the odd woman shoved Adriana back, then a boot to her gut blew out any semblance of breath Adriana had in her. It felt like a press had crushed her guts.

She made a pathetic gurgling sound and staggered back. Ears ringing. Gods, she was strong.

The sound of metal clashing caught in her ears. Mia had taken to the fray. She met with the newcomer, like a lover long parted. As Adriana blinked the stars from her eye, she saw Mia dance around her foe; her silver dagger darted out to find openings. The short sword she held in her main hand was used for parrying the large, black blade of her attacker. Normally, one would be confused as to where the blades came from. But Adriana knew. She smirked; Mia still wore the leather jacket she enchanted for her. How sentimental. That was Mia in a nutshell: Confusing and contradictory. The chance to reposition was something Adriana could not pass up, so she did, trying to get distance and flipping through her mental library to select a spell.

She felt a tingle along her legs and up her spine. It was like making love: Fear and excitement surging through you. The knowledge that now, it could not be stopped. The power welled from deep within her and she tamed it, channeled it, and held it in her hand for just a second. It was...delightful. "Down!" Was the only warning she gave before release.

The bolt of lightning flashed through the night, tearing through the air and hitting the woman in the side. Mia had ducked and rolled aside just as the spell was set off. For as much as they two of them seemed to detest each other, for as much as Adriana had such bloody complicated feelings over her: Mia and Adriana fought well together. They knew when to bob and when to weave. When there needed to be force and

when calm would solve problems. This, they were in sync with. Violence and duty were their marriage.

However, this was not as easy as Adriana hoped. The bolt was met with dark steel as the woman swung her sword to absorb it. Arcs of energy danced up the blade, sending the bolt into the sky. But it did look as if she was shaken by it. Good. At least it was something. Mia dashed back, and was met with a sickening backhand. She hadn't prepared for the speed of this altogether odd woman, this beast; Mia was struck, and fell off the side.

Without missing a beat, Mia rolled from the ensuing blade meant for her. She dashed away, parrying, moving the woman around for another spell. Adriana knew these signs, these subtle movements. She already assumed what to do. With a swirling motion of her hands she created a small whirlwind at her attacker's feet. It took her footing off, opening her up to a strike from Mia. Her blade met flesh, slashing a clean line down the giant's chest and thigh. This should have been a fatal hit, but both of them stood in amazement as sparks flew away from the point where steel collided. Mia's blade simply danced along the surface of her skin, doing no real damage.

"Ok. This is....new." Adriana mumbled to herself. Mia was again, put into a retreating stance from the furious attacks of this damned...whatever the hell she was. What was she!? She was well over six feet tall, and brimming with muscle. Her eyes were wild, Adriana noted. And while she acted like some kind of beast, her martial skill was honed to an edge. Adriana's mind was racing, but a calm overtook her. She began

to pace, watching the two fight with a detached fascination. So, this..newcomer was insanely well-built, fought with a vigor and skill that isn't common, and can endure attacks most can't. She even shrugged off one of Adriana's more potent spells.

Therefore, logic had to dictate she was something used to fighting magic. Something, possibly created? A person made for a purpose. That made Adriana's stomach tighten a bit, she knew that feeling well: She was an instrument of the family. A tool that had been forged by them; but could she complain? Adriana would have no life without them. These thoughts caused a clutter she did not need, and thus, she swept them aside. The point was to study this being in front of her.

Mia and the large woman met again, clashing blades together as she was pushed back against the wall of the warehouse. Having the flighty fighter pinned, Mia was savagely struck in the gut, right at the solar plexus. Adriana's senses came into sharp relief as she saw the blade raised to swing down on Mia. Enervation, energy, energy! That was it. Without thinking, Adriana closed the distance, it was maddeningly slow as she ran as fast as she could. Snapping open her collapsible staff, Adriana reached out with a thrust, barely connecting with the blade. But with the momentum and the well-wrought steel, it was able to deflect the blow from hitting Mia. However, Adriana was sent a bit off balance. Before she could recover, she felt her world soar into the air. Her neck hurt, pain exploding in her mind. Thick fingers viced around her throat—that would explain the pressure, the immense pressure. She let out a choked sob as her hands grabbed the

other woman's arm. But it was no use, her grip was like steel. She might have said something, but Adriana couldn't make it out. Blood was pounding in her ears.

Her vision faded as the black overtook her.

Her mind screamed at her for release. She needed to escape, Adriana took a moment to calm the primal panic whirling inside her and tapped into her well of power. She forced herself back into the world. No air, no matter. Tightening her grip on the other woman's forearm, she started to draw. Drawing the energy, the very life force from her. She felt a shiver of cold go down her body. This was like expecting a cup of water and getting the ocean all at once. No person she ever encountered had this kind of reserves of energy in them. Life-force is a limited thing; but, this was like an infinite wellspring.

This was impossible.

Adriana must have screamed, she felt her throat tearing apart from the force of it. She tried her best to hold on, to keep her spell up. She had to weaken this attacker. Even if it blew her out for sometime, she was the last thing that stood between Mia and getting killed. Wait, why did she care about Mia? This was her last hope to not die herself. Another sound rang in her ears, it was a low savage voice; filled only with anger and hatred, she realized after a few numb seconds that it was the mystery woman. She was trying to shake this spell off. Roaring and screaming as if an animal caught in a trap; however, Adriana continued to draw from her. She steadfastly refused to let go.

Everything was rising, growing, a cascade of unknowable force was consuming her. The world burned away into ash as Adriana felt everything torn away from her.

Suddenly, Adriana was standing in another place.

It was cold here. Well, colder than where she was. It was a kind of cold that tore into your very bones. It made her teeth hurt and her head whirl each time she took in a breath. She looked around wildly, where was she!? Adriana took in her surroundings. They almost seemed unreal: She stood upon what looked like a giant metal plane. Simply a huge square of pure steel. She even tapped it with her foot, being met with a metallic clang as the sole hit surface. Impossible. In fact, everything about this night was impossible.

Adriana turned around to see the woman standing in front of her. She looked different. Less hunched-over beast and more regal noble. Adriana tried to shake off her feelings of tangled desires. Ok, she was severely handsome like this—not important, not now.

Ariana's scattered thoughts were rattled and cast into the sea as she heard her voice: It was deep, low, and yet oddly soft. Adriana felt a shiver work up her spine, creep and crawl; not slide up cleanly. "You're very smart. I see it didn't take you long to sort out my weakness. Impressive." She was mulling over Adriana, looking at her as the lion might gaze at meat. Adriana felt fear claw at her heart, but pushed it down.

“It was a simple matter of deducing the most logical result given the evidence. Something inside you provides you with excessive...energy. I deduced that the source needed to be stifled before we could hope to overcome you.”

“You took the edge off and with that, you also managed to calm me.” the woman sighed, looking around. “Before you ask; this is my mind scape. I needed to talk with you, this little beacon. You certainly are a bright one.” The mystery woman chuckled, amused. “I wonder when you will see the source of such light?” She spoke calmly, like a strategist looking at a map.

“I am not special.” A lie, simply by being a magi she had special blood. The very secrets of the arcane flowed through her veins. Adriana hated that though; she was just another denizen of the City. Just another stuck at the feet of the Founders.

“Oh? You don’t know!? Hmm...it is not just I with the odd inner power, Adriana.” She was taken aback by that, what was she talking about!? This might have been some kind of tactic. Steeling herself, Adriana looked around as if trying to see what kind of trap was about to be sprung.

“You know my name...” She licked her lips. “What is yours?” Adriana didn’t bother to question how this person knew her name. She was currently talking to her inside her brain so any goes, she supposed.

“Hmph, you earned it. I am known by many names: I am Eislia when I awake.”

“And...what are you?” That got a chuckle from Eislia, deep and throaty. Founders above, she was hot. ‘Stop it Adri!’ she quickly chastised herself.

“That would be too easy, and you are far too smart—you will have to figure that out. It will be more fun that way!” She said, grinning. As if some event was being waited on, she looked up, then smiled to herself. “Now, we get back to the story. Enjoy the tale, have a good time with it, Adriana.” with that, everything seemed to snap into another reality. As if a reel was being replaced on a show. The image changed with jarring suddenness.

They were back in the district. The air was of a different kind: murky and wet. Disgusting how gross reality was when you were flung back to it. Adriana let out a cough, her breath catching in her crushed throat. She fell to her knees, and felt hands on her. They were not the massive hands of the former mystery woman (now dubbed Eislia.) It was Mia. “Hey, what the hell!? Adriana!?” Adriana had a hard time paying attention to her, or well, anything at all really. Her head buzzed and her fingers hurt like hell. The pain let itself be known so suddenly, Adriana had to suck in a breath. This caused more coughs to wrack her into a more slumped position.

She looked over to see Mia crouched over her. Beyond her was Eislia, felled onto her side. “Heh, Mia...look, I won.” Adriana felt a giggle bubble up in her throat, she hiccuped then, fell into something soft and yielding. Her flesh having given out from all of the strain.

It seems she hit her limit.

Wake up, Doll

Warm, warmth. It was so nice, so very underrated. Why didn't everyone simply stay warm all the time? Adriana felt like she just discovered the smartest thing ever: Be warm all the time. Why do people go to work and suffer through silly emotions when all they can do is be warm? Silly, she thought, so silly and pointless. She mulled over such important thoughts, confident in her assertion that warmth was in fact, great. When a kind of odd sensation tugged at her. It was as if she was lashed to a wagon, sent galloping along a far too bright lane. Incandescence washed over her, a groan rose up from her throat and she tried to roll away from the source of it.

That tactic proved unsuccessful as she was met with a cold, hard floor. "Fuck!" Came her eloquent response to the stimuli. Realization dawned on Adriana, creeping frozen fingers up her back: She was naked. Adriana scrambled up into the bed and under the covers faster than she's moved in her entire life. Now that she was actually awake, she could see the source of the blaring light; the sun, the bastard. Many-a-time it made

her life hell by reminding her she did something innocent like ‘stay up all night reading’. The bed was indeed warm, but not hers.

A quick scan of the room confirmed her suspicions that this was not her familiar apartment. Dingy walls gave way to clean wallpaper, and decent-looking paneling. This was an apartment in the upper district, most likely. She sat up, holding the burgundy blanket up over her chest. Both to protect from the chill of morning and to hide herself. Yet again, Mia was sitting in a chair; this time not awake and prowling on her. She was fast asleep, her sword laid across her lap—a blanket draped over her shoulders. She looked as if she’d been guarding her ;but that was impossible. Now, this would arguably be the best time to put Mia’s hand in warm water or simply squirt mustard in her face; but, Adriana knew that these actions would only lead to a potentially severed limb. Seeing as she was clearly keeping watch before slipping off, it was fair to assume she would still be in a ready state if startled from sleep.

The more logical course of action would be to let her sleep. After a few moments indulging in petty revenge fantasies, Adriana decided that reason would overtake emotion in this case. She looked around, finding a bathrobe draped over a nearby chair. Had Mia left that for her!? That was far too considerate for the knife bitch to display. However, Adriana did save her life. Perhaps this was her way of paying back the debt. Regardless of intent, she slipped out of the covers and into the robe. The search for her clothes didn’t take long, seeing their state was alarming to say the least.

Sitting on a table, her gear was laid out with little care. To Mia's credit, she probably had more to worry about than making sure her things were arranged neatly. Her beloved jacket was marked and frayed, a large slash along the back alerted Adriana to how close she had come to oblivion. The pockets of various components and needed instruments were intact, thank the gods. She noted her staff was in its collapsed state, sitting with her folded up pants, shirt and vest. Everything was grimy, and a bit worse for wear, but intact. While Adriana didn't like the idea of using spells for frivolous things, this was not exactly frivolous. Clothing was a necessity after all. With a little wave of her hand, the clothing all started to repair itself. As if time was wound backwards, dirt vanished—ripped seams mended and frayed cloth rebuilt itself.

Pleased with her work, Adriana with great care, picked up her clothes and walked into the bathroom. She needed a nice long shower, nay, she deserved one. Hells, because of her, both of them were alive right now. This was certainly a fancier apartment, far nicer than Adriana was used to. Aside from the incredibly-decent looking bedroom she woke up in, the bathroom was a different world compared to her home.

She stepped onto the smooth teal tiles, noting there were no mats. But, as her bare foot met the floor, she realized it wasn't cold. Adriana hummed; heated tiles, wow that is fancy. Most likely an eternal flame enchantment on the base of the floor, that was how it was done most of the time. Though, older buildings had steam systems that got the job done as well. As was typical for her, Adriana stood there and mused over the solution. She liked to take the time to work things out with

her mind, even if it was the mystery of heated tiles. Also, her toes were loving the warmth, so there was no loss.

There was actually a counter in this bathroom too. It looked like some kind of expensive stone, maybe marble. She wasn't much of an interior designer, so she had no idea. Setting the bundle of clothes away from the sink, Adriana peered at herself in the mirror: She had a cut across the lip, a light red mark on her left cheek, and darkening bruises on her neck the shape of a hand. Still only one eye though, shame. She thought it might have grown back overnight. Hells, enough impossible things have happened in the last eighteen hours (Mia helping her, being one of them) it was entirely plausible in her mind.

Her robe was discarded, along with her eyepatch as Adriana stepped into the quickly streaming shower. Her muscles let her know exactly how much of an exertion yesterday was. And as she turned in the hot stream of water, she discovered scrapes and bumps here and there. The aftermath of that little battle they had. She wasn't even too involved physically, and yet she felt like hell. A part of her; a small, highly irritating part of her, thought of Mia and how much worse off she might be.

The idea of doing something nice for the knife harpy nearly made Adriana laugh out loud. Still...Mia was a comrade, she hoped she'd be in fighting shape sooner rather than later. At least for the sake of practicality. Adriana was shocked when she started to think of Mia in the shower, washing off and checking over her many bruises across her perfectly sculpted body...

Adriana's scoff was so loud she startled herself with it. She needed to find some way to eradicate these foolish thoughts permanently. The past is the past and she needed to accept that, dammit. She turned around to let her face be blasted with water for a few seconds. She looked down to note that soot and grim was streaming from her hair. A few scrubs of soap and liberal elbow grease took care of the problem quickly. Satisfied with her cleanliness, Adriana stepped out of the shower, her head still felt groggy and tangled, but clearer.

The only downside to waking up, and getting ready for the day is that you have to actually face the day. This is the horror that greeted Adriana as she stepped out of the bathroom, adjusting her tie and neatening her hair. While it was nice that she felt better enough to face things. Well, she didn't want to. There were too many weird occurrences, too many disruptions to her life. She wanted to be home, in her shitty apartment, reading on her day off and trying to regain some semblance of a mind after that horrendous night.

Questions nagged and picked at her brain; too many for her to let this go: Who the hell's was Eislia? Why did she know who Adriana was? Most of all, what the fuck was with her cryptic comments? Adriana was an orphan, like many other children in the city of Forthiron. It wasn't like that was some special trait she possessed. Aside from her arcane skills, there was nothing odd about Adriana. She looked weird, that was certainly something she already knew. She'd been told enough times that she looked odd: Too perfect, in a sense. The kind of unnerving oddness one feels when they gaze too long at a statue. Perfect features: Sharp and defined, but also there is

an unsettling element to it. Adriana's gaze was a bit too much, her features just a bit too sculpted. So much so they make one disturbed, not attracted. Suffice it to say; it's had a negative impact on her dating life.

Adriana's dead-pale skin and ashen hair didn't help things; due to this, she never felt normal. So, when this mysterious woman suddenly yanked her into her mindscape, then talked about her as if she was some...special person, it upset her. Was Adriana supposed to have belonged to some grand cause, then she fell to a life of crime? But how can a baby discarded in the streets have any kind of fate other than squalor and struggle?

Her thoughts of course were going a mile a minute, so much so she didn't even notice Mia had stirred from her guard station. The feeling of eyes on her caused her to wheel around and face her. Mia was still in the chair, having shed her aviator's jacket and draped it over the back of the chair, her scarf joined it sometime during the night. She was just in her cream blouse and dark tight pants. The sword was sheathed and leaned against the chair. "What the hell was all that last night?" She said as she crossed her legs and rested her chin against her knuckles. The examining gaze was at the same time infuriating and annoying.

"I have no idea." Adriana said, as she tried to summon some bravado, she leaned against the wall. "You were right: This was a very unusual case." Mia glared at her, Adriana relished the small chance she had to get under her skin. "But seriously, I have no clue what's going on Mia. Who is this woman? How did she come here I mean...you saw that crater right!?"

Mia grinned and pointed at Adriana. "Yes, I got a pretty good look at it when I was pulling your ass out of danger; as usual, I might add." Adriana wanted to counter that, but she had nothing.

"Fine, yes...what I mean is that..." She hesitated. "It seemed as if she impacted the ground and...caused that crater." Adriana scoffed. "But that's impossible."

"Yeah...I mean when I was told it landed in our territory I wasn't expecting that to be uh...literal." Mia shrugged and rose from her seat. She looked perfectly composed and Adriana noted her chestnut-brown hair was perfectly coiffed.

Wait.

Math not add up.

She cleared her throat, but was cut off by her 'friend'. "Look, we dwell in a lot of grounded kinds of work: Finding moles, plugging leaks, managing waste." She grinned. "As it were. So, you'd think eventually we're going to find some weird shit" Adriana shook her head.

"Hold on, what's going on here!? You spent the night cleaning up whatever happened to us, took a beating, and stayed up watching over this place." Adrian gestured to Mia as she approached her. "How are you not passing for a zombie freshly risen!?" To Adriana's surprise, Mia actually looked taken aback, she kept approaching though, stopping about a foot from Adriana, still wearing that Cheshire grin. (By the

gods above and below, Adriana wanted to smack it right off her face. She knew it'd end up with her spitting out her teeth though.)

"Well, rejuvenation potions, a three o'clock washup; nothing special. I have no idea why you are focusing on this, Adriana. You might think you know everything about me." She reached out to poke Adriana on the chest, running her finger up the silken trail of her tie. "But, you really know nothing about me if you don't already know: I am always prepared, girl." Adriana had to fight her urge to snarl.

Instead, she calmed herself down, blinking and looking down at the hand, then to Mia. "Fine, fine...as long as you are still useful to me. I don't care for the details. So, can we actually discuss our next steps? What happened? Where are we? Where is....she?" Mia scoffed and walked away, she looked over Adriana's jacket, as if examining some piece of evidence.

"Oh, you mean the giant hulking, weird, unkillable berserker!?" She snorted. "She's in the other room, I made sure to take all precautions." She idly rubbed her chin. "Especially after feeling what kind of punch she packs. I figured we need answers, and hells, I couldn't kill her if I tried..."

"Eislia." Adriana said firmly. "She has a name." That actually got Mia off guard. She turned back to face Adriana, eye twitching. Gods, that felt good; to see her frazzled like this. However, the feeling of victory quickly faded under the light of Mia's anger.

“What!? How!? Wait...what!?” She stammered; stomping back over to Adriana, who held her hands up in defense. “What... you did that energy thing!? I saw it while I was trying to get my legs under me. You gripped her and she started to weaken. I thought it was just a simple thing, then you crumpled like a cheap can.” She narrowed her eyes on Adriana. “What happened!?” Mia’s voice felt sharper on Adriana’s ears than any blade she had drawn on her.

“That I am unsure of...I’ve used my enervation spell many times before, it...” Adrina paused. “Well, you know how it works. I simply decided that Eislia had some kind of...inner energy reserved that was empowering her. We drain that, you stab her, we win? Yes?” Mia simply nodded along, gods, it really did feel as if she was moments from gutting Adriana. The idea that she had something on Mia was delicious; but it wasn’t a good idea to push her too much. “Well, when I drained her it was much different than I thought, she was... massive. I mean the energy she had in her was impossible. I remember being overwhelmed. “Adriana shook her head. “And when I came to, I was in this odd...place. Eislia was there, she spoke with me. Told me her name and said something about how...she said something about ‘taking the edge off’. I had no idea what she was babbling about.” She artfully omitted the more intimate parts of their conversation.

Mia looked like she was thoughtfully mulling over a piece of meat. Analyzing the texture and taste. She mumbled to herself. “Ok, so...she somehow pulled you into her mindscape!? But why, what the hells are we missing!?” Adriana had nothing to offer but a shake of her head, she cut in after a moment: “Look,

maybe that's a mystery for another day." Adriana licked her lips while she tried to jog her mind into some semblance of activity. "We need to ask ourselves what the next actual step is: What were the parameters of our mission in this case?" Mia had crossed her arms over her chest and shrugged.

"Um, find the source of the disruption, investigate it....see if it's a threat. I suppose that's what it is..." She trailed off, then raised a brow at Adriana. "Why? What's going on in your stupid head there!?"

"Founders, can you not be a bitch for one second!?" Adriana retorted. "I'm merely saying that the status of our...friend is not something that needs to be known."

"Friend!" Mia snorted again. "You horny fucker, she tried to kill us last night and you're already making plans to jump her bones!?" She sighed though, letting that little barb rest in Adriana's chest. She tried not to clutch it, nor show aggravation at the comment. But Adriana felt heat rise from her arms and chest. Founders, Mia knew how to anger her.

"I think..." Adriana said as she reigned in her anger. "We simply inspect her and draw a conclusion then?" Adriana's voice felt like blades in her mouth. Seemingly eager to get this over with, Mia nodded in agreement: "Good, then we can report in and I can hopefully go a whole week without having to look at you." She sniped; a knife bitch to the end, it seemed.

It turns out the other room was a smaller, much more cramped one. It appeared to be a storage space or something, maybe a sewing room. The idea of Mia sewing brought Adriana great amusement. Mia: the angry tailor, bitch of the stitches. Speaking of the devil, Mia walked in ahead to click on the lights. Framed perfectly in the warm overhead lamp, was Eislia. She was bound to a small wooden chair, sitting with her arms tied behind her back as if she was sitting in the most relaxing seat ever invented. Gods, how could she do that? Adirana had been a witness to many interrogations. Hells, she'd done a fair few herself. Simple deprivation worked more often than not. A hard chair, some tight rope and being left in the dark was enough to unravel most constitutions. However, here is our vexing virtuoso of vorpality, sitting as if nothing was wrong.

Now that they were not fighting for their lives, Adriana took in her exact details. Eislia's hair was long and wild, black as the night, tumbling over her shoulders and back. Her features were sculpted and handsome. Familiar in some odd way. As if she'd seen her face before. But of course, she'd never met a woman like her. In a slight way, she reminded her of Lord Eversei, her boss. Perhaps it was simply the air which the two women held themselves.

She leveled her gaze at Adriana, who felt as if she was the one bound; even if for a brief moment. She washed the feeling away with a curtain of cold resolve. Not unless a certain other individual was pissed at her, had she ever felt so on her backfoot. "You're the one that defeated me? Hmph...A bit scrawny for that, aren't you?" her voice was just like in the dream scape, soft and low. Muted somewhat by the room's

walls. It was odd that she seemed to not know her. However, a glance to Mia clued her in: Eislia was playing dumb. Fine, she wanted to see how this played out.

“Yes, that is me, or rather us. We, as they say in more crude circles, kicked your ass.” The larger (and it must be stated, much larger) woman chuckled, as if this was some casual book club. “It was very clever, and you also managed to get me back to my senses. So, for that I thank you. Now...” She looked at Mia, then back to Adriana. Adriana could not help but note those vermilion eyes did not lack any of the intensity from last night. Neither the isolation, nor defeat had tamed them. Adriana felt her heart jump into her throat. Palpitations skittered across her chest on insect stick legs. “What are you going to do with me? I can already assume you are not normal citizens of this city? Which one is it anyway? Terostav? Hmm, no...”

Mia’s jaw worked; it was clear she did not love this Mia never liked to not be in the know: She was a handler, her job was to know things. She wanted to know the where/what/why at all times. This kind of guessing game irritated her. In that way they were total opposites; Adriana relished a mystery. In fact it was her love of mysteries that pushed her through so many aspects of her life. The unsavory elements of what she did, and who she did it to, were things that she could ignore when all she was doing was getting answers and finding clues. Before Adriana could register what was going on, Mia stepped closer to their capture.

“What are we going to do with you!? Well...find out who the

fuck you are, and how the hells you did...all of that!?” She gestured, vaguely, as if a puppet in seizure. “I’ve never had anyone face me down and not end up meat! So, now that you’ve had a nice rest...maybe we all three of us can get better acquainted hmm?” there was no hint of fear in Eislia as she looked up at Mia. She didn’t have to look up far, Founders, even sitting down she somehow towered over both of them.

“I’m sure you haven’t faced anything like me; I’m not just anyone.” She looked away from Mia, likely to piss her off (Ok, Adriana had fallen in love with Eislia now), her eyes settled onto Adriana. Not a word was spoken, but she could almost hear the words: ‘like you’ instead, Eislia shifted a bit, glanced back to Mia. “I am...an escapee; a refugee to your fine city. All I want is to lead a normal life, and hide.” Her sincerity was hard to ignore, her words spoken with such clear conviction that no lie could dwell in them. This was added to the fact that she was not bothered by anything going on in the slightest.

Before Mia could add something, Adriana spoke up: “Wait... what are you talking about? Refugee? From where?” She felt her voice break a bit, this was all too much. Eislia didn’t answer, her eyes simply flicked up to the ceiling. Mia was the first to break the silence, she scoffed and paced away, shook her head. “Great, she’s insane. You’re seriously telling us that you’re from...” She pointed up. “The Ultimacy!? I...no one has ever gone there, and no one has ever come from there. At least, not since the founding.” She scoffed again. “This is bullshit.”

“Given what she did last night...” Adriana said, her voice strained for calm. ”And what she was capable of?” Adriana

leaned over to Mia. "This is not...outside of the realm of possibility." Mia glared at her, but seemed to relent.

"Well fuck, what the hells to we do with her then!?"

"I suggest letting me go free." Eislia piped up. That nearly got Mia to snap at her, but she relented.

"You know what!? Fuck it: Mission successful." Mia announced with a flick of her hand. "She's not a threat to the family, aside from going berserk (which is a problem), but she's not our business....And honestly. I'm more interested in staying out of the affairs of the fucking Founders."

"That shall not be a problem. When I came down here, I was... knocked off balance. The impact sort of triggered my..survival state." Eislia explained. "Until your good magical friend here sapped my anger away well...that simply undid it." She bowed her head. "I swear, I won't be a problem for either of you."

Mia glanced at Adriana. She'd watched all of this, sliding it through her mind, tried to scan for any semblance of reason. The facts added up, and as preposterous as it looked like on the surface; Eislia's story added up alongside them. "I'm not the one in charge here, Mia, I just collect, compile and collate evidence."

"Yes, well I'm kind of implying you do that!" She hissed. "That was the whole...look, look I'm giving you the look, see? That's when you do the thinky thing!" Mia accentuated this point by jabbing a finger at her own eye.

“Fine. Then given the evidence we’ve seen...while I cannot definitively say what she is, I can certainly say that her story holds water. All of the facts align, as...odd as they may be.” Mia sighed at Adriana’s words. There was a nice little spark of satisfaction she felt that Mia would have to admit she was right.

“That’s...about what I thought. OK, let her go, but there’s a catch: Adriana.” She turned and clapped her on the shoulder. “She’s your responsibility.” It surprised Adriana that Mia could use lightning magic, because at this very moment it felt like she’d been struck by it. Her breath came back after a few beats.

“Wait...what?”

“You heard me.” Mia said as she glared at Adriana. “I’m too busy and active in the family. I don’t have the time. But you...” She grinned and tapped Adriana’s chest. “You can easily help our little...friend out with adjusting to city life.” her voice was cloyingly sweet, and the finality of the tone was a dread bell for Adriana. She sighed.

“Understood.” Adriana knew when she was defeated, which was often with Mia. She had learned a long time ago to pick her battles; and learned very quickly alongside that other lesson to never pick them with Mia. Mia never backed down—she had a constitution that could make a boulder flinch. It was always better to simply get out of her way and let her do what she wanted. Adriana rubbed her temples to try and ease the throbbing ache that had introduced itself over the course of

the conversation.

Mia walked behind the chair, prd a dagger from nowhere, and cut the giant loose. "Please know that this whole mix-up was in no way a reflection of the Nummari family. We hold no responsibility for your bodily safety and are in no way holding you to any of our standards and practices." She recited the odd little speech as if she'd given it a hundred times, Adriana could believe Mia actually did that for such an occasion.

She was always so prepared.

Eislia stood, stretched her massive limbs, and flexed her hands. Despite the fact that she spent all night tied to a chair, she looked totally comfortable. "Well then..." Mia added. "Welcome to Forthiron city." She grinned. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have to report back home to check in and let them know what happened. And...I'll be omitting your um...oddities. Don't worry, I want to keep the family as far from the founders as possible...and that means keeping them out of the loop." She looked over to Adriana, a flash of concern in her eyes. Before she could analyze its reality, it was gone.

"Spare key is on the front table, leave it under the mat, use the invisibility spell or I'll kill you." She said in a sing-song voice.

"Die in a fire, Mia!"

"You too, bitch!" She called back. Mia always loved getting that parting shot in.

She shot Adriana that shit-eating grin she often wore and turned to leave. Somehow, Adriana had no doubt she was totally ready to face a new day. Adriana herself felt like she ran a marathon; she wanted to crawl back under a blanket and never come out. All Adriana wanted was to disappear. As she spent a little time fuming and fussing over her feelings, she felt a large hand on her shoulder. Glancing up, Adriana was surprised to see Eislia looking down at her, she had kind eyes; oddly enough. Seeing her from this angle, one could easily have fear eat away at their heart. To have a giant warrior this close, and you in a vulnerable position could spell death. However, Adriana felt oddly calm. "You seem to have quite a queer relationship with her."

"Not queer enough." She mumbled. "Regardless!" Adriana sighed and stepped back. "I will honor the agreement we all came to agree upon; as long as you fulfill your end." She tried to assert a shred of dominance here. Eislia simply shrugged.

"There was much talk between you two, but not exactly much agreed on. Is that how you always converse?" Adriana tried to respond, but she felt her words stumble in her throat. Heat radiated from her cheeks, how the hell is she saying all this!?

"Talk time over, we go now!" She sputtered out, turning to storm from the room.

"Where are my things?" The soft, baritone voice pierced into her back like an arrow. Even if the volume was low, the urgency was not. Adriana groaned, turned on her heel, and faced her.

"I....don't know. Fuck." She rubbed her face. More problems. One after the other, all she had to do was keep going and solve them. Founders, yesterday her biggest worry was being horny over a barista. "Mia didn't bother telling me. Look, let's just... search around here, she can't have left them in the street or something." The larger woman simply bowed her head in agreement.

"That is satisfactory to me." She motioned for Adriana to exit the room first. Ah, that must be a constant concern for her: Getting through doorways without getting stuck with another person. As she stepped into the hallway, Adriana could not help but chuckle at the thought of Eislia stuck in some doorway. She sighed and stepped aside, her eyes traced over the patterned wallpaper. Yet again, very fancy. This had to be one of Mia's safe houses. It was absolutely not her actual home, Adriana knew this. Mia was far too cautious. It often made her wonder why Adriana was not herself. Perhaps she was less ambitious. Perhaps she didn't care enough about living. That was an odd thought to dwell on, so Adriana decided not to.

It turned out that it wasn't too big a job to find Eislia's things. In fact, it looked like Mia had dropped them in the entrance hallway. It made Adriana puzzle over how the hells she hauled both her and a giant woman all the way from the warehouse to here; Elves were known for greater strength and speed than humans, but still this was quite a bit. On top of that, Mia was also carrying all of Eislia's gear: A large sword in its scabbard, some tattered looking black cloak, and a small box of dark forest tones that Eislia snatched out of Adriana's hands

apologetically. Regardless, once they were gathered and ready, the two of them stepped out of the room and secured the lock. With a flick of her hand, Adriana cast the invisibility spell on the key, then she grinned and hid it in one of the lamps hanging along the corridor's walls.

With a merry whistle she set off with her new 'friend' to return home and hopefully sleep forever. It was only then, as they got on the elevator and headed for the ground floor, that Adriana had no idea where this apartment building was located in the city.

Pick Yourself up Off the Pavement

The streets of the city were a bit brighter today. It must have finally stopped raining (and/or threatening rain, as it had been for the past few weeks) sometime last night. In fact, the sun was barely peeking through the cloudy murk above. Wow. That must be a record, it never gets this sunny in fall.

Adriana's head still felt fuzzy, memories from the last day felt hard to retrieve. The adrenaline from that fight had long faded. Oftentimes, Adriana observed that the fury of combat is often remembered as a haze at best. It was as if the mind worked to slow the memories into some dark corner. She found herself wondering how many times of terror and blood could be shoved away before they couldn't anymore?

Not a worry for now, (those not-worries were adding up). What Adriana had to focus on was getting home and recuperating from all of this chaos. They were quite a distance from her apartment, so the first order of business was taking the SparkRail. Hopefully, with a bit of grace and a bit of luck, she

could get some normalcy back in her life. She rubbed at her cheek as she started off, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Eislia was following. She was indeed, exactly three paces behind Adriana. She was not one to overstate things, but it was creepy. It really didn't help that Eislia had that giant sword slung across her back and the tattered robe didn't help.

"Um...you can...walk beside me, Eislia, it's fine." Adriana said, as she gestured for her to come alongside her. With but a stride, Eislia was right there. That was an odd sensation, Adriana was not used to someone being this much taller than her. She wasn't exactly towering over the world, but Adriana wasn't short either. Despite how she might seem that way, Mia actually wasn't taller than Adriana. In fact, she was a few inches shorter than her; numbers sometimes felt like lies. Now however, she felt the very odd sensation of someone completely, and absolutely towering over her.

Adriana glanced up to gauge Eislia's mood: She looked pensive, but overall calm. While she might have glanced around, her stride spoke of confidence. "So..." Adriana started. "I'm going to be presumptuous and guess that there is a great much to you wish to discuss?" Eislia laughed, ah that throaty laugh; Adriana realized she was rapidly becoming addicted to it.

"That is an understatement, but surely you have time, yes? You mentioned you have a day off? Could we perhaps make a day of it?"

"Wait, are you asking for a tour!?" Adriana snapped.

“In a sense.” Eislia said, tilting her head. “I assume we could both use food, and I prefer to know my way around.” She was either being impressively smooth, or this was some angle, some game. Adriana merely lacked the historical context to decipher which it was. She glanced up at Eislia, her mind trying to unravel intentions and motivations. Eventually, her stomach sent an express message to her know that ‘fuck it, hungry’. Seemed that she’d have to go along with it.

“Fine.” Said Adriana, offhandedly. “We’ll get something to go, and then get you back to my place with as little attention drawn as possible.” Adriana felt her smirk tug at her lips, her cheek still hurt a bit. “If that’s even possible with your size!” Eislia laughed. It was odd, she seemed like she was in a mood that could never be broken, not in a million years. Adriana watched as Eislia closed her eyes, seeming to savor the feel of the sun and air on her skin.

“It is so very...flawed here.” The massive woman looked around, as if she was seeing a city Adriana had never laid her gaze on. ”But, it is more beautiful than I imagined.” As she said that, Eislia’s crimson eyes glanced down at Adriana. Despite all of Adriana’s reservations over this whole affair, her heart skipped a beat.

“Yes, well...I would not call it beautiful here. To be fair: here is all I have known, and beauty has never been the word I would use for it.” She mused. “Then again, I’ve never seen true beauty have I? Only grime and waste, therefore, what metric can I even use?”

“An over-thinker? That makes sense.” Eislia spoke so casually that it was hard to tell if this was a jab or genuine observation.

“Funny, funny, I see the fall knocked loose a sense of humor hmm? Or did I simply rub off on you when we exchanged energy?” She didn’t get much more than a mirthful chuckle from Eislia, who had fallen silent in her observations.

They walked along a bit, the still-slick streets and sidewalks gleaming with ethereal light in the sun’s rays. Adriana was feeling better, certainly off-kilter, but better. She made a note to give herself a good workout before bed, it would help to center and organize her thoughts. While Adriana was not the strongest person, she liked to stay in shape. Long ago, she learned her body needed to be as fit as her mind in order to excel (or simply survive) in this life. So, she made a routine of calisthenics and cardio, resistance training for endurance and limberness. It did earn her a more...sculpted body; even if she didn’t, at present, have anyone to show off to; it still felt nice to have.

Adriana and Esilia rounded a corner, where Adriana was met with the most satisfying aroma of fresh food. Well, fresh for here. A pang shot through her stomach, reminding her she hadn’t eaten in a long long time. Memory barely dragged up the image of that pastry she had just last evening—not mentioning the fact that she had used so much of her magical reserves last night. Adriana had checked her hands and forearms in the morning, no burnout, but it was a close shave. Suffice it to say; it felt like it was ages ago since she’d taken in sustenance. Around the corner, there sat a small food cart,

with a relatively short line of people shuffling past for their own fast breakers. Luckily, and with great mercy; it didn't take long for Adriana and Eislia to be served.

"And what is this?" Eislia asked as she held onto her wrapped sandwich. "We call them breakfast holds. Stupid name. But it is breakfast." Adriana held it up. "That you hold. So...I suppose I cannot dispute it." Eislia looked down, picking a bit of crusty flat bread off and chewing it thoughtfully.

"It seems very...workmanlike." She concluded. Adriana snorted out a laugh and led them across the street to the Sparkrail station: A large, steel framework structure. Stairs led up a story to the actual platform. The entire city was connected with the Sparkrails, they led up and down the entire expanse of it. The life blood of the city, without it, no one would get anywhere, really. The railing felt cold on Adriana's hand, even through the gloves she always wore. The clank of soles against steel always made a morning song; the percussive track of sunrise. However, it was now past rush hour, so we were relatively alone. Up on the platform, there stood no other figures beside Adriana and Eislia. That suited her just fine—better to avoid odd looks this way.

Eislia certainly attracted attention. She seemed more akin to a grim, sword-wielding reaper than a citizen of Forthiron. She'd have to fix that, but it wasn't like Adriana was any good at fitting in herself. Heat rose to her cheeks as she thought of Mia. Why did she chain her to this giant weirdo!? Was it another one of her absurd punishments? And what was with her animosity? Ever since she became Adriana's handler, Mia

was all knives and steel to her. She spat back, sure but it was only because Mia established the relationship as adversarial. It was as if Mia wanted to forget any of their past. As if she was in the wrong, when it was Adriana who had ruined their friendship.

“You are blushing. Are you thinking of Mia again?” Eislia’s question was so dead-accurate it threw Adriana’s mind out a window to be slammed onto the pavement of reality. It was so jarring she swore it knocked a tooth loose. Adriana fumed and looked away, stuffing her breakfast hold into her mouth. The relief of silence while she chewed was like heaven.

“That’s a complicated matter, look...just because you and I... shared energy does not mean you get access to any and all of my thoughts.”

“I’d think such sharing was enough of an invitation.” Eislia retorted with a playful note of mirth in her voice. Adriana glared up at her, but the smile Eislia wore somehow dismantled her anger. It sputtered out—cold water tossed on a flame. She was...so beautiful. Oddly safe feeling too; which was absolutely absurd as just last night they’d been fighting to the death. Still, it was hard to shake how bizarrely—safe—she felt around Eislia. The small part of Adriana’s brain that craved comfort, the little tiny part she’d spent the last year chaining and tossing into a dark pit; that part wanted to be in her arms.

“Yes well, it wasn’t. Alright? If you must know, she excites my rage on a regular basis. She frustrates and vexes me to the nth degree. Is that satisfactory as an answer?” Adriana didn’t

mean for her voice to hold an edge, but it did. If there was offense given, it did not show on Eislia. She simply shrugged and stated flatly: “though I lack such experience, I think I understand.” Somehow her tacit understanding made it feel worse. Adrian looked away and scoffed.

The car of the Sparkrail clamored into view, soon it was resting at the station. Adriana motioned for Eislia to board with her. The car was perfectly ordinary in its size, it’s just that it seemed so small once Eislia stepped inside. There were only a few other passengers; mostly, people are not going this direction at this time of day— save for a few workers back from the mines. Adriana’s neighborhood was mostly of the lower classes, not that she minded. She did count herself lucky that her day job was a walk away from her apartment, meaning Adriana rarely had to take the Sparkrail.

Adriana sat down, with Eislia next to her. “Ah.” Eislia said, resuming their conversation without pause. “I was curious as to your relationship with her. I am not exactly educated on the culture of the cities. I’d rather not make some kind of flub, nor cause offense.” Adriana sighed and nodded at her, having to overcome the urge to pat her knee. She found herself wondering just how toned she was. One could only assume the answer is ‘massively.’

“It’s, it’s fine.” Adriana rubbed her face, and sleep threatened to take hold of her again. Founders, she was drained. “I understand the need to acquire as much information as possible. There’s none taken.” She shifted in her seat. “The relationship with Mia and I is...complex. She’s been with

the family as long as I have, and we both come from similar circumstances. Last year however, she was assigned to me as a handler, and...well it's been more strained. To be honest, I don't understand it, totally. I only know she vexes me." There was quite a bit of omission there, but Mia was anything but an easy topic for Adriana.

"Hmm...people who can wound us the deepest often have the access to do so." Eislia offered helpfully. Adriana's collar felt hot. She returned her attention to her food, taking a few bites to calm her aching stomach. "Ugh, maybe...at any rate, could we please drop the conversation then?"

"Of course." Eislia said softly. Founders above, her voice was a dream.

Stop it, Adriana.

"And you work at an...office?" Eislia asked as she glanced around for anything she could sit in comfortably. Adriana noticed and motioned for her to sit on the bed. The two of them had just arrived at her apartment, having finished their portable meals and walked in silence from the station to home. Eislia was perfectly nice, hells, even easy to talk to. That scared Adriana.

"Yes. It's my cover job, as it were..." She sighed, rubbing the back of her neck nervously. "I feel..." She glanced at Eislia, not sure why she felt so open about this. "I have a small, simple

dream: That I'm just some simple clerk, working in a small office decoding documents for a living. And sometimes...I buy flowers and take them home to my wife. And...we both have a small, quiet, good life." Her face felt so hot as she spoke and she had to eventually look away. "As I grow up, more and more I realize how stupid that is."

"I think it's wonderful, Adriana." she wasn't looking at Eislia, but she could hear the smile. For some damned reason it made her heart feel as if it were a furnace. "I do not exactly... remember why I came here. It is hard to say but aspects of my memory are spotty. But..." Adriana turned to face her, she tilted her head as she watched Eislia's face. Her voice drifted off; intelligent eyes darting around as if reading from a page. "I do remember that I wanted...my own life, you understand? Something of my own and not theirs." Her eyes darted upwards. Adriana nodded as she listened to her.

"You were made by them, yes? For...a purpose?" Adriana had picked a chair to sit across from her. She was happy to be home, among her books and disorganized mess. It was hers. No one else's. She draped her coat over the back of the chair and smoothed her plum-colored vest as she sat.

"I...yes. I was made to kill for them. To eliminate those who stood against the Founders. Magic is abundant up there. I had to have means of...opposing it." Eislia shook her head. "Dangerous waters often hold no signs on the surface." She said absently. It looked almost as if Eislia was reciting that. She wasn't sure what the meaning of that was; one puzzle piece at a time. Adriana nodded in understanding. That added

up from all of the data she gathered in the fight.

“I see...if this is painful we don’t need to talk about it. In fact, we can simply discuss what you wish to do in your new life. Hmm, that might be nice, yes?” Adriana, for some reason, felt the need to reassure her. Eislia smiled and let out a sigh. “Ah, to be honest...I’d love to simply relax for a while, perhaps acclimatize to all of this.” Adriana, again, nodded. She felt like those little dolls people made from spring work to constantly bob their heads. “Of course. Well, I’m exhausted and am already lacking sleep. However, I can’t have myself turn into a vampire. So...” Adriana’s voice drifted a bit. “How would you like to spend the day?”

“Hmph...perhaps we could use a run?” Running meant sweat, Adriana’s throat dried up as she struggled not to imagine Eislia in the shower.

“Ah, why don’t....we get you a change of clothes first, hmm? You’ll have to stay with me for a bit, but...” She trailed off as she noticed Eislia staring at her, her eyes transfixed on her neck. Adriana felt her hand go to it, gently touching the bruised skin.

“I...did that, didn’t I?” She asked, her voice so small that Adriana felt her heart ache. She shook her head.

“You said it yourself, you didn’t mean to. That...you were in some kind of survival state.” Eislia had already strode over to Adriana, the distance closed in barely a pace. She knelt down in front of Adriana; her throat tightened, being so close to

the other woman was exciting in so many ways. Eislia gently reached out, but hesitated, her expression begged permission. Adriana nodded numbly to give it.

Her hand, so large and just last night used to harm, gently laid against Adriana's throat. She could feel the knuckles brush against her skin, sending electricity jolting down her spine. She sucked in a breath as Eislia's fingertips set upon her throat, warmth spread out from them, an all consuming sensation of peace blanketed over her. Adriana herself could heal wounds. With her it was a painful process; as she used magic to wind back the time. It reknit cuts, and bound bone back together. As one could guess, the pain was the most extreme form of agony. She'd had to do it to herself a few times and it always felt as if she was digging through her flesh with a rusty fork. A rusty fork that was also on fire.

However, this felt wholly different. This was safe, calm, and pleasant. Was this the kind of magic in Ultimacy? Curious. Adriana might have to investigate this further. When she was done, Eislia drew her hand back, the look of concern still knit her brow together. This time, Adriana could not stop her instincts. She reached out to place her palm on Eislia's cheek, a tender moment she could not resist. Adriana leaned forward and looked into those gorgeous sanguineous pools. "I...thank you, I have never felt anything like that."

"Your life has been filled with pain and loneliness. I could sense it last night, taste it...Adriana. I am so sorry you have endured that." Eislia placed her hand over Adriana's, causing her heart to thud against her chest. Her mouth felt dry, and

she wanted only to stay like this forever. But life had a way of tearing fantasy asunder.

“No. It’s OK.” She slipped her hand away, and cradled it against her chest as if it were burned. Like that, the moment was gone. Adriana was standing on the edge, and found herself yet again unable to leap.

Eislia picked up on the tension, rose to return to her seat. “Ah... well, good.” She said, clearly a bit nervous looking. Anger burned Adriana’s skin, she was too fucked up to even allow someone to touch her. She reached up to feel the now-healed skin along her neck, it didn’t hurt anymore. Well, that was something at least. She cleared her throat and shifted in her seat.

“Why don’t we...get those clothes hmm? That might be a good way to see the neighborhood, then we can maybe go for a jog?” Adriana said as she sat up, her attempt to salvage the situation. Eislia smiled a bit, she tapped her chin.

“Hmm...clothing? Of my own?” The larger woman seemed like she’d been mulling over the idea, as if it was a new concept entirely unknown to her. A pang of coldness hit Ariana in the gut: She’d been in the same situation. No clothes; no changes of wardrobe, the idea of wearing something different from day to night time was a totally unknown factor back when she was younger. The family helped her with that. Perhaps Adriana could do the same for Eislia?

Adriana looked over at what Eislia was wearing: While it

looked odd, her outfit wasn't totally alien to the city. The cloak was a bit weird, but that's nothing too bad. She made mental notes: if Eislia wanted to workout, she needed sweats. That's one outfit. Maybe a few others. That would be acceptable. She found herself lost in the thoughts of Eislia's measurements or what would look best with her...amazing body type. Founders—her biceps must be huge. Her gaze was locked for a moment, before she shook her head and stood.

“Well let's aum...leave the cloak and the sword, is that fair!?” Adiana asked. For some reason, she felt it was very imperative to ask Eislia for permission at each juncture. Something told her the giant warrior never got that option where she came from. Eislia rose from the bed, the creak of the springs signaling their relief, and walked over to strap her boots on.

“That is very reasonable. I am...excited, you know?” Eislia's smile was actually adorable. So odd on such a hard woman, but it somehow fit her very well. Eislia stood, the sword in its scabbard and cloak left behind, the two of them headed back out.

Adriana's mind was on the energy exchange last night, and not on the chill afternoon air they had been walking in. She'd performed that spell many times before: it was very useful to put down someone much larger than you, and was excellent for capturing a snitch for interrogation. When one uses enervation, there is simply a slight drain of a person's internal energies. Simple, effective. But, with Eislia it was

overwhelming; a massive surge of power she'd never felt before. That much of a pull created a sort of vacuum, and an exchange occurred. As far as Adriana knew, something like this has never happened before. Then again, last night had many 'this has never happened before's'. So, perhaps she should take them in stride.

That one comment though, it nagged at her. Eislia still wasn't being entirely open about everything that happened. "I want to talk about that...place we were?"

"The mind scape?" Eislia asked, striding easily alongside Adriana. She looked a bit less imposing without the sword and cloak, still her physique made it hard for her not to look at least a bit intimidating. "Hmm..." She mulled over her thoughts a bit. "I know this might seem odd, but I do not fully remember what happened there. It is...complicated. The Eislia you met inside of me was a sort of fracture of who I am. She remembers more than I do, and is hidden to keep eyes off of me." Admittedly, that went completely over Adriana's head, but it seemed like some kind of attempt and hiding from any scrying spells. Interesting idea. Aspects of your memory locked away. So then it seemed like Adriana was going to get answers from the more enigmatic version of Eislia. Though she had to admit, she liked this one better.

Despite all this, Adriana sighed. "I was kind of hoping to get more answers, but...maybe you and I can find them together, hmm?" She said, her cheeks warming as she looked up at Eislia. The cold air seemed to cut even deeper at this stage, it was absolutely revitalizing—even if she still felt tired. Tired

and hungry, that seemed to be Adriana's eternal state lately. Maybe she'd take a vacation: Go far away to another level of the city, rent a hotel room and eat until she expired. Eislia exchanged her look.

"Hmm...maybe. I am sorry that this happened."

"I'm not. I was able to get you pacified; everything worked out about as well as it could have, hmm?"

"And then we have time to decipher exactly what's happened..." Eislia added. As if grand providence was at play, they arrived at the clothing store. Adriana, being how she was, held the door open for Eislia. With a bow of her head and a smile, the larger woman stepped inside. It was a small quaint shop and one that Adriana absolutely adored. 'Scortis' Fineries' An upper class store with lower class prices. She loved it.

The walls were lined with cubby spaces and shelves, all filled with casual clothes of all manners. It was here that Adriana went first. She wanted to get some sweat clothes—for working out, or simply being at home. If Adriana ever spent a day at home being idle she had her pajamas, Eislia deserved the same luxury. As they had walked to the shop, Adriana had already sized Eislia up. Her work was cut out for her; it was going to be hard to find things in Eislia's size. Easy things first. She drifted past the underwear section and nearly suffered a pulmonary as she thought about Eislia in them. No, maybe she herself can grab that. Adriana let out a huff at how utterly immature she was. Nearly thirty years on this world and she flushed like a rose at the mention of..unmentionables.

It was so very evident: She really was fucked up. Only when presented with her actual shortcomings was it so painfully obvious.

The soft sounds, most likely muted by all of the cloth around, were breached with a cleared throat. Adriana turned to see the source. Eislia was standing near the corner of mirrors, holding her arms out. The proprietor of the shop, Scortis, was taking her measurements. Eislia wore that smile of hers as she extended an arm and lowered the other. "Adriana! You did not tell me you made a new friend!" The tailor chuckled. While they might have been busy with their task, that certainly did not stop Scortis from cracking wise. Adriana sighed and watched.

An older elf; the master tailor was one of the first people Adriana made friends with. When she first moved to this neighborhood, it was Scortis' tailoring and conversation that brought Adriana a great deal of comfort. She often came by the shop to look over new patterns, or simply chat about fashion'. It was awfully rude of her not to have said hello, but her mind was so bloated on other matters. "Ah, right, I apologize, work has been hectic: This is Eislia. She um...comes from far off, and I was going to show her around town."

"Hmm good, good where do they build people like this though!?" They laughed and twirled the measuring tape into a perfectly wound ring in what seemed like a few motions. "Well, if she's a friend of yours I can offer a discount, what are you looking for!?"

Adriana looked down in confusion at the pair of sweatpants and a few shirts she had in her arms. "Oh aum...w-we were just going to get these and maybe some underwear, socks? I was going to leave that part to Eislia." She glanced over at her friend to see her admiring herself in the mirror, all smiles. If it were anyone else, it'd come across as conceited, but here it was...oddly cute.

"Mmm, foolish! But...I understand budgets. Look, let me make her something nice...I'm thinking silk pants and a tunic? Hmm, something fancy so she can show herself off a bit, everyone deserves that." Before Adriana could launch a protest, Scortis was already shushing her. "I'll put it on your tab, you can pay it off when you can, hmm? Good, settled!" Adriana sighed, then glanced back to Eislia as Scortis scuttled to the back of the shop.

"Sorry...about that, they tend to get excited around new customers."

"Hmmm...it seems as if they do not have many..." She said, still admiring herself. Adriana had to bite down the words 'you really are beautiful, you know that?'; instead, she simply watched her. "I am glad for it though, the kindness I mean." She stretched her massive arms over her head, Adriana's mouth was suddenly dry, she swallowed.

"Well, the clothes make the person, yes? And honestly, if our mission is to get you to blend in with the city, well...we can't much have you running about like some ancient warrior." Eislia chuckled at that, throaty and deep. No matter how

many times she heard it; Eislia's laugh remained a highly enticing. Adriana scoffed and turned away, then perked up at the sensation of movement. By the founders, Eislia was looking over the underwear.

"You did mention these, what do you recommend?" Adriana could have choked to death and been happy about it, when will she get any kind of relief? She watched as Eislia examined the boxer briefs, 'yes! Those!' she wanted to scream. Founders, she wanted to throw her arms around Eislia and kiss her all over. Suddenly, Adriana's collar felt excessively hot, she had to let out a long breath for any sort of relief. Yet again, fear paralyzed her. 'No, need to think of the past' she chastised herself. 'Focus, you stupid lesbian.'

Thankfully, Eislia got the impression that advice was not needed on all things, and carefully picked out a few pairs of underwear and socks, everything she needed for at least a week's worth of clothes. Adriana vowed to teach her the laundry as soon as she could, she would not have any kind of misunderstandings with chores. Yet again, her mind was on other things and wandering. Such that she did not notice their tailor returning.

"Ah good, so..." Scortis clapped their hands together. "It will take about a day to start on this, due to other business; though, I have all the measurements and I can get it to you...in two days? Well then, I can ring you up for the rest!" With a sigh, Adriana pulled out her wallet, at least the tab was not rapidly bloating; only a slow bloat. The garments were bagged and paid for, leaving Adriana puzzled over her funds as Eislia

snatched her haul with glee. Glancing over, Adriana could not help but smile at the slightly infantile way Eislia looked it all over. They stepped out into the street, now shimmering with the attempt at sun rays cascading over the miserable browns and grays of her home district.

The silence that ordinarily would blanket the morning, had already given way to the clatter of footsteps; all Adriana could hear though, was the buzzing of magical energies. They shifted and halted, too and fro. All around them: In the power lines, in the fartalker network, on certain individuals, flits of color and sound. When she was younger it was a bombardment, but now it was simply an idle display; more akin to evidence of the thrumming heartbeat of the city. Magic intertwined everything with the very fabric of reality. Slowly knitted back together after some great, ancient calamity tore it all away. She worked her finger against her thumb in thought. Introspection had become too much of an indulgence.

To Adriana, her bed really was a wonderful thing. She fell into it gratefully each time her day was done. And every time it greeted her with open (bed-like) arms. It was not an expensive piece of furniture: not antique, nor special in any way. What made it so wonderful was that it was consistent; It was there for her, always. It also had the other unique property that it had never been shared with, although that was far from wondrous. (It was of her own design however, so she could not blame anyone but herself.)

It was in these unusual circumstances that Adriana had found herself this night: Laying in bed, (usual) with her silken pajamas on (also usual) laying beside the hulking form of another woman (this is the less-than-usual part). For the first few hours, panic hit her. Not the panic of outright fear—more the icy fingers of indecision. She had no idea how to sleep all of a sudden. It was as if the rules had been rewritten, the arena altered without her knowledge.

Her whole life, Adriana had slept alone. Her childhood was spent in shallow sleeps; in an alley or some vestibule, any place she could seek refuge. Even when she Mia to rely on back then, neither of them sleep deeply. It was far too dangerous. Over the years, once the Nummari family provided them with a stable place to live, they learned how to sleep in a bed. Adriana had to learn how to actually sleep deeply. It was a huge alteration to her life: the puzzle pieces she'd gathered scattered and implored rearrangement. She did though. Adriana was resilient: she adapted, she could do it again.

However, this was another seismic shift to her life pattern. She didn't know how to calculate this—the heuristics of her mind unable to work this out. A large, warm body beside her. The large arm pulled over her and held her close. Safety, warmth, joy flooded her mind. While Adriana still clung to the vow she took a year ago, she allowed herself but a little shred of this. A small morsel of comfort; she closed her eyes to sleep.

How she got here still felt a bit like a dream. Eislia and her had returned to the apartment, set down the new clothes. Adriana

had to confess that she felt a bit of delight at watching her new ward look over it all. Eislia eagerly asked if she could change into her sweats. Adriana, not thinking, suggested Eislia take a shower first. Bad move on the 'resisting sexy moments' thing she was attempting to maintain; but, Eislia would feel better if clean and in fresh clothes.

She had the hardest time distracting herself, hearing the water running, thinking of how it might look cascading over Eislia's body. She worried her mind over the recent events: Their conversations, the mysteries that seemed to entwine the two of them. Even the way that Eislia's voice sounded. It was all so very vexing.

Too bad the morning brought even more vexations.

Consequences & Favors

Adriana slowly tumbled into consciousness. Awareness slid down a slide from a pleasant place to a slightly more pleasant place. The point being it was nice; the other point being this was odd for her. She usually woke worse-off than her dreams. A light murmur escaped Adriana as she hugged something soft and firm, after a moment's reflection she realized it was an arm. A very muscular arm. Oh my...wow this thing was like, really muscular? The covers got even warmer; blood rushed to Adriana's head. She took a moment to enjoy this feeling, then rolled over to face her bedmate.

Eislia was already up. She was rolled onto her side with her elbow propping her up. To Adriana's shock, she appeared to have been watching her sleep. "I didn't want to wake you..." She said softly, her voice velvet. Baritone and smooth—it was so pleasurable to listen to. A smile threatened to pull her head in half, Adriana let herself feel a bit of this happiness though. She could see this laid out before her: A life with Eislia. Founders, what was wrong with her!?

“A small courtesy, you seem to be filled with those.” Adriana said, trying to find a place to put her hands that was not indecent. She settled on placing them over Eislia’s very, very, muscular chest. Worst choice, but also she can live with that option. Eislia was to be wearing one of the undershirts they bought the other day. To Adriana’s relief, she also had on a pair of sweatpants. “Was it too cold last night? My apartment isn’t exactly...erm, modern it its heating systems.”

She laughed, the rumble of her chest making the sound even more congenial. “It was fine. You provided whatever warmth was lacking.” Her words brought such heat to Adriana; she could feel the spark deep in her core. As if she was casting a spell, but even more beguiling—a temptation she might not resist. She hoped Eislia did not notice, but at this proximity one could hide nothing. Perhaps that’s the most intimate part of everything. Adriana felt herself squirm a bit, arousal tugging at her.

“Um, I didn’t think I’d have the sheer mass to provide any warmth.” Adriana confessed, her palms seared with heat, but under Eislia’s chest they blazed even brighter. “You um... seem...”

“Adriana.” She interrupted. “Why do you hesitate like this? I confess, I am not exactly a woman of a long romantic past...” She dipped her head to the side, and rolled her eyes. “At least, I think do. But I like to think I can pick up clues; You and I have held an attraction, I cannot deny it. Why do you?” Her expression was searching, curious—not a hint of anger in it. But it still made Adriana’s heart pang. She drew in a breath

and let it out.

“You are right, I feel...” she gazed up into Eislia’s eyes. “I feel something for you, something very strong; emotions that I have long locked away. I want to explore them, Eislia, I really do. But I need to warn you that I have...” She worried her bottom lip a bit. “Problems, I want to express and explain them to you, and I will, but later.” A small gasp escaped Adriana’s lips as the larger woman wrapped her in her arms.

“Thank you for sharing what you have so far. I want...well, I’m not sure what I want. But I will be patient with you. I promise.” She shifted a bit, her large arm still draped over Adriana. “So, you work today, yes?” At her words, Adriana felt like melting into this embrace, forevermore in the clutches of a giant. Work. Adriana gasped and shot out of bed as she rushed over to her wardrobe.

“Fuck! These last few days have been a haze! I nearly forgot.” She sighed. “The costs of a double life.” Adriana glanced behind her as she unbuttoned her pajama top. “Could you...?” When Eislia didn’t take the hint, Adrian made a motion of her to turn away with a flick of a hand.

“Oh of course, yes.” Adriana’s ears perked at the sound of rustling sheets. Did, did Eislia pull them over her head? That’s rather adorable; glancing over her shoulder, she did indeed see the massive warrior with the sheets pulled over her head. Large feet sticking out from underneath the far-too short covering. Adriana chuckled softly to herself and returned her attention to dressing. It felt nice to change her clothes. Magic

can mend and clean your garments as long as you'd need it to; but, there was something about fresh, clean, clothes that made one feel more alive.

Buttoning up the vest of smooth smoky Grey, Adriana smiled to herself. Her hands smoothed over the front, the feel of the material a slight joy. Her shirt was of a creamy white, and as fine as any other garments she wore. Memories of freezing in the street, with barely scraps to hold onto her back. The vow that she would never wear rags again rang deeply in Adriana's mind. Lately, nostalgia certainly has been clawing at her cerebral core. Adriana was not sure why; but this surging, impulsive brain needed taming.

It needed to be stated, for the record, yet again that Eislia was not helping. As if on command, she got herself out of bed and padded over to Adriana. The magi closed her eyes as she felt those large hands on her shoulders. An intimate moment spawned from consideration; she was neatening the folds on her clothes. "You look stunning, Adriana." She said, the smile in her voice clear as the sun that streamed in from the window. "Very professional, yet humble in my opinion. You shall do well at work, I can tell." A slight chuckle escaped Adriana's throat, it happened without even her knowledge.

"Are you trying to pamper me?"

"No, simply...making up for being one of the disrupting forces in your life." she answered smoothly. Ok fair, that is a reasonable motive, Adriana surmised. "On that note, I um...have a question?" Eislia moved over to the front of

Adriana, she looked concerned. To Adriana's relief though, she appeared to not be distraught. The expression on her wonderfully handsome face was so easy to read. As if it were a book she'd poured over for centuries.

"Well, you've earned the right to ask at least one." Adriana said, trying not to stare again.

"I was thinking that I would like to...take time to integrate into this culture." Eislia said, pacing over to the kitchen. "I want to experience everything I can and well...this room is a limit. So, I propose: You got to work, but allow me possession of your key. I can go out, explore, maybe even...run some chores?" The massive, hulking, powerful woman looked...almost pleading it was a mixture of exhilaration and nerves that drove Adriana to nod. Eislia smiled. "Excellent! I know...how hard it is to trust; I arrived here just the other night and now I am turning your life upside down, I want to make it-" She was cut off by Adriana taking her hands into her own.

"I told you that I wanted to try to explore...whatever this is we have. And that entails a bit of trust, doesn't it?" There were times in Adriana's life when she had to force a smile, be pleasant and appealing. This was not one of those times. She felt it warm her face and fill her heart with a slight spark of hope. Adriana walked over to the front table, it was a beaten up old piece she'd found on the street, a skinny end table that she re-purposed for something to rest her keys and wallet on when she got home. Taking out some slips of cash, she removed her house key from the ring and handed both objects over.

“I’d tell you to be careful, but really...” She paused. “Do not solve any problem with violence unless you answer back to violence given, understood?”

“I am not some brute tha-ah....right well given the other night: Fair.” Eislia laughed as she took the objects. She stared into her hands, then blinked. “Ah...I should get dressed.”

“If you intend to leave with me, that might be smart.” Adriana teased, she’d already had her jacket on and flipped through her spell book, more to distract herself than anything else. Arcane runes and intricate writing lined each page, she ran her fingers over the surface of a spell. She was so much younger when she wrote some of this, of course she added to it over time. As inspiration hit her and magical convergence occurred. It was...like chaining lightning to one spot: The power was intoxicating. But it was also fun to see how sloppy she was before. Still, this was something that belonged entirely to her, even though her home technically was provided by the Family but this: her power, her genius, it was all by right of her own work. By instinct, she’d turned away to let her companion change. No desire to turn and watch, none. She was not some demented pervert.

The book snapped closed and she fastened the leather band to bind it closed fully. Adriana ran her hands into the pockets of her jacket, making sure she had everything she needed. And making sure her staff rested snugly in the loops that secured it. Excellent. She made a silent prayer to the founders that she didn’t need anything and could have a normal day of work.

Eislia was finished changing back into her old, odd clothes. Oh well. She'll have a few nice outfits soon enough. Adriana made a note to run past the tailors after work and pick them up. "Well, this shall have to do, I'll um...leave the sword and cloak here, as before." Adriana nodded.

"Good enough is what we'll have to deal with, but only for a bit longer." Adriana added with a nod, she turned and opened the door. Eislia, despite her size, always seemed to move with a supreme confidence. Even ducking her head under the door frame looked graceful for her. Eislia smoothly locked the door and pocketed her key and money. Adriana sucked in a breath as she felt her arm taken.

"Too forward?" A blush warmed Adriana's cheeks and she drew in a breath.

"No, perfect."

The journey to work was...eventful. Having Eislia beside Adriana was invigorating. She indulged in the fantasy: her wife walking her to work as she prepared to spend the day with old tomes and relics. Then, she would come home to her. The streets were slick with rain from the night, the air was chilled with fall air. Adriana felt none of it. The clack of the pavement didn't even register to her ears, she felt as if she was gliding to work.

By the time she arrived at the office, Hana had already opened.

“Oh! Hey Adriana did you enjoy your day off?” Xe asked, picking up a stack of papers and sorting them into the shelves in the back. Adriana had removed her jack and was laying it on the back of her chair.

“Hello Hana. It was um...nice. Restful.” She said, idly rubbing at her neck. She was thankful that Eislia had healed it, the bruises were all but gone now. That would have made explanations hard. Adriana could just hear Mia’s voice in her head ‘just tell them it was a sex thing, no biggie.’ That was not as easy as Mia seemed to be obsessed with it being. Adriana smiled as Hana came over, holding out a cup of coffee.

“This is for the other day.” Xe sighed. “I’m really sorry I messed up like that.” Adriana felt her skin flush, right up to her neck.

“Oh no no, hana...I was in the wrong. I hadn’t slept and was running on fumes, but that’s not an excuse.” Adriana took the coffee though. “Thank you, but...it’s not needed ok?” At her words, xe smiled and bowed xer head.

“Thanks, I just..don’t want to mess up you know?”

“You won’t. This is a casual place, Hana. We’re all very...laid back workers. And you are doing a fine job.” With a final reassuring smile (she hoped) Adriana sat at her desk. Already there were a few documents waiting for translation and a small notebook that needed transcription. She rubbed her hands together and was about to get started when the door swung open. Marcus was standing there, grinning like a lion in heat.

They had some kind of wrapped parcel under their arm.

Adriana scoffed and leaned back in her chair. Marcus was the sole hunter and securer of magical artifacts in this little office. They had a great eye for what was junk and what was not. Many times, they came back from a day of rummaging to find truly amazing things: Like the scrolls that had kept Adriana up all night. Today however, Adriana was not in the mood for discoveries.

“Hello all! I’m hoping that we’re having a good morning so far—” Marcus stopped their usual spiel, and glanced at Adriana. They smiled, a wide at this time very annoying grin. “Adri! You look, wow you actually look happy.” They sauntered over and tapped their chin. “Ok...not happy, but less miserable than usual.”

With what she hoped was a searing, glowering, withering look, Adriana sipped her coffee. “Small miracles. So, what’s the hunt brought about this time?” She asked, trying her best to maintain an icy demeanor. Marcus’ grin ran a shiver down her spine, it often meant bad news. Well, good news for them, bad news for Adriana. She watched as Marcus, made sure the door was closed, then glanced around. They slid up closer and placed the parcel on the desk, then with great care removed the cloth.

Adriana nearly dropped her coffee. Her throat went dry and she had to scurry for a surface to place the cup. She leaned forward and gazed at the apparent find: A small casket, about the size of a bread box. With intricate golden and silver

sections on the surface. There were glowing runs lining the front, arranged almost like a label. As she tried to meet eyes with them, their exact form seemed to never come into focus. Adriana blinked and shook her head. There were no obvious locks or other mechanisms along whatever she assumed was the seam of the lid.

She reached over to run her hands over the smooth-looking surface, but Marcus stopped her. With a frown, she nodded to them. Best to be as safe as possible, it could be magically warded. "So, you bring this here? You realize I'm already behind on work? Come on Marcus....give me a break, truly." She paused, looking back at it. "Where DID you find this!?"

Marcus simply chuckled. "I never reveal my secrets. But Adri, you have to see if you can figure this thing out. I've never seen anything like it!" Adriana scoffed, pushing away from her desk and rubbing her temples.

"Marcus, I have work here...alright, let me have this for the morning, and I'll take a look at our mysterious little relic in the afternoon, alright?" She glared at them, Marcus simply sighed and wrapped the casket in the cloth again.

"Fine, fine, I'll put this in the back room, for now it's hush-hush ok?" They picked it up and walked to the back of the office. Adriana was left with her rather mundane work. But this work was what she was here for, really. Poking around some at her desk, she finally managed to settle down and get to work. Life seemed to be determined to knock Adriana off her kilter, she could not seem to get a grasp on it being in any

way orderly. This week has been a sledgehammer to the gut several times over. And it wasn't even half way over.

Her brain buzzed at all the potential for whatever it was was in the casket. She wanted to crack it open and devour all of the knowledge she could. But, with great reluctance, she slid over the notebook she was to transcribe and got to work. It didn't take her long to settle into a rhythm. She let her mind wander, and the only place it seemed to settle was on Eislia.

That talk they had this morning; the sunshine coming in from her window. The soft orange that danced along motes of dust. Was that real? Were the words they exchanged even a reality? Did Adriana dream it up? She worried her lip as she mulled over these new, less-than pleasant thoughts. It would not be the first time that her own mind played tricks of her: The cost of a creative intellect.

What was Eislia up to? She wanted to run chores, but that could be anything. Ok, well Adriana was not an expert, but she DID know that thinking like this was not good girlfriend material. She can't obsess over her partner. Adriana stopped writing for a moment, her collar growing hot again. Partner. That's...no that's jumping the gun a bit. Her breath felt like lava, the rustle of the papers cracking like thunder in the night. She leaned back in her chair and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Calm down, Adriana.

The rest of the morning shuddered along on broken legs. Struggling to drag itself along the plains of time. However,

the afternoon always comes for it, slaughtered and harvested into the night. Before that though, it was lunch time. The day wouldn't have Adriana so easily.

She pushed away from her desk and rose, stretched, and turned to stagger outside. Her jacket was slid on before she even registered it, hands felt around to make sure everything was where it was. (Why was she so on alert?)

Adriana's steps brought her to her usual cafe; and after a harrowing order event, she sat outside at one of the small, rickety tables. A simple meal and drink sat on a rickety table. Adriana was attempting to calm her equally rickety nerves when a shadow passed over her. A familiar scent caught in her nostrils: Perfume, rose or some other flowery variety. "Mia...I swear, not today." She groaned.

Across from Adriana sat her very superior handler, wearing a very superior outfit and a very superior smirk on her very nice lips. Too bad shit kept spewing from them. "Hey now, I'm here for a status report and failing that." She stole a fry. "Any details of the sex-variety. Cause you jumped her right? I mean, you were making eyes, or, eye all the time we were interrogating her."

"Oh, fuck right off."

"Right yeah, that's the whole topic we're discussing Adriana, keep up dear." somehow, Mia managed to look like she fluffed

up as she ate one of her fries. Like a thrice-damned cat eating a canary. "Is she a Giver or Taker? Does she have a nice bush? Are her arms as big as they looked!?" All the questions seemed to spout from her lips. Adriana wanted to die.

There was a brief moment, a microsecond, that she wanted to tell Mia about the cask. Something about it was nagging her, like it was important; but she decided against it. Mia didn't have to know her whole life. Adriana grit her teeth and watched her for a moment: Mia was nicely dressed, as usual, Like a frosting covered knife. And those damned lips.

"Are you done with the vulgarities!?" Adriana snapped, reaching over to block her food from another attempt at thievery. "Or did you just come here to discuss my non-existent sex life?" Mia huffed, leaning her chin in a hand and pouting.

"So boring, you're like a monk with no sense of fashion or commitment." She purred, to Adriana she seemed like she was being extra...Mia today. This caused suspicion to flush through her body.

"What do you want?" Adriana said flatly. Her irritation itched at her like a bug bite. Mia wasn't here for some status report, nor was she here to update Adriana on what happened at the manor. She'd never do that, she always denies information like an evil little squirrel. Mia sighed and sat back, folding her hands in her lap.

"Well, I came to inform you how everything went with the

Family.” Ok, that’s new. “It went smooth, Lord Nummari was...curious about what happened, but I was able to give her the story that satisfied her: We found an anomaly that couldn’t be explained, some odd crater surrounded by a mixture of magical radiations. Nothing else on scene was found. Now...” She leaned forward and grinned. “For the other reason I’m here: I need a favor.”

Those words simply did not compute in Adriana’s poor brain. A favor? Mia wanted one from her!? This was...a development. This felt like walking into a room and knowing it was trapped—the mystery was not the danger, but the means of your death. However, it was impossible to pass this up. The sheer chance to have something on Mia was too tempting. Even if Adriana knew this was going to fuck her over in the end. In Mia’s words though ‘sometimes a fucking isn’t so bad’.

After a few moments of deliberation, in which she watched Mia with caution, Adriana finally nodded her head. “Fine. A favor: Which means that when I perform this favor, you owe me one.”

“Yeah, that’s generally how it works.” Mia answered dryly. “Look, thing is I’d rather pick anyone else to do this, hells, an animated dung pile would be better than you. But you are the only choice I have. So...” she gestured to Adriana. “It’s you.”

That ruffled her feathers, Adriana huffed and glared at her with what she hoped was a deadly look. “What’s the task? Out with it. What did I just get talked into!?” With a truly devious smile, the kind that made Adriana immediately feel on edge,

Mia said.

“I need you to take me to a fancy party.”

The details of Mia's plan were as terrible to hear as they were to imagine. She laid it all out for her: There was a formal celebration happening at nine this evening. Apparently a rival family was showing off their newly-refurbished library, and everyone was invited. ‘Well, everyone who's rich and important.’ Mia added. Nitpicks aside, she'd somehow snagged an invite. The reasons why she was so eager to go involved and deception; two things Mia loved oh so much. When Adriana pressed her if it was something involving the Family, Mia clarified this was a personal favor.

The day passed quicker than she thought it would. Adriana spent it going over the odd box in the back room: She analyzed it, scanned every surface with a magnifying glass, looking for any hint of how to open it. She'd remembered to wear gloves and a mask just so that nothing could possibly spark any magical counter measures. It was interesting to try to figure this device out. But, in the end the best she could do was attempt to note the runes down for possible translation. However, even that didn't work. As she stared at the symbols they seemed to shift and change, even trying to think back on them, she couldn't even remember the shape. As if they were strands of slimy fish guts, sliding from her mind's fingers.

So that's two massive frustrations that were planting them-

selves on her head so far. Today was really shaping up to be a fantastic fuck up of grand proportions. Her shoes scuffed the street's stones, a limp infliction on a the city's cold bones. Adriana groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. She really did not need this. Furthermore, she did not need to be thinking about Mia right now. That damned woman was like a thorn in her side. If the thorn was a dagger constantly being thrust under her ribs.

She drew in a breath, feeling the sallow cheeks and weary lines on her face. Adriana wasn't feeling like the object of beauty right now. How the hell was she going to make herself presentable to a bunch of nobles and imbecilic inheritors!? Did she even have a beauty routine? Did Mia? Yeah, Mia probably bathed in the blood of babies or something like that, Adriana wouldn't put it past her.

The rest of the walk went by quickly and without any event. She usually came across some of the neighbors outside, chatted with them and covertly looked into any concerns. There was a time when Adriana extended her help as much as she could. However, it led to disaster more often than helping, and she's stopped doing it. Best to keep her head low and...simply exist.

Existing, that's what Adriana was best at; Simply keeping her head down and moving through life like a shadow. If there was an award for 'being good at living,' Adriana would win it. Not living well mind you, just being alive. The Family was the only thing that Adriana had in her life that meant anything. Serving the family and ensuring her lord held onto her power

was all she was good for. Wow. That was a sobering thought. Her hand rested on the door knob to her apartment.

Adriana felt a pang stab deep within. It always hurt to remind oneself of one's significance (or lack thereof.) Well, her evening was off to an amazing start as it stands. She let out a sigh and pushed open the door.

Firstly, the door was unlocked, so that's one thing that went right. Secondly, all thoughts of inferiority melted from Adriana's mind as she stepped in. For the first time in her entire life, Adriana felt as if she'd stepped into a home: It was warm, and soft; the air was a blanket that enshrouded her as soon as she entered. The smell of food danced in her nostrils. She barely even registered closing the door. Somehow the lighting even seemed more pleasant.

Eislia stepped out of the kitchen, she had a large bowl in her hands and was mixing something, Adriana could pick up the scent of yeast. Baking? What was that? "Oh, you're home, excellent! I'm in the process of making dessert, dinner is almost done as well." She spoke with her usual sureness, giving her a soft smile as she returned to her work.

Adriana tried to compose words to express complicated brain signals, but those systems seemed to fail her outright. She dumbly removed her coat and shoes, and went about her usual ritual entering her room: She idly placed her spell book on its appointed spot on her small desk, her compacted staff went on the nightstand, and she left the rest of her daily objects in her jacket. Once she was happy with that, she walked over to

the entrance of the kitchen.

“Um...it appears you were busy today? I thought you’d only run a few chores?”” Adriana did not mean for her tone to be accusatory, it just came out that way. If Eislia was bothered by it, she didn’t show it. She was wearing her sweat pants and sleeveless shirt. Over that she had on a simple white apron, by the founders her arms were amazing.

“Oh! Yes!” She chuckled as she poured the (what looked like) batter into a pan, then put that in the oven. “Well, I was going to simply get some groceries and possibly find a way to get another key made. All of the neighbors here are so helpful and well...I was a bit caught up in helping them. Apparently, people here trade services for products. I was able to get some cookware, which you were lacking by the way, and groceries, some smaller amenities. All from helping with a few repairs. I also found the hardware store, and the kind person there was able to get a key duplicated!” she answered, her tone mirthful. That was a great deal of information, wow. Adriana felt a tingle on the back of her neck and scratched it.

“I....see, that’s quite a bit that you’ve got done today.” Adriana said in disbelief. “I mean, I’m sorry, that’s...um thank you? I’ve never really thought to utilize the kitchen aside from its most basic uses.” She felt embarrassment overwhelm her. “Eislia...thanks.” She stepped back, some instinct driving her to give her companion space. “I um...so we have a slight change, Eislia I, um...need to go out tonight.”

“Oh? “ She asked, taking out some plates and starting to put

the food on them. There appeared to be some kind of stew, with small biscuits, it looked...homey, hearty. If she had a childhood, Adriana suspected this food would remind her of it. Was that a purposeful choice on Eislia's part? Make something comforting? Or was it just a sum of the ingredients she could acquire? Not really productive to over think everything, Adriana.

Adriana stood there nervously for a beat, she cleared her throat. She might as well start being helpful; and walked over to set the table. It was a small, cheap thing sitting against the wall by one of the two windows in the apartment. Adriana barely used it for actual eating; one never needs a proper meal ritual when one is alone, but now things are different. "Yes, well Mia has a task for me, it's...a personal one. I need to change and prepare for a...very formal event. And I will not be home until very late, so please do not wait up." She said as she cleared off some books and papers from the table, transferring them to her desk.

"I see....well then, we can enjoy our dinner as I relay to you my plans." Eislia looked absolutely breathtaking as she sauntered out to place the dishes on the table. She seemed to possess a kind of grace and power only seen in fantasy. After placing two glasses of water beside each of them, Eislia sat across from Adriana. Wait it took her a second, plans?

"Plans?" Adriana repeated aloud dumbly. She looked down at her food. It looked absolutely lovely, with fresh vegetables and thick broth. More like gravy than broth. She doubted that anything offered at the stuffy party later on would compare

to this. After taking a sip of the broth, she felt this was a very correct assumption. The flavors danced on her tongue, and lasted after she swallowed, the sensation of pleasure always triggered such an odd reaction. Adriana was repulsed by it, but not so much that. More so that she was afraid to embrace it. So while good food is appreciated, she hated how it made her body feel. Maybe one day, she won't be such a 'fucked up, boring monk' as Mia put it.

Maybe for Eislia.

Her cheeks went supernova as she clapped a hand to her cheek. "I, um...yes, it's very good, but as I said. Plans?" She looked up to see Eislia was staring at her intently, no doubt wanting to see her reaction. She apparently liked what she saw, as she nodded and returned to her own dish.

"Ah yes plans; well you see I am not exactly sure why...per se, but I am good at fixing things. Machines come easily to me." She tapped the side of her mouth as she thought, Adriana could not help but think how cute that was. "It's...complicated Adriana, I remember some of what I was before, I remember Ultimacy and my life there, but it feels as if some of it was lost in the journey. That part I am unsure of..." She paused. "It is as if the plans for my escape were extracted from my mind... I...anyway." Her large beautiful eyes looked away in shame. Adriana felt her hand reaching out for her before she could even think it. "It's alright we'll um...figure all of this out in time, hmm? If you can be patient with me, the same courtesy can be extended to you right?" Another comforting smile seemed to explode across Adriana's face without permission,

Eislia seemed to have that effect. The larger woman looked at Adriana, as if she found the shelter she needed. Adriana wanted to be that for her so badly.

“Right, yes....of course. At any rate—I think that I would like to join the Sparkrail crew. I overheard one of the shopkeepers talking about how they are often looking for work.” Eislia seemed almost ashamed as she explained her plans. It finally occurred to Adriana that this was probably because she’d never had the chance to actually do such things before. Sparks flitted in Adriana’s core, her breath caught. It was such a surge of emotions; She wanted to hold Eislia and tell her she was real, she had a life and it mattered. She opted to eat more stew.

“Sparkrail? Hmm, yes, that is a good means of employment. I have heard excellent things about it, and the system could always use more maintenance and upkeep!” Adriana looked down at the food, smiling as she took a few more bites. Not only was it delicious, but she felt full so quickly, it was as if wholesomeness was condensed into matter. After another moment of silence, she cleared her throat again. “I think that’s a great plan, Eislia. I wouldn’t worry to much about getting on the team right away, this city is a big place and many people are also looking for work. But I know you can do it!”

“Of course, but I refuse to pay my way into your good graces with food alone.” She grinned a wide, handsome smile. Adriana yet again found her gaze mad lingered. Eislia surely was a handsome woman. Her features were so very enticing. “Adriana?”

“Yes.”

“Finish your dinner, you have a function to get to, do you not?”
She smiled at Adriana, a slight playful glint in her eye. Adriana gulped and blinked.

“Ah, yes of course.”

5

The Function

Mia was late. She was never late.

Adriana paced back and forth on the steps of the Sparkrail station of Central Forge District. This was the station that she'd been told to meet Mia at, and she was starting to suspect this was some trick.

The taste of Eislia's dessert on her lips made all of the problems she was having now seem unimportant. It was a simple tart, the filling was unknown to Adriana, but it tasted like heaven. Memories danced on her lips as she tried to calm her mind—any panic was silenced when a lavish car pulled up. Yet again, it was a different one from the other night. Adriana had no idea how, but Mia seemed to always have a new automobile for each outing.

She got in as soon as the door was opened, closed it and flopped into the seat. Sat across from her was Mia. She was dressed just as she always was; highly fashionable. The only difference

was that this time she was dressed to draw eyes, not blend in. Adriana had to admit that she looked absolutely stunning. The crimson-shaded dress was a bit on the nose, but she opted not to point that out. Anyone who didn't know better would likely be pulled in by Mia's shape alone.

Adriana knew what Mia was though: a phantom threat with a pleasing smile. She was all lips and teeth until she showed claws.

"You look, nice." She finally said evenly. Mia seemed to fluff up under the small praise, razor lips slit into a slight smile.

"Hmm...I'm all wet already, Adriana; No need to keep revving the engine." She purred, at some unseen signal the car's engine turned on. It hummed with power and smooth design, of course it was an expensive car. Mia wouldn't have settled for less. She had to have planned that little move, the little shit.

"Already with usual Mia-isms, I see. We are in a rare mood tonight, or is your generosity wavering?" Adriana said with a slight grin. She didn't really want Mia to see any actual amusement in her gaze.

"Maybe. You look good by the way. I'm glad that you dressed to kill." An actual compliment? This whole night has to be a fever dream, Mia wouldn't be so nice if that were not the case. Still, it felt good to hear. A prickle of her skin told Adriana she had to watch these reactions around her handler. She hated Mia, and she had to remember that. She hated her for how she

cut Adriana out of her life. They were once so close, and then Mia grew so cold to her. She felt her emotions merge between anger and arousal. It was frankly criminal how volcanic Mia made her feel.

All of those misbegotten urges simmered underneath the surface. Cold smoke hinting at the inferno deep inside. Adriana was good at hiding, repressing. So, she simply smoothed out the front of her jacket in reaction. "Thank you Mia. Now...will you share with me what exactly we are doing?"

"I already told you a bit." She started, taking a drag from the cigarette on the long filter she held. All grace and style, but toxic. How fitting. "The simple fact of the matter is I need you because I know you are the only one who can break one of the locks holding the object I'm looking for."

"And what is this object?"

"Private information." Mia stated sternly. "A small book, that's all I'm going to give you. The plan is: we enter the party, schmooze a bit, and case the security." She bit the end of the filter, showing off her slightly-sharp teeth. Adriana's mind went to salacious grounds. "I have a cover story for us." Mia continued, and gestured to a small envelope sitting beside Adriana. She glanced over to it, but maintained eye contact with Mia. "Then we head to the back, I'm sure you can find a reason to get me there. Maybe you're looking for a good corner to fuck your wife?" She grinned and winked at Adriana. Always with the sex.

“Or, if we wish to skew things to accuracy: We both hate each other and are only staying in the marriage for work?” Adriana countered, her smugness bubbled up from behind. A gloating cloud.

“Ouch, you wound me! But, if we were going for accuracy, you should then drool over every other woman and shit yourself if anyone shows emotion around you!” Her saccharine voice dissipated said cloud.

Adriana drummed her fingers on her knee, then reached for the envelope. Enough of this stupid sparring match, maybe she wanted an escape, or maybe she was scared. Whichever the reason—she decided that study was more important than conversation. Mia’s looks and general state of dress were not helping.

One of the hardest parts about trying not to think about sex is that it inevitably makes one think about sex.

Adriana began to appraise herself of all the information provided: A list of the important guests to watch out for, a sheet with her and Mia’s alter-aliases, a map of the three floors of the manor they were headed to. Nothing on what she was supposed to be retrieving, but pretty much everything else on how to get to it. As she skimmed over the details, taking it all in at once (she’d go back over and memorize important details after)—she noticed something: The locks were all magical, they were extremely well scouted (most likely that’s what Mia had been up to the past few days) but all of them required an arcane spark of some kind to open them.

Oddly, this realization made Adriana's heart sink. Of course Mia only wanted her for that. For some reason that was unknown to her, some deep-sunken desire that flickered to life, Adriana had hoped there was something more. That Mia wanted her for other reasons. A sheet of cold detachment slid over her. The complicated knot of feelings twisting and twitching deep inside. Mia was always the one to do that. She was the hand that held the knife to her. Both of them had sliced each other deep and scuttled far away. That was the nature of their relationship it seemed: Attack and retreat.

All there was for them were blades seeking veins. Somehow, that was deflating to relearn. Perhaps it was the ground she'd gained with Eislia; the healing she'd felt blooming in her heart. It was foolish to think that would somehow magically alter other realities of her life.

After doing another scan to file away important names and faces, she let out a sigh and folded up the documents. "I assume you want these destroyed?" Adriana said, handing them to Mia who promptly snatched them. A bright pink tongue pierced dark lips. Adriana pulled back a bit from the display, what was Mia thinking?

"Always so smart, Adriana..." She paused, touching a gloved hand to her lips. "How bout a quickie before we get there?" Before Adriana could scoff in disgust, Mia rolled her eyes. "Ugh, fine...whatever; look, as long as you stick to the job this will go smoothly, then...I owe you a favor. And do I ever hope you pay it back with fun things!"

“Wait, that’s not how this works: I tell you what to do, you do it. Believe me, I won’t be asking a favor that leaves you smiling, Mia!” The only response Adriana got from her ‘partner’ was a wink and smile. Seriously, Adriana had no idea what was going on with her. Wait, no she did know what all of this was; Mia was horny. Adriana sighed and rubbed her temples, fingers worn and long as if gripped by age. “This is going to be the longest night in history...”

“By the Founders, Adriana...you take everything I say so literally!” She drew out her words, the syllables of ‘I’ and ‘say’ slithered over with her vile tongue. Her vile tongue that Adriana could not help but imagine doing things to her. She suppressed a shiver as she felt the car slow to a halt. She hadn’t even noticed the outside world during this ride. Her world and thoughts seemed to be occupied entirely by Mia and her presence.

With a monumental amount of restraint, Adriana got out of the car without another word. The time for slings and barbs was for the journey; no it was time to focus on the job. She wasn’t exactly happy with having to do this, but, well, she was suckered into it expertly. Mia was the best at convincing Adriana of anything—Adriana had to accept that as a truth about them.

“Hmm, this is going to be a bit painful at first Adriana...” Mia said as she walked over to stand in front of Adriana. Her deft hands flitted over her chest, adjusting, neatening, a nanosecond of softness in her eyes flicked away as she patted Adriana’s arm. “So, let’s play the part so we can be done with

this; go get ‘em lover!”

Far, far divorced from Adriana’s home, this manor was a massive affair. A large circular parking lot that the owners would call a driveway housed numerous cars. Mia had the car a bit farther away, most likely to give us more time to get into character: Well furnished lawn, large opulent plant formations, and carefully manicured nature surrounded them. It was a far cry from the red bricks and constant ashen stench of home. The air was perfumed, sweet-sickly. Adriana hated it.

This area of the city was spacious. Far too spacious, there were no buildings to clog the sun’s rays. No overhanging plates or roadways. It was all exposed (as much as it could be) to the wide, dead, gray skies.

This manor, in particular, was located on a series of hilled structures that stood at the ring of the city. Standing around the third major layer, nearly at the top. The only thing that resided above this level would be that where the paragons dwell, those who spoke with the founders directly. Then...far far above that, was Ultimacy. Supposedly the place where her new house mate was from.

Adriana and Mia turned to make the journey to the Manor. While the walk wasn’t long, it gave Adriana time to think and settle her mind. Well, settle is a poor choice of words. Adriana’s mind is never calm, nor does she want it to be. Adriana’s mind is a finely tuned machine, one that intends to be used at all times to the best of her abilities. She is always on

the search for more data—more input—any puzzle to solve or mystery to uncover. It's why her day job was of such value to her; if she just waited for the Nummari's to call on her, she'd have expired from boredom long ago.

"I assume no one we know is going to be there?" Adriana asked, her voice kept low and smooth (one can never be too careful in such places). Mia shrugged.

"Highly unlikely, both of us navigate in such distant waters from these."

"Surely, you seem to have a few inlets into such a world, dear?" Adriana joked, a wry smirk was on her lips.

"Not as much as you seem to think, sweet wife." Mia returned the mocking smile, disarming Adriana's attempts with a deft parry. "Look, I have a driver and a nice apartment because I like nice things and seem to think I am worthy of them. Whatever your deal is, I can't be expected to follow it right!?" Adriana fumed at that little lashing, she let out a huff. Her breath was hot enough to scald her teeth.

"Such barbs, still. You'd think we'd be past that." The way that Mia wheeled around to face Adriana, eyes like darts and lips slit up in a dagger's edge, she was sure that Mia was going to gut her on the spot.

"We're aren't past jack shit. Soon, you're going to spill the beans for me. But tonight isn't the time, so get your fucking head in the game. Got it, hot lips!" She punctuated her point

by jabbing a finger at Adriana's stomach.

It was amazing how undeniably beautiful Mia could look when she was threatening Adriana. She cleared her throat, stepping back from Mia's sword-edges threats. Threat wasn't the most accurate word, they were promises, perfectly stated outcomes. More shame soaked Adriana's brain pan, she reached up to scratch at the buzzed hair on her side. She wanted to be away from Mia's anger, but also be smothered by it.

"Mia, fuck you." The slap cracked through the air with percussion that would make a drummer jealous. Adriana's head snapped to the side, her cheek stung so much she winced when she rubbed the spot she was hit. Oh, that felt good. 'Wow.' Ariana thought to herself. 'I really am messed up.'

Instead of looking furious, Mia looked pleased with herself. "You realize that's what you and I need to end this little... whatever the fuck we have going on, right?"

"Yes." Adriana scoffed, rubbing the red from her cheeks. "We will have to, but I'm really not ready to right now." She stood more rigidly, flicking her hand in an offhand gesture to the cheek offended. "We can play this off as an impassioned fight?"

"Yeah that works for me." Mia's words came out with secretarial professionalism. She turned on a designer heel and walked to the manor, the incline was slight, but Adriana somehow felt it all the way up. Mia was right and she hated to admit it; circumstances were changing rapidly and they could no

longer have things stay as they were. The question was: What did they want? What did Adriana want? Did she want Mia as a lover? To have her body and mind be captivated by such a complex woman? She wasn't sure she had the answer yet, her entire body felt rough and raw at the same time.

Something screamed at her that she wasn't ready. For what, she wasn't sure.

Entrance to the manor was a simple affair: Mia showed her invite, shot the security a smile, and Adriana simply clung to her for passage. She certainly wasn't pleased with having to act, but Adriana did it so well. After all, she had to do it for most of her life. For both Mia and Adriana leading a double life was as natural as breathing.

Adriana sighed as she again felt the lack of spell-book nor staff here. She even had to make sure to take a jacket with no pockets for reagents—If anything were to happen, she'd have no reference points on the fly, meaning she was stuck with a limited pallet to draw upon.

Of course, the anti-magic zones were a concern. When pressed on the subject, Mia told her to 'calm your tits, I have plans'. So, it's not like she had many options. The security in this function seemed to be fairly hands off: No pat downs nor detection rods were used. Which told Adriana that there was a magi somewhere, probably mingling among the crowd. Would

it be a good idea to flag this mystery down, or assume that Mia accounted for this? Her shock at not being inspected, and slightly puzzled expression told Adriana that might not be the case.

Once they were allowed entrance, they were guided into the main ballroom. Dark, calming tones greeted Adriana, the wood panels were stained a near-black mahogany tone. Blood-red walls contrasted with the stark white ceiling. She felt her soles clack against the marble floors, they were pale as if bones were paved through the room. Stone and dead trees, how very deathly. She drew in a breath and scented marigolds, actual flowers as she scanned around and confirmed. It was opulent, it was wonderful.

It was wasteful.

Mia led her over to a safe corner once they made a circle of the room; both of them endeavored to look sufficiently bored. "Looks like we may add one more step to this little plan." She said, her voice a steam engine's hiss.

"I took that as obvious, thank you for the confirmation. It looks like I'm going to have to sniff out the magi and see what I can do."

"I don't think taking out an agent of the house is a good idea." Mia, opting NOT for violence. Oh, how things change. Adriana was in agreement though.

"I wasn't exactly prepared for this." Adriana licked her lips,

trying to come up with a plan. “I could...try to distract them, but you might be more suited to that.”

“Are you kidding?” Mia reached up to place her hands on Adriana’s cheeks, smirking. “You’re damn hot. Only problem is, then you’re stuck distracting them, and I need you in the back.”

They were, for the first time in a long time, at an impasse.

Adriana took a sip of her wine. “I have a plan, but you are going to have to trust me.” Mia snorted at that, trust was oddly not on short supply with them; they just loathed each other is all. Mia sighed and shook her head, shifting her stance and moving her hands from her well-rounded hips to fold in front of her equally well-portioned chest.

“Fine. Let’s hear the plan.”

Mia was always a good listener (even if she’d stab Adriana’s eardrums out for saying that.), so relaying the plan was not hard. She was to head to the bathroom, get access to the back area, and wait for Adriana. Her part of the plan was to simply look pretty, and look like she belonged in whatever place she was walking into.

Fortunately for us; these are both things Mia is stellar at.

It was Adriana's part of the plan that might prove to be more complex. She moved through the crowd, doing her best to maintain what little cover they had. Smiles, brief words exchanged, and the ever present tug of a magical presence. Someone was here, and they were checking for magi, that would mean Adriana was not only looking for them, but the opposite holds true as well; she might be hunting a dagger's tip.

The crowd was all influential intellectuals, the upper crust of Forthiron. As she was about to say her casual hellos to another party goer, give a false name and speak her lies, she felt something tug at her cerebral cortex. A magi. The tingle of magical potential rose through her spin, bloomed with fecundity. Her gaze snapped over to the farther edge of the crowd. Seeming to part for them, her quarry turned into view.

They stood seemingly apart from the crowd, a Fallen with pale almost alabaster skin and deep blue markings. They traced up the one exposed leg from the delightful ball gown she wore. Long, curved horns sprouted from her head, the contrast of black to white almost jarring, yet a pleasure to behold. Their eyes were two black orbs, just as most Fallen that Adriana had met. Their dress contrasted the pale skin with vibrant blue, it was the tone of what Adriana imagined the sky to be. As they stood there, holding a flute of champagne, their smile seemed to speak volumes. 'I know what you are, and why you are here.' Oh, at least they had some temerity; Adriana liked a spirited game.

Adriana made her way over to this mystery person, before she

could step up and take control, her spare hand was taken, and she was smoothly brought into the dance. She started down gorgeous features with perfectly-painted eyes. Sharp, pretty features hid the intellect and spark Adriana knew were buried within.

“I’d have called security on you.” Their voice was slow, smooth, as if they slid a finger over each syllable, as if each tone was a carefully crafted sculpture of sonics. “But...you have the most intriguing gaze; it does not seem to call malice into it.”

“You’d be surprised.” Adriana found herself quipping. “I can be quite aggressive when I don’t get my way.”

“Something sings to me that it’s not a matter of the mundane sort.” They smile—a terrifyingly appealing curve on their soft lips. “Perhaps there is an acceptable level of danger I am willing to allow.”

A cock of a brow.

“Are you saying you are bored and wish to spice up your boring evening? Hmm...I can’t say I am against such things, but...my wife may protest.”

“Many things tell me that is not an issue for her.”

Adriana snorted out a soft laugh, tilting her head. “You seem to be told quite a bit. So...is my face that’s making you not pull the trigger?” The admiration that she usually saw in people’s

eyes wasn't there when this mystery person looked at her. It was closer to curiosity; as if a cat was unsure of her prey. "Or...something else?" Adriana finished her sentence, nearly strangled by the beauty before her.

"Hmm." They purred, their tone a wavering line of silk. "It is perhaps possible I'm curious what you could bring. Malice would be enacted already. You could just be an innocent magi wishing for a nice evening out?" They smiled a bit. "It would wear badly on my employers if I shouted out anyone with a whiff of the arcane." They leaned close, pressing themselves a bit closer to Adriana. "You do indeed wear it well, you have been well-trained."

Not as dashing as they were hoping, as utterly disappointing as this felt; work came first. Adrian pined the ache that rose up as she tipped her wrist and spilled the wine all over the front of their dress. Their coupling broke; as wood cleaved in twain. Adriana had her hands held up in apology. "Ah, I am...so sorry I am a klutz at times!" She offered a handkerchief to help with the cleaning, which the magi snatched away swiftly.

They glared at Adriana and stalked off to the rear area of the building. Towards the bathrooms. The heat at the back of her neck, having crept up over the conversation, slid back down into Adriana's core. She let out a breath, then continued her play. She chased after them with apologies on her lips and worry in her eyes. By the time she rounded the corner, the bathroom door had slammed closed.

Adriana glanced around: The small hallway only had access

to the bathrooms, with a door leading to the kitchen. She wasn't sure where Mia was, but the plan had to be adhered to. She placed her hand on the bathroom door, then tapped out a series of sigils quickly, the seal formed around the handle and should last a few moments. "I-I am so sorry! I um, hold on, I'll get something from the kitchens!"

"No no it's fine, I've wiped most of it off, besides." They chuckled, even though Adriana could hear the lovely tones of their voice. "I was not the one who paid for this dress." The door jiggled a bit, but of course did not budge. "Wait...What's going on?"

"Hmm?" Adriana tried the door, it of course would not move. "I can't...it's...stuck, I'll um...I'll find someone, I'll get help, don't worry!" She called out as she rushed off, before they could even levy another protest, Adriana was out of ear shot. She pushed her way into the kitchen and through towards the back exit.

This led her to another corridor, though less finished than the others: Carpeted floors and rich wood walls gave way to bare concrete; the skeletons of the house. It's the barest expression laid before Adriana. These were the more utilitarian parts of the building, the places where the owners would never set foot.

The clock was ticking.

"Hey bitch." The voice lacerated the air, nearly causing Adriana to jump out of her skin.

“Mia, don’t fucking do that!” Adriana sighed and turned to face Mia, who was hiding by standing there like she belonged. As if the house had been built around her. She scoffed and neatened her hair.

“Smooth moves, I could nearly see you popping your load right on the dance floor. But I guess that magi is kind of hot. Nice eyes and all. So....are you ready?” Mia clapped her hands together. “Good, cause we have like, three minutes at most.”

“How perfect; I was scared we’d have it easy.” Adriana scoffed. Excellent, of course Mia was right, but it wasn’t exactly a joy to hear it. “Just lead the way, let’s get this over with.”

“Exactly what I want to hear on a date.” Mia snorted. She pushed past Adriana, giving her a devilish look and only further instilling the putrid ball of hate/lust in her chest. There was something about how she was acting tonight that had set Adriana on edge. The bizarre swirl of attraction and annoyance struck at her. Strings plucked and teased up her spine. Falling into step behind Mia, Adriana raised a brow. “Two guards around the corner.” She whispered. “I take left, you take right?” Adriana nodded once Mia’s gaze flicked for confirmation.

Adriana exchanged a look with her, then dropped her hand and took a microsecond to summon the will. It was as easy as letting the swell overtake you, as simple as falling. With magic, the submission to a greater will was the easiest part; a thaumaturgic hum buzzed all around the universe, a current under reality. All magi simply dipped into it, let it take them

where they wanted it. The only key is that one must take some control, slide a blade through the water instead of forcing a palm through it. That was generally how Adriana saw it, she tapped into that ethereal otherness and drew a small spark of power, it danced along her palm, contained there with careful concentration. For her, it was another mind she set to the task, a small splicing of herself to keep the spark in check. Allowing her other parts to focus on other tasks, a nice little trick.

Her mind reached out and grasped the thread, feeling the pure energy of it, the raw potential. And she shaped it, with her mind, her will and her force. She shaped it and made it her own. Just as she had always done, just as she had done with her own body, with her sense of self. Suddenly, she felt the rush of air; an explosion of movement and kinetic force. Her hand was guided on it's own—her feet carried her through the space between, to the guard, past him, past his torso. Her hand, a phantom blur of energy and force, severing not the life, but the connection to senses.

The guard crumpled to the ground having his perception and bodily control robbed of him. She knelt down and traced a few lines on his arm: restoration of all automated functions, breathing and bowel control (there was no way she would violate someone's dignity like that). The guard let out a gurgle trying to roll over, to no avail. Adriana stood and looked over to Mia, dusting off her knuckles. "I did mine faster." She said, bending over to tie the guard's hands behind their back. "And see? Just a punch, nothing fancy. None of that finger wiggling bullshit."

“Oh, you mean that finger wiggling bullshit that you specifically needed for this little job? The finger wiggling that you specifically needed from me!? Was it that...or, the other finger wiggling!?” Adriana starked, quite proud of herself.

“Shut up.” Mia quipped, always with the masterful oration, that one.

Mia led them to another hallway, this one even more nondescript: wood walls and floors, it looked like this was leading to the servants quarters or something else that was located in the bowels of the large home. Adrian kept her eye peeled, but it was her other senses she was paying more attention to. Then, they came across it—a black door, it seemed to be made of iron, with a perfectly smooth surface. Adriana placed a hand on the cool material. She reached out again, the energy flicked out from her palm and tasted the material of the door. Whatever it was, it was: Fire-proof, explosion-proof, impact proof, magic resistant; resistant, not immune. She glanced over to Mia, who was smirking like a panther. Founders, she was a fucking know-it-all.

“This is finger wiggling I need from you, hot lips.” Adriana scoffed at Mia, she always had to have the last word on something.

However, that wasn’t of importance right now. She had to focus on the matter at hand. Drawing her magic back up to the surface, she closed her eye and focused. She could feel the swirl of arcane around the locking mechanism, instead of heat it was a font of cold. As if it was drawing everything into a void.

Which was...technically what it was doing—light included. It was a simple device to break, one most magi would not be capable of, hence why the lock was probably so relied on.

Adriana was not like other magi.

She'd known it years ago: where some were slower, Adriana was fast as a whip. Where others might fuddle through the path of an energy's web, Adriana was a clever fox. She was simply able to focus herself better. She worked with the ebb and flow of energies, not against it. Perhaps that was all it was. She was patient enough to understand her place in the equation of a spell. Regardless, she knew why Mia had chosen her; again, the disappointment sounded deep in her chest.

She pulled the threads, and worked aside the seals, with a breath drawn, she poured her energy into the lock. Adriana was nowhere, she was all everywhere. She was in the manor, standing beside Mia. She was a thousand feet underground, she was electricity, she was potential. The sickening sensation of reality crashing back into focus hit her like that slap, or a kiss—pleasure and pain.

Adriana stepped back from the door, taking in a breath and gesturing to it. "Well...finger wiggling done, let's get the hells out of here." It was really hard for Adriana to suppress the swell of pride; Mia's snort of approval and casual airs certainly did a good job of suppression. Adriana was tempted to growl at her for wholly obscene reasons, but she opted not to.

A whiff of perfume, a fruity mingling of effervescent notes

that made Adriana wish they could have kept the act up a bit—maybe a dance or two. Mia seemed like she didn't care at all, walked past Adriana with that predatory smirk on her lips. Slashes of wine that, in a nanosecond, Adriana wanted to drink. Mia really was a damned witch. "Wait here wonder gal, I have to grab my prize, then we get out of here. Just keep watch." Her voice was perfectly calm, Adriana got the feeling that if this particular object held any significance to Mia, it wasn't personal. Then again, she was a slithering backstabbing minx, so it could be a front.

The matter of extraction wasn't all that complicated, Mia came out with a small book tucked under her arm. She nodded behind Adriana, to a door at the end of the corridor. "Night's over Adriana, time to make our exit. There's alarm spells so uh..." She wiggled her fingers. "Do your thing." Adrian let out a scoff and walked down to the door.

"I swear to all I hold dear Mia, when I think of my little favor you are going to regret making me do all this!"

"Die in a fire, Adri." She retorted with a smug smirk.

A few deft flicks of her hand and the wards were shattered. She unlocked and pushed open the door. Cold air hit Adriana's face as if she'd surfaced from boiling water. Mia was right behind her and Adriana led the way back to their car. It was surprising: no hiccup, no hitch stopped them. Perhaps the fates wanted to give Adriana a break, for once.

It might have been the night, the fancy surroundings or it could have just been the wine; but when they rushed into the car, Adriana felt elated. Mia urged the driver to get out of dodge, and then slid into Adriana's lap. No resistance, no protest—a dull pull had been aching between them all night, as much as Adriana despised to admit it. For all of her reluctance, all of her denial, she could no longer withhold herself from Mia.

Their lips met in a crash. The energy between them exchanging, it was even more jarring than any enervation spell Adriana could cast. Mira fit Adriana like a glove, their bodies craving each other's surface. Her mouth broke from Adriana's lips, hissing her name. She moved lower, claiming each inch of skin with ardent passion. Fingers flitted over buttons undoing them, the restraint she showed in not ripping the fabric aside was appreciated (her clothes were as usual, not cheap.) Mia slid off of Adriana's lap, her hands parting her shirt. The purr she emitted filled Adriana with lurid need.

Mia tugged at her waistline, as if asking permission. Adriana knew that she should have stopped all of this right now, but she didn't. She nodded, her neck numb and her skin searing with need. Her hands trailed into Mia's luxurious hair, she whined and sucked in a breath once she felt hands free her cock from her panties, the zipper having been yanked down in a flash. Mia was eager, then again, so was Adriana. Were those all mockeries dancing on her tongue, or was she really so

brazen? It was so hard not to over think it. But it became easier as her mind sunk into a heap, feeling her lips close around her shaft, move along her length. Mia's hum seemed to pluck at Adriana's very being, vibration and form coming into one mingling sensation of pleasure.

Cold air hit flesh as Mia's mouth left her. Adriana whimpered pathetically, looked down to see Mia, stroking her length. She followed that by dragging her tongue up Adriana's cock, causing her to gulp for breath. A year of pent up frustration working itself out. It was a bit vexing to realize that Mia was the one who held the key to that release. Had there really been such a desire on both of their ends. Had Adriana really been so blind as to miss this? Her gaze flew up, her head snapped back; the surge of tightness unraveling deep inside was impossible not to follow, she was chasing lightning in the wind. Adriana was fairly sure she choked out Mia's name between clenched teeth.

Mia laughed, that much Adriana knew, she was so aware of so few things. The entire world of perception was centered on Mia's mouth, the warmth, her breath washing over Adriana's skin, the tease of delicate fingers. The same fingers that held the knife. Ok, Adriana reasoned that thinking about knives right now might not be productive.

"Adri." She hadn't called her by that little nickname in ages. Or at least it felt like that. Adriana looked down at Mia, amber-shade eyes locked onto her gaze. She was pleading, begging. Adriana swallowed. She needed to say no, her core burned as a furnace; it had been burning there for ages. She needed to

say no.

Adriana, again, nodded yes.

The last time Mia and Adriana had sex was when they were lovers. When they were two people with nothing but the other. When they would have bled and died without a thought for themselves. The gaping wound of a year apart felt as if it was only a second now, as they fell into each other. Mia knew everything that Adriana wanted, everything she craved but denied herself. Each whispered curse, each muttered praise, every single touch of skin, it was utter heaven. It was perfect; albeit only the chemical kind of perfection.

As soon as they were done fucking, the pallor of embarrassment settled over both of them; a blanket cast over the cabin of the car. The drive was silent and agonizing, a spike buried in the ribs. Mia was quick, never making eye contact. This was why her feelings and passions were a rancid lie. Adriana had, yet again, let her vile being taint another. She wasn't sure right now how she felt about Mia, but she did know after tonight one thing.

Mia didn't deserve to be plagued by her.

Blood, Sex, & Tears

Mia stepped out of the car, her skin woke to the chorus sang by morning air. She was in tune with every little sensation offered to her. While she wasn't a morning person, it was the events of last night that had her nerves alight. After the little tryst with Adriana she couldn't just go home and sleep. There was too much on her mind, too much running through her. She spent the evening hiding away on some rooftop, letting her driver get a night's sleep, smoking, and generally untangling her mind. When she was ready to come home, she gave them a call and here she was.

Her heels clacked on the stone as she slipped a few extra slates of pay into their hand. "Take a break, I'm going to be more down low for a while." Mia tipped her head and walked into the lobby of her apartment complex. The hole that she dragged Ariana and the giant to wasn't her actual home, but rather one of her many bases of operation. Mia preferred to take what wealth she had and roll it over into making her a better operative. She used to think of it as an investment in her

future, now she just does it to be better than the others.

Being better is all she really has left.

Mia rubbed her temples as the elevator doors dinged open and she stepped inside. She didn't regret her actions per se; she just wanted it to have gone better. That was the problem with Adriana: She gave you everything you asked for, but never what you wanted. Mia wanted Adriana, body, mind and spirit. The doors closed with a 'ding' and she was left alone for the ascent. Even thinking that was painful to admit—She wanted Adriana, she wanted to be wanted by Adriana: To be consumed, worshiped, obsessed over. She wanted Adriana's love for her to burn hotter than any flame; she wanted to be reduced to ash. Mia was, by design it felt, defined by Adriana.

And that, right there, was the part that fueled her anger.

Rage: searing, fuming, roiling wrath; that's what Mia held onto for most of her life. Anger was a close bedfellow of Mia's. She loved it, nurtured it, slicked it back with gel and perfume. It was what let her survive all these years alone and in the den of wolves. Her anger was one of the forces that made Mia so damned good at her job; however, this time it was a liability. She knew that if she kept letting it guide her actions in regards to Adriana; it would lead to her downfall.

Bells rang in her ears, and she realized it was the ding of the elevator coming to its destination. Hands in her pockets, she stepped out and stalked down the familiar path to home. When she first started working with the family—earning real, actual

money, she had bought this place as her first investment. She wanted to build it up, make it nice, and eventually surprise Adriana with it.

They were dating once, not just dating; lovers. They were soul mates, they were bound in ways not many people were. Mia woke up everyday living her life for Adriana. Back then, Adriana wasn't as broken as she was now. She had a mind like a steel trap and teeth eager for blood. She was tough, she was beautiful, she radiated barbarity. Adriana's steps were steel, her soul was fire in a storm.

And then it all changed; it all broke.

Mia had done the breaking, she always did. This time it was to her own heart, her Adriana. Both Mia and Adriana had...made a mistake. They might have gotten drunk with Lady Thalana—Lord Nummari's daughter—and had a bit of a tryst with her. The fear of punishment overtook Mia, and in that moment, her true colors showed. She lied, sold Adriana out. Forever and always, she showed the universe how very unworthy she was of even having had Adriana's heart in the first place. one day her war hawk was replaced with a beat pigeon. That was the day Mia's heart became a rock. Adriana was smacked down to 'a retainer' and Mia had been elevated to her keeper. It was an instant shift, not just in how Adriana was acting, but in the power imbalance. Even if she hadn't used and betrayed her like that, they could never be lovers again. The power imbalance between them saw to that.

Her soul turned to dirt under the boot, the world was dimmer.

But Mia kept on; because, the one thing Adriana and her promised each other is that they would keep on. Survival, perseverance, they would keep going and never stop. Ever since they ran into each other struggling to get food on the streets of this filthy city, Adriana and Mia were vowed to one another. It was what stilled the blade from Mia's heart countless sad nights.

As she arrived at her door, she clutched at her heart. Teeth clenched in concert with fist—but she choked the anger down. There was nothing she could do to stop it. She stepped inside, keys tossed into the bowl, shoes off. She stood there in her fine gown, the paint on her face and the lingering phantom press of Adriana on her skin.

It wasn't until she was in her room that she remembered why she even came out here; the sole cause of all this. She removed the book from under her arm: A small journal with leather bound cover. It was real, actual leather. She knew this because Mia knew it was from the outside. Mia knew it was from the outside because she'd confirmed the details about a dozen times. She called in favor after favor, working every lead, all to track down this book.

The payoff was worth it. At least, well, she hoped.

Her back unwound a bit, the tension eased away into the aether. She was home now and the mission was a success. The additional complications that came with her little moment of passion could be dealt with later. Right now, she could do with a bath and some wine. Her work would have to wait, this step

was far too delicate to rush. The other concern was keeping anyone else out of this. This was Mia's mystery; hers and hers alone.

One of the main things Mia spent her money on and made sure was very well equipped was her bathroom. Growing up in a situation where running water was a rare commodity, she was determined to make sure her place of cleaning was as opulent as can be. Lavish tiles, heated by steam pipes under the floor, removed any harsh morning foot chills. The mirror was of the finest glass she could find. All of the counters were fine marble, smooth and clean.

Her fingers traced along the surface as she stepped in, having shed her shoes and shawl already. Mia slid her dress off, the fabric caressing her body as if it wanted one last touch before being removed. The idea of Adriana's hands wouldn't leave her mind: What they could do to her. Mia shivered and turned on the spacious shower, lined with glass doors. It was exquisite, it was beautiful, it was hers.

Beautiful things fit Mia so well; like how a knife is beautiful, or an explosion. She adored the rush of air and blood. She revered the way a body fused nerve, muscle and bone into one focused intent. Like many artists before her, Mia was vain; she loved to do what she did and do it as well as she possibly could. She loved to be better than everyone at her job.

Stripped nude, she stepped inside and let the hot water wash over her. She wasn't really sure why she had been feeling so assertive when she saw Adriana for this mission— well,

personal favor really—But she was, and how strongly she had to pull herself back too. There was something in the air, some urge that she couldn't crush down. Most times, Mia was in charge sexually. She liked to be on top, in control, and able to walk away at any time. This meant that she could be totally in charge of her urges and desires as well. That wasn't the case tonight.

She had lost a bit of that control that she coveted so very much. The past few weeks have been a very chaotic time for Mia; her emotions were in a whirl, cast into a vortex. The careful crystalline order she'd assembled had been shattered. All it ever takes is one part out of alignment to send the whole system to shit. Mia tried not to dwell on it as she cleaned herself, soap of the finest fragrances as she deserved. At least, that's what she told herself. Lies can be so very sweet.

Mia stepped out from the shower, wrapped in her softest towel. She didn't feel like dressing at the moment, she needed wine. Now. As she stepped over to the cabinet it was stored in, she heard a sharp, mechanical tone interrupted her. She hissed and walked over to the far talker. This one was on a secure line, not for fun or social calls (not that she had any). She tapped in the code, and the message sifted against the screen. Lightning magic writing the words in glowing letters.

»» Mia. You are required at a site. It is your night off; but the Lord requires you. There are four interlopers, they need to be removed.

She sighed as she read the words, pouring a glass of wine for

herself. She thought for a moment and typed her response.

»> How bloody do I need to be?

The wait for the transmission to send, then the answer felt like ages. She rolled her neck; her muscles were already screaming for action. Tonight was just a paltry sip of blood. She wasn't even allowed to kill anyone. Well, that's a lie: It would be far smarter if, when she decided to do a small job on the side for herself, she didn't kill anyone. So, she didn't. It was a simple snatch and grab, and any fallout she could deal with. The response flashed up; back to the matter at hand.

»> Make a statement.

She smiled and sipped at her drink. How perfect; she got to have a fuck and stabbing to top it off. Perfect night.

»> Give me the address and details in the car, I'll be circling.

Her lips curved into a wider smile, her fingers drawing away from the keys.

»> Taken care of. Be good, Lord Nummari is watching.

Well, who the hell knows what that means. With the Lord Nummari, it was impossible to tell. Yet again, her mind flicked to the Lord she served: She was insurmountably tall, even taller than the freak from the crater. Pale-skinned and black eyed: she was a true caster— a rare breed— and the power that flowed from her terrified Adriana and Mia. She commanded

respect and such fear in equal elements.

Also, she was incredibly hot, but that's beside the point.

Mia always had a taste for the dangerous ones, and there was none more dangerous to cross than Lord Eversei Nummari. No one who did is around to talk about it. If the words were literal, then she might be under the eye of the head of the house she served. Mia liked attention, but not that much attention; spotlights like that can add up to a one-way ticket to the bone yard. As things stood, she wasn't ready for any vacation plans yet.

The wine didn't last long in its glass, she downed it in a gulp. Mia then set about slipping into a nice outfit. Something she could move in, the boots she liked and her jacket of course. A wonderfully broken-in leather jacket. She scavenged it long ago, from some long-forgotten sub basement. Her and Adriana had a habit of running around where they shouldn't back in those days. She loved it so much that Adriana enchanted it; gave it a little more protection and pockets of holding to store her myriad of knives and swords. Mia did, so, love her blades.

With a bit more bravado, Mia stepped out of her apartment. She was on the street in minutes, not opting to chat with any of the valets or the doorman. Her car was already waiting for her, she did so love efficiency. Mia slid into the car, she had one hand in her jacket, idly, a finger slid along a blade's edge; a reminder. She pulled her hand from the pocket to watch the crimson drop as it slid down her finger. It practically glowed, moonlight caught in a vermilion prism. A part of her thought

she should not like the look of blood so much. Another part of her realized it didn't much matter. Being soft and kind was never a part of Mia. Maybe that was the cause of all of her problems? Well, if the world punished you for being hard, then fuck the world.

The smooth leather of the backseat yielded to her form, she smiled at the comfort. The car pulled out and started off, she checked the data, sent to her far talker console in the car. "Head to the factory, the...old mining base in the Canal." She said to her driver. The feel of acceleration pushed against her chest. She thought about Adriana again. Her hand hovered over the keys on the console, she COULD call her for help. She could...it would be well within reason to.

A magi is always an asset to have on such a mission; and Adriana is the best she's seen in a long time. She had the teeth and will to do what needs doing. No. That would be a stupid idea. Mia was many things, but she was not stupid. Ok, so Adriana was out, Miss stars and sunshine was out of the picture. She could do fine on her own. Mia let out a sigh as she deduced that she was summoned specifically on her own to do this—getting help might invoke punishments she didn't want—she kept to the plan.

Game time. She had to compile and prepare her mind for this. They were expecting her, that she was certain of. Which means she had to expect them to expect her. Which means that both her and those traitors were going to be dancing around a whirlpool trying to out-think each other: She should sneak, but they'll expect that, probably trap the unusual points

of entry. Then she should go direct, but then they expect that, reinforcing the main entry. If she had time, she'd wait them out; but Mia specifically lacked time. Her scheming was interrupted with a loud, sharp ping. Another message:

»» The lord requires you to recover what they stole as well. You cannot touch it directly, cover it up and bring it to her.

That was new. Mia had never actually done jobs quite like this; she was usually just the stabber. Maybe scene cleaning and information extraction, but that's it.

»» What?

The keys always seemed to clack in a different cadence, one of annoyance, as Mia typed the sharp response.

»» You heard me. This object is a small cask. It should be there. This is a very vital, but dangerous item.

Mia sat back. "Oh great..." She snorted aloud. "What's inside, the little baby body of some bizarre noble!?" Her hand drifted over the keys, part of her wanted to send that little smart-ass barb. But again, she remembered who might be watching. She muttered under her breath: "I don't want to know, why am I even wondering!?"

After sending a more formal affirmative response, Mia hesitated; this was a complication, it was new. Complications threw monkey wrenches into plans. She'd have to be careful she didn't get brained on this one. With fingers pinched to

temples, she sighed again.

It's fine.

It shouldn't be too much of a problem; but something about it made her hesitate. Mia's breath danced on her lips, she eventually let go of her hesitation. This was a new factor—one that she could adapt to—it's not like she wasn't used to being flexible. Despite all of these internal reassurances, something tugged at her. Worry: 'Shit Mia, that's so unbecoming' she thought to herself.

The fact that they were holed up in Nummari territory told Mia that these morons were even more desperate than she thought at first. They must know that staying still will bring hell down on them. So, were they waiting for someone like her to come to them as part of their plan? Or was this just the usual stupidity the greedy showed?

Her thoughts chased themselves in frantic circles, again. Mia noted with dismay. She had to stamp that nasty habit out—it served no use. Her car came to a stop, about a block away from the target location. It appeared to be a safe house, at least that's what her intel said. Mia fluffed her hair as she smoothly stepped out of the car. The streets were wet from a rain that fell earlier, a rain she didn't recall. Idly, Mia's mind tried to collect her observations from the gala to her home, the ride of shame; but she couldn't remember anything really. Her mind was too busy sorting out how to feel about recent events. Now,

things were clearer.

She remembered the rain.

Cold air warmed in her lungs as she drew in a breath. Her steps took her down the street. A slam of a door, rev of an engine; and she was on her own. Just as Mia needed it to be, just as she deserved it to be. Alone, in the night, with blood that needed letting.

This district of the city was poor and run down, it was actually the neighborhood across from Adriana's. How very devious, she was being sent so close to where her entanglement likely was. Mia bit her cheek so hard she tasted blood; why did it have to come back to Adriana all the time? Mia curled her anger into itself, she'd need to in just a short while. Back on task, the general state of the surrounding area made this ideal: There are less patrols here, so she didn't need to worry about interlopers that got in the way.

The appointed site; a five-story building that appeared to have been a business residence a time long ago, stood before her. Now, however, it was boarded up—left to rot. Mia knew the truth of it though: It was a safe house purchased by the Nummari family and outfitted with the basic creature comforts. Perfect for an operative that might need to lay low, or if one that had need to shake off excess heat. Mia had spent a few nights in one of these places a little while back. It was less than fun.

She rounded a corner and stepped into the alley that cut

between two buildings. Flipping a knife out into her hand, Mia started to pry one of the windows open. Every few moments, she stopped and listened for any movements inside. Nothing. With one last jerk she pried the window open enough to slip in. Flipping up and sliding through the cracked open window, Mia landed softly. She was very good at being quiet.

She grinned as she saw the chunk of wood with nails driven through it, rested on the floor right under the window. So, they weren't total dumbasses. Good. Mia needed a good hunt tonight. With her natural agility and foresight, she'd expertly climbed in the window and around the trap.

"Ugh." She softly scoffed as she looked around her surroundings. Crouched under the window, a combination of moonlight and residual streetlight gave her enough illumination to see she was in a small bathroom. The sink looked filthy, everything else appeared to be battling it for the top spot of wretchedness. If someone had holed Mia up in a place like this, she'd have skinned them alive. The door was unlocked, and despite the general state the building appeared to be in, did not creak as she gently pushed it open.

Keen ears and sharp eyes guided her down a hallway, closet to her left and a living area to her right. It was in complete disarray, given the spread of clutter it was easy to see this wasn't where they were spending their time. She suppressed a scoff as the realization hit her: she'd have five floors of this crap to wade through.

It was going to be a long night.

Each floor was dirty and cluttered with wreckage. It was clear that even for a safe house, this place was decrepit. It must have been one of the less-active ones. Mia crouched in the shadows, listening for any movement or other distressing sounds. She pursed her lips. Footsteps echoed from the floor above, she slid her eyes closed, the darkness overtook her. The lack of visual distraction made her hearing sharpen. One target was above her, nearly directly above. Fourth floor for him; the rest seemed to be on the fifth. It sounded like three? Four? It was hard to ascertain exactly.

That was less than ideal. The easiest way this could have gone is to have them all lumped together, Mia was good at dealing with crowds. Having the targets spread out meant they had more time for them to mount a counter attack. However, this had to get done. In the grand plan for the evening, one down isn't so bad. She'd just have to deal with it on the fly. Man, that's been happening alot tonight. She really dealt with her whole 'pent up relationship' issue on the fly too, horny cunt. Mia could not help but chastise herself.

One problem at a time.

She stepped out from the shadows, crouching low and moving up the stairs as fast as she could. The marriage of urgency and stealth could often be the tipping point for a good stabber. She intended to remain the best at the art of stabbage.

At the top of the stairs, she spied a shadow in the room across the hall. Mia sucked in a breath and broke into a dash, drawing her sabre and dagger in a flash. She didn't bother with subtly

nor sneaking, she simply launched herself at the first target she had. He was rummaging around in a cupboard and barely had time to turn around. Eyes white, slivers of alabaster in the dark. The tip of her dagger drove into his clavicle, sinking past bone and into the ribcage. He gripped Mia's waist as she landed on him, an attempt to throw her off with the momentum she brought. It didn't work, as she clung into him with a steel grip. Mia grunted as she tried to angle her sword for a second impalement.

Strong arms and the will to live won over angle and leverage. Mia felt the world explode into stars and searing lines as she hit the wall. A twist of her left hand and she yanked back, tearing his rib cage open. Steel severed flesh and bone and she was met with a torrent of blood. Thank the Founders for magically-augmented weapons; plus, her own natural strength. Mia had to turn her head to the side as the body slumped against the wall, pinning her to it. She slid with it down to the floor. Loud footsteps were drawing closer, good.

"Hey what the hells is going on he—" A voice called out, interrupted— rather rudely— by Mia tossing her knife into his throat. She kicked the corpse off of her, sprung up and rolled out the door. A flick of steel and tendons were severed dropping the second to the floor. In case he survives the steel in his throat, she can't have him walking around. She got to her feet and spotted the last two coming down the stairs. So, it was four. Hmm, she needed to trust her ears more. However.

It was a microsecond too late that she noticed the crossbow.

At first she thought someone had slammed her into a carriage, her side rocked and she spun from the impact. Of course, she knew she'd just been shot, hence the rolling with it. Her jacket managed to absorb most of the impact, but she still felt the burning jolt from her shoulder, the bolt having lodged in her arm. With how powerful crossbows could get, she was thankful it hadn't torn the limb clean off. Curse the founders for magically-augmented weapons. Her breath returned, and movement came to her. She dashed at them, noting the crossbow man who was engaged in frantic reloading.

Her snarl reverberated in her throat. In the middle of her charge, she slipped her good hand into her jacket and drew a cleaver. With the weight of steel, and the added inertia she built up she brought all to bear on the one who hurt her. The heavy blade chopped along the side of the crossbow, splitting string and bow alike, coming to rest in the man's guts. The arm raised in panic to fend off the attack was also hacked clean through. Mia had slaughter in sight, she was channeling the strength that often brought fear onto her kin. With her killing implement lodged in someone, and speed being a matter, Mia didn't bother pulling it out for another strike. A resounding thud shattered her focus, acting on instinct, she pushed off from the stairs and collided with the last attacker.

He was big, and had his arms around her. It was easy to infer that the heavy impact she just felt was him hammering on her back. Fucking rude. "Fuck you!" She had no idea why she shouted out; it was so useless. If her breath was on fire, her muscles were lava. They burned with exertion, but all this had warmed her up—she was loose and ready to go. The pressure

from his bear hug felt like the building had collapsed on her, breath was stolen and her chest felt like it was going to cave in.

Mia crunched into a ball as best as she could given her restrictions, then jerked her back and head up and away from his arms. She felt the satisfying crunch of skull hitting nose. Cartilage rammed into bone, the pain was agony — she should know, she's had it happen often to her — Physics was so useful to know, she simply threw off his balance, caused him to tip forward, then used that to slam her head into his face.

He let out a gurgle and staggered back, hitting the wall. Mia pursued him, not giving him space or time to recover. She also didn't draw a weapon, simply slashed at his face and throat. She didn't care if she felt a nail snap, she wanted to make it hurt. With a savage snarl, she tore into him, the poor asshole falling onto his back. Her nails sunk deep and she ripped back with all her might. Throat, flesh and jugular and all tore back with her force, another gout of crimson gore splattered onto her. Mia could not help it, it was something deep within, she let out a wild howl of triumph.

“Oh founders, holy shit...please let me...” Above the roar of blood in her ears, Mia heard pleading. Coughing and gagging punctuated each prayer. With great effort — fueled entirely on adrenaline at this point — Mia rose to her feet. A warm gush of blood flowed down her chin and she smiled, she wasn't sure who's blood ended up in her mouth and she didn't care.

“Looks like I'm getting lucky twice in one night.” She growled,

as she reached into her jacket to select her weapon; her fingers brushed up against a cold steel handle. She smiled, wide and wild as she drew the meat tenderizer from her pockets. It was a small, steel, brutal little device. Her soul sang for a song; percussion seemed the best instrument for it.

She approached, slowly. Her smile probably looked pretty bad; all things considered. Bloody teeth and a devil's grin. The man tried to flee, tried to crawl away, but it was too little too late. Mia might have been hurt a bit, but he was far worse off. She rolled him over with a booted foot, getting down and straddling him. "Show me what you got, daddy." She laughed and grabbed his lower jaw. The first swing hit the man's skull with a dry crack. He whimpered, and struggled, but her hand locked him in place. Even if her bad arm was weak, she was still able to easily hold his head still while her other arm worked.

The next crack was wetter, the skin already split and bleeding. Mia grinned a bloody-toothed grin and laid into him, each swing coming back with more and more blood, then skull, then brains. Eventually, after what felt like ages of indulging herself, she stopped.

Mia stood and looked over to her shoulder. Oh right she forgot about the bolt sticking out of it. "Fucker!" she said, professional to the end; Mia reached up, and after a second of hesitation, snapped the bolt off. It would be—bad to try to yank it out. Sadly, she'd have to deal with it later; at least this would let her move around without the bolt's end catching on anything. She doubled over as the electric surge tore down her back. It took a good few seconds for Mia to find her breath

again. “Fucker!” She added, intellectually.

It was a long, painful climb to the top of the building. Each step up the stairs was agony. Mia got along on curses and obscenities in order to fuel her body’s mechanics after the adrenaline wore off. Oh, how sweet it was to have that fire running through your veins. Only to have to wear off and leave you feeling like a puppet with strings cut. She could taste copper in her mouth, spitting it out didn’t do much to alleviate the flavor. It wasn’t so much that the taste of blood repulsed her; rather, it made her crave more of it. ‘Founders above, Mia’ she thought to herself. ‘Can I get anymore screwed up?’ Well, at least she was aware of it—small victories and all.

The fifth floor was a bit more cleared out than the other floors; they seemed to have stored most of the actual supplies up here. Maybe to escape the stink of the lower floors. Upon checking the bathroom, Mia surmised that these were NOT clean freaks. She was going to require several baths and showers after this mission. Aside from being a filthy mess, one other thing was clear about this floor; The cask was not on it.

She checked the cupboards, the beds, the couches, and rotten chairs. She checked between the walls and pulled up any floor board that was remotely loose; still nothing. Mia’s curses turned into gouts of profanity as her desperation grew. Each floor, she scoured and ripped apart, each pile of trash she frantically dug through. She was covered in filth and more than a bit of excrement by the time she was done. She was sore, tired, her shoulder went past throbbing and was now burning with pain, and she could barely move.

Mia was going to return to Lord Nummari empty handed.

The thought struck her with more force than the crossbow. She felt her mouth go dry as she forced open the door and stumbled out onto the street. It was raining. Hard. She felt none of it as the realization struck her. Founders, she'd have to return to her having failed the mission. Mia's blood was ice, her throat raw, her head filled with rotten clouds. Her energy was quickly leaving her, what little she had left after the murder was eaten up with frantic searching. And now, she was hitting that wall beyond the wall. Her car was waiting just down the street, she barely made it into the backseat before she felt her final jolt of energy use up. Her limbs were steel-encased. Cheap iron that was overly heavy and too weak. "I need..." she coughed. "T-ugh, fuck-take me to the Nummari estate. The status of th-the m-mission."

Mia's voice felt so distant: It was weird, almost like she was standing far away and hearing it echo down an alley. She saw white hair and a warm gold orb. Dammit, even when she was bleeding out and exhausted, Adriana would not leave her in peace. Damn witch, damn her to hell. When she burns up from the Lord's wraith, she decided her last words were going to be 'fuck you, Adriana.' Mia snorted out a laugh at that, sliding down onto her side as the world fell away from her, a dark pool consumed and overtook her senses.

7

Quest Urgent

Threads and ribbons, threads and ribbons. Movement so silken, touching flax and cotton. She remembered how it felt to touch new cloth, to find such a rare and treasured object such as an unsullied shirt, or a pristine pair of pants. One time, she found a dress; the finest sheen on the material she'd ever beheld.

It was stolen from her in a day.

Mia learned then that you have to fight for what is yours. You have to punch and kick and scrape. The world spits in your face and you bark back. Bear fangs, snarl and roar. That the world never hands you anything. Nothing is free and nothing is truly given without cost. Even the love she had for Adriana was an expectation of safety and softness returned. It was an imperfect arrangement; one that they both desired. In that time.

She was adrift right now. In a soft warmed hazy fluid world.

It stretched out for as far as the eyes could see, first a hazy black overcoming everything. Then the deep blues and dark vermilions spilled into her world. This was her entire universe now; safe and warm. Soft. Nothing in her life was soft. Mia was not soft. Mia was all blade and edge. She was a wall that waves broke on. She was the rock tossed in anger. A balled up fist and bursting veins.

Mia tried to look around, to see the source of the red, the cause of the blue. Her vision was so clouded though it made it hard to make anything out. Dark shapes moved towards her and she struggled to get away. But she felt the fluid hardening, encapsulating her. Her limbs felt like they weighed a tonne, she couldn't move nor get purchase. The shapes closed in and wrapped around her. She let out a startled gasp.

"Damn it girl, stop fighting. OW! She bit me!" A voice tore through her little world, severing each little strand and draining the blackness from it. Light rushed to her and she let out a gasp.

Mia was on all fours, the ground was cold, it was stone. Cold smooth stone. Again, forms came to her and lifted her up. She barely registered it, but she was sat on something. "Dammit, Mia. Mia?" A face pressed itself into her view. Worn features, angular shape, eyes of emerald set in black pools.

"Hey doc." She managed to mutter. "Where am I?"

Of course the Nummari family—being as well-funded and powerful as they were—had a doctor. They actually had a

full medical staff on hand for the Lord and her daughter's every need. But they also had a sawbones for the house agents who befell danger. Or, in the case of Mia, stitching her back together after nights like tonight. "Dr. Farrow. How's it going?" The older woman was inspecting Mia's wound, well the more severe one. She simply hummed; a common habit when she concentrated.

"You bit me." Came her reply. Mia shrugged and rolled her eyes; it wasn't like Farrow hadn't done anything worse to her.

"I was out of it, I was very out of it, so like, sorry doc I won't do it again. Unless you ask." That got a laugh from the busy doctor, Mia's victory was short-lived as she felt a swab jammed into the wound. "Ah! Fuck! come on; WARN me next time!" Mia protested, her hand itched to clutch at her wound. She knew however, that her hands were filthy. The more she touched things, the more she risked infection. Her gaze flitted from her own ruined arm to the Doctor, who was putting the sample of Mia's wound-blood under a microscope. "Doc, doc....doctor!" She said in a sing song voice. "Are you going talk, or do I need to come over and play with you a bit to get your attention!?"

The granite expression she received told Mia something was up. "You've caught a little something, Mia." Dr. Farrow said, her voice a knife-edge. "Looks like those boys were packing a few curses on their weapons." She shifted over to a large cabinet with glass doors. The frame was stainless steel, like most of the furnishings in the room. Now that Mia looked around, it was clear where she was: the 'lower' medical bay of

the manor. Not the nice, fancy one upstairs, but the one for all the agents and muscle: basic, bare-bones, and barely pretty. The floor was cold stone and tile, the ceiling; grey and drab. All the equipment looked like it had seen better days—at least she was comforted with the knowledge that she was in good hands.

Dr. Farrow was a smart women—a brilliant doctor—too bad she fell on the wrong side of the Nummari family. Then again, a life in debt is not the worse fate. Mia watched Farrow's tail lash a bit as she dug around the cabinet. It was funny, Mia never even knew her first name, only the title she held. Her slender frame belied a resilience that everyone in this life had; but she was a step above. Mia had never seen her so much as crack a millimeter. Even when patching together two bleeding kids. She tried not to roll that thought around too much in her mind.

The pain was too great.

“Oh, shit....uh oops?” Mia shrugged, regret over the motion was overpowered by the wave of pain. She opted not to show it. Mia rather loved being tougher than her peers, she looked like something to be used only for her beauty. It gave her pride she had thorns. “Guess I should have used protection.” Movement brought her from her dark corner, Mia glanced up to see Dr. Farrow filling a syringe. This was expected, but still not wanted. “Dammit doc, are you going to stick me with that thing?”

Dr. Farrow snorted “Mia, you’ve been stabbed like, three

times tonight alone.” She removed the needle from the bottle and worked out any air. “You’re not even going to feel this. Also it’s required; the curse will spread through your whole body in about a day. This’ll stop it.”

“Heh, eh...four times if we are talking about a different kind of penetration.” Another laugh, she was doing really well tonight. That is, until Dr. Farrow jammed the needle into her neck. Icy fluidity pulsed through her veins the shock was so great she had no breath for a second. “Gah, fucking!” She balled her hands into fists, only when the needle was pulled out did she manage to relax.

Instincts uncontrolled, Mia rubbed at her neck where the needle cored deep. To her dismay, it already felt better. The lingering sluggishness lifted its heavy embrace on her. She didn’t even realize the bolt that she took was cursed. Shit. This was the problem with getting such a quick and dirty job, she hated that she didn’t have the time to scope the place out and get the information she wanted before going in.

“You’re just lucky it was so minimal. By the way, your jacket is fine, as usual.” Dr. Farrow gestured to Mia’s jacket, hanging on a hook nearby. “The enchantments on this thing are damned impressive. Adriana could have been an enchanter, if the world was fair.” She was right, even with the way the world is—with magic just reawakening—Adriana was so good at making enchantments stick.

“Eh, she always wanted to be something boring and scholarly. Work a job, come home to a wife. Founders...she’d blab about

that all the fucking time.” Rancid pain curled up in Mia’s guts, steel wires turning flesh into a wet mulch. Damn that witch, damn her to every hell that exists.

“Still holding a flame for her, huh?” The doctor’s voice sliced through the bloody wool of Mia’s tangled thoughts, she shook her head lightly. Mia groaned and rubbed her face as she tried to get rid of all of this fucking baggage. She was like, an expert with handling baggage lately. She didn’t need to talk about this, she didn’t need to ‘heal and get better’ she needed roughly forty gallons of good whiskey and a year to sleep it off.

“Doc, I really don’t need my head searched; stitch up the body portion of me and send me on my way? If you could be so damned kind.” The older woman laughed a bit, grabbing a bottle and handing it to her. “What’s this?” Mia inquired.

“Booze: Cheap. Drink some and you’ll thank me. Lord Nummari told me to stitch you up with no medicine; but she didn’t say anything about a little ‘numbing agent’, so drink up.” Mia looked at the bottle. “Best I can do.” The doctor mumbled under her breath. The defiance of orders was impressive, a devil’s dance to work around them. Mia grinned and gripped the bottle.

“I never turn down a doctor’s advice.” She said, pulling out the cork with her teeth. She spat it out and took a long pull from the bottle. It tasted like piss and medicine. Mia coughed and gagged as she swallowed. “Ugh, fuck what IS this!?”

"I said it was cheap-" Dr. Farrow had already set to her task; the needle poked ice-cold holes in Mia. Causing her winces to distract from the fowl taste of booze. However, the conversation and drink made fast work. And after the third or fourth swig she felt nothing. "-never said it was good." She mumbled, her concentration was entirely focused on the task at hand. Mia could only nod at her words, the booze's numbing haze was nice. Mia's thoughts had been way too busy as of late, she wished she could tone it all down; not think for just one day. She wished that all she had to do for a long stretch of time was sleep, eat and fuck. But, the world was far too harsh to give her time off. No rest for the vile and all that.

Metallic sharp snips, a mumbled word of 'done', and Mia hopped off the examination table. She winced, that was not fun. The jolts of pain only helped her to stay awake, stay focused though.

Upsides.

Dr. Farrow placed a padded bandage over the wound and wrapped it up. Mia still felt like shit, but she felt less like shit. "There's a sink in the corner, you can get cleaned up. Get all that shit off-" She paused. "-both figurative and literal. I got some clean clothes for you, it isn't your style; but you'll live."

Mia groaned as she stripped off the stockings and panties she had on, they were both unsalvageable. She staggered over to the sink and turned one of the taps. A gurgling, pathetic

slosh of cold water came out. It smelled strongly of iron. It wasn't like her shower back home, but it was preferable to being caked in shit and blood. Altogether, an improvement. Besides it wasn't like Mia had been through worse when she was younger. The only added challenge here was the injured arm.

She looked over her nails: One was outright broken, actually that was two, upon closer inspection. Her right index and thumb nails were broken off painfully. She winced and started to wash her hands off, jagged chunks of flesh mingled with all the blood. It took quite a bit of scrubbing. Mia looked down at herself as she worked, distracted. All down her neck and front, caked, dried blood had crusted into a horrible jagged wedge between her breasts. "Check it out, Doc." She smooshed her boobs together. "I look like a horror character; kinda hot right?"

"Founders, Mia stop that! Now I'm gonna see it in my nightmares!" Dr. Farrow said with an exasperated groan.

"Or wet dreams." Mia cackled, returned her gaze to the mirror, and kept washing. The blood in her hair needed a more thorough clean, but it would do for now. She tied it back to keep it out of her way as she worked. A sharp glare tossed her way from time to time informed Mia that Dr. Farrow wanted her to finish. Mia opted to rinse herself off quickly and with as little of it ending up on the tiled floor as possible. Luckily, this was a shit-basement and there were drains in the floors. Still, she felt a pang of guilt when she stepped back and saw the little sink area looked as if it had been mauled to death.

Coppery stains clung to the sink and the floor had a fair bit of filth on it.

She turned away from the scene and dressed.

Cheap slacks, ill-fitting underwear and a blouse that was past its prime. Mia looped the belt around her waist and secured it, at least her pants wouldn't fall down while she was being reamed by Lord Nummari. She walked over to the hook where her jacket hung and slid it on. The smooth, soft leather felt like home to her finger tips. The fluff along collar snugged against her nicely. She closed her eyes and remembered Adriana's arms.

This time, out of all the times it happened, she didn't push the feelings away. She let her brain dredge up everything: the want, the urge, the need to be in her arms again. It hurt like hell, hurt worse than the hole in her arm. She sighed and opened her eyes.

"Alright, I'm ready."

The main hall of the Nummari estate was, by design, meant to intimidate: Large vaulted ceilings, a grand staircase, the largest fireplace that Mia had ever seen; all of it draped in the finest golds, marble, and crimson cloth. It's all pretty standard once you get used to the ruling elite. They were all about impressions.

Lord Nummari was the extreme case of that.

Mia always rightly assumed most nobles were the kind of weak, limp-wrist socialites that really had no power. They had rule of law, they had gold. But they had no guts. Not claws of their own. Everything was hired help. However, the ruler of the Nummari family was something else. She was powerful, actually powerful. Mia had never seen anyone like her before, and she highly suspected that she'd never see another like her again.

By a large margin, Mia wasn't an expert on finger-wigglers. However, she knew that it was kind of hard to do. One thing that set most good magi apart from the bad, they knew when to quit. They knew what their limits were. The bad ones burned themselves out, the good ones worked around it. The rare few, the actual great magi, well, they simply didn't have limits; Lord Nummari was one of those.

There were times in her early life that Mia had been afraid. Many many times. Boys made her afraid: the violence in their eyes and seemingly boundless appetite for suffering. The gangs made her afraid, the night did. When she grew up she murdered her fears. She stormed the walls and tore down castles—she made herself the monster in the shadows—and through all that she was still afraid of one thing: Lord Nummari.

She was cruel, she was calculating, and worst of all she had the might to back it up. Mia had seen her turn someone to ash in a second. She'd seen her melt fucking steel with her flames.

She'd seen what happened to those who failed Lord Nummari. When she was led into this massive, great hall; Mia was sure as the sunrise she was going to die.

Standing before the Lord, who was she sat on a chair that cost more than her car, Mia held her breath. She didn't dare speak, she didn't dare breath. She was too focused on steeling herself against the agony she knew would consume her. Instead, a voice was her anchor out of panic.

"Mia, my dear? You can open your eyes now." the voice was deep, smooth, and rich. So rich it felt like she was paying through the nose just to listen to it. Mia opened her eyes again, she wasn't even aware she had squeezed them shut. Eversei Nummari— lord of the Nummari family and all that— sat in front of her, even sitting she was towering above Mia. For Eversei was massive. She as easily seven foot tall, finely-sculpted muscles. Alabaster skin and black eyes; her hair was cut shorter than the last time they spoke, it was still dark like her nails and lips. "I only want to talk, I swear to you, child." Mia wasn't sure if she nodded, or not, but she forced her body to make some affirmative sign. Whatever it was, Eversei rose from her chair.

In two strides she was right in front of Mia; tall as a mountain. Mia had to crane her neck to look up at her, Nummari did her a favor and bent down so they were eye to eye. Lord Eversei placed a long finger under Mia's throat, forcing her to tilt her head back further. A sharp nail scraped her skin. Mia became keenly aware of the blood surging just under the flesh, the point of the nail amplifying its pulse. Lord Numari's

eyes became Mia's entire universe as they gaze into her. The look was impassive, appraising, mildly predatory. Black orbs she felt herself drawn to drown in. "You did good work this evening, we had our people go over the safe house now that you dispatched those traitors." She hummed in thought, a sepulchral sound.

"We lack the cask though." A Mia's face was cupped in massive hands. Claws and eyes, she was staring into the wolf's mouth. "You were told to retrieve it and it was not there. Hmm, now, we can't blame that on you can we?" Her voice turned sweet, a nectar so saccharine that it nearly convinced Mia she wasn't in danger. She tried to nod, force herself to move; but to no avail. Lord Numari leaned in close "Can't you talk, little one?"

"I-I'm sorry my lord." Ash tumbled from her mouth, the words like coarse detritus. The sense of panic was fading, it was being replaced with pure adrenaline. Mia had no idea how much of that stuff her body could make, she seemed like she'd been pumping it all night. Her muscles were going to ache in the morning—whenever the hell that was going to come. Her eyes flicked about, what time was it? "I tried to look everywhere for it—"

She was cut off by Eversei. "Shhh, it's OK my dear. You have not failed me. The agent who sent you the false information? Maybe he has, but not you Mia. Never you." She assured her and while the words might have soothed, the threat that laced underneath was hard to ignore. "I do need you on this case. You are my best and brightest. Even the magi who work for me? Their use is so much more limited than yours." She

smiled, the teeth as blades to Mia. Many parts of Lord Eversei were as terrifying as they were appealing.

“I know that you have that one under your command: Adriana. She is talented, her blood is strong and she reeks of magic. She also has a false front job in the magical trade. She could be of help. I need you to recover this for me, my dear. I shall make sure the doctor gives you our best tonics, I am going to demand you rest tomorrow, then when you can get started I suggest you do.” She turned away from Mia rising to her full height. “She still matters to you, doesn’t she?”

“I’m sorry?” Mia’s veins ran from hot to cold in a nanosecond.

“She does. Well...if you do not bring this cask to me in a week’s time. I shall kill her as you watch. I shall strip the flesh from Adriana as she begs for your help. I shall let her know before she dies that you failed her. Do you understand, Mia?” Her body was no longer in her control. Everything became so small, so unimportant. The distance between Mia’s face and her hands seemed to be a world’s length. It was unclear weather or not she nodded.

When Mia’s senses returned to her, she was shaking; sat on the steps of the servant’s entrance for the manor. Her gaze locked onto the night sky. Well, whatever sky they had in this city. Mia never really bothered to question if there was a sky past the upper plates that made up the Ultimacy. She had no idea how it looked like up there, could the Founders see the

sky? Were the stars just for them? Mia knew about stars, she'd heard about them from the caravans. Apparently, between the cities the world had a sky. She idly mulled over the idea of such an expanse. Was there a layer above the founders, another set of masters? She laughed at that thought: the universe being one huge, layered torrent of shit each way down.

She didn't realize it, but a cigarette had been stuck between her lips. Glowing ember snapped her attention to it. The bright flare cut through soft darkness as she sucked in a drag. "Looked like you could use that, Mia." Dr. Farrow sat beside her, a sliver of colour slicing across her peripheral vision. Mia didn't bother to turn her head, it was as if it was impossible to even think of moving her neck muscles. Signals fired, but they seemed to not be received. With great effort, Mia reached up to draw the cigarette away from her lips, letting out a gout of smoke as she exhaled.

"That's the truth, Doc." She said quietly. "That could have gone better."

"Could have gone worse." She countered; the flick of metal clicked in the early-morning air as she lit her own cigarette. "You're still alive." Mia could not help but agree with that. She as alive, that's what she did: Survive. Even when it meant casting Adriana aside to climb the ladder. Her gut twisted a bit painfully.

"Yeah, I'd rather have a good lay and bottle of wine than this though,"

“You’d always rather have that than anything, Mia.” Dr. Farrow snorted out a laugh. Mia coughed softly and took another drag.

“She said I had today to rest, and she needed that thing back or...” Her voice cut off. “I’ve already fucked Adriana over, now her life is in my hands. Fuck!” She scoffed and tried her best to reel her emotions in.

“Yeah...I heard that.” A slow exhale, Mia wasn’t sure why she found it to hard to look at Dr. Farrow. Maybe she just wanted someone close, but not present. “I don’t know what to say Mia you and her...it’s a dangerous life. And none of it’s your fault; you were practically born into it, surviving from one day to the next is a struggle.”

“Are you stating facts or giving me absolution?”

“Sorry. This isn’t a pity parade is it? Look, you’ll get this little box back, then you can move on to the next mission.”

“And the next, and the next.” Mia finally leaned back and glanced at Dr. Farrow. She looked pretty in the moonlight: Sharp features a slight nose, her eyes were so dark in the night it was as if there were simply a void where they should be. Dr. Farrow blew out some smoke watching it idly.

“That’s about the long and short of it...” She met Mia’s gaze, almost startling her with the suddenness of movement. “What you need to do, is stop running from what you want. In this life, if you can find a shred of happiness, you cling to it.” She gestured to her. “So...what’s making you happy? Not booze

and sex; actually happy.”

Mia tried to play it off, she looked away from her. It was too painful to say. She sucked on some more smoke. “You know the fucking answer.” She uttered.

“Then go get her, you idiot! I know shit went sour. But I also know how your god damned eyes light up when you say her name. That doesn’t come around often, not for people in our life.”

“This is one of those times-“ said Mia, around the cigarette in her lips. “-when I’m not a fan of the direction the conversation is taking.” A roll of her eyes, and Dr. Farrow scoffed. She stood after slapping her hands on her knees.

“Fine, I never wanted to get into the habit of talking to walls. I learned my damned lesson years ago not to do that.” She made a motion to turn and head back into the manor.

“I’ll never be to her what she is to me: A shining star, a single cause, a consuming force.” Mia spoke so suddenly she seemed to startle herself. She pulled out the cigarette and flicked ash off, watching as the bright stars fade to dark. “For years, I cried over that fact. I begged the Founders to make her love me the same but...” She shook her head, trying to hold in the choke of tears. “I think now I understand that maybe I don’t need that. Maybe the feelings not being returned; it’s all part of things. I deserve; it you know? This is like the Founders kicking my ass, their revenge.” She flopped her hands up to the sky, then let them fall back into her lap. “I can love

her, without hurting her. But if she loves me, that gives me a chance to let her down again.” The memories that she’d been forcing down all night bubbled up to the surface—if just a bit—and she had to turn her head down to ignore them. “If that kind of pain is my price to keep her safe; I can live with it.”

“That ain’t love, Mia.” Dr. Farrow had stopped and turned to her; she could hear it by the sound of the doctor’s heels. “That’s just you obsessing over the past. You can’t ever have it back.”

Mia stared mutely ahead. She really didn’t feel like pressing this—or any— point. She simply opted to do what she always did when confronted with a problem she didn’t want to deal with: “Like doing your mom.” Perfect.

Dr. Farrow sighed, glasses clinking together echoed from behind Mia. “Those are the tonics you’ve been permitted to use. Take one vial in the morning, the other before bed tonight. The tin of cream you apply to the wound till you run out. If you’re not going to listen to my relationship advice, at least take the medical.”

Everything about the night could be firmly categorized as ‘a shit show.’ That much was clear to Mia, she had to at least give herself credit for her sharp analytical skills at figuring that out. The rest of her trip home was a blur, much like her entire time at the manor. There was something about the main hall that

always seemed off to her. It was like you went in and barely remembered what happened. Any time Mia tried to drag her mind back to a memory of that place it seemed to slough right out of her brain.

The only time the fog seemed to lift was when Mia stumbled through the threshold of her home. Everything was the same as she left it; even the flicker of light emitted from her far-talker console. She groaned and batted at it. "Your fault." She mumbled, heading over to her fridge to get something to drink. Thankfully, she had some beer. Well to be truthful that was about all she had in there.

Mia forced herself out of the cheap clothes she had been provided, may they never stain her home no more. The temptation to toss them out the window was strong; she resisted and instead shoved them in a box. When she could, she tossed any older crap she didn't need to drop it off at the orphanage. Damn, she remembered how excited all the kids were to get donations. Her and Adri had to scramble to get something for themselves.

"Ugh, fuck you!" She threw up a hand and flipped off...the world? The cosmos? She wasn't sure. All Mia knew was that she had enough of the past for one day. She flopped onto the couch and popped the cap on her bottle. Taking a deep, much-needed swig of beer, Mia let out a burp and leaned her head back. Tonight was ironically, supposed to be a night for her own little agenda, to dig up some of her distant-distant past, not retread tired ground of her and Adriana.

And yet, it always came back to her didn't it?

Mia lazily tilted her head to look at the book she had set on her table. The small journal that may or may not contain vital information. She groaned and pushed up from her seat, drank more beer and picked it up. With another satisfied noise, she sat back down and flipped it open, holding the beer between her legs. The cold felt nice even if it was a chilly night. She flipped through pages of entries; most of it was boring, dealing with trade deals or 'today I had a bagel' sort of things.

That was until she came across what she had been hoping for. "Caravan 1120 met today. Traded spices. Wind dancer clan was growing, showed off their new child." She checked the date, that confirmed with whatever records she could find. The dates lined up and her contact's information was consistent. This might be it; this could actually be the lead she needed. After rushing to her desk to grab a small notebook, she added to the information already in there, jotting down the relevant names and dates. Mia set the book aside and finished her beer. Finally, she glanced over to the tonics. "Fuck....no rest for the wicked." She mumbled and grabbed the small bag.

A quick trip to the bathroom to slather the reeking ointment on her wound, then a re-bandaging. She uncorked the first vial and downed it. More vile than vial, she choked as the sizzling liquid drained into her gut. "Argh, fuck!" She clutched at the pristine marble counter and waited for the pain to pass through her. Healing magic was always a horrid affair—unless you paid through the nose for it. These tonics were some of the higher-end stuff, but they still tasted like hell's backwash.

The challenge was not spitting it up, and also holding it down for the thirty or so seconds it took for the healing to take effect. She was already dreading her later dose. With a few grunts of pain, she applied the tincture-sludge that Dr. Farrow had told her to.

Mia was finally able to actually see and hear again. Her throat burned; but another bottle of beer took care of that. Glad that she'd picked such things up. Unlike her counterpart, Mia was always prepared. She shopped regularly, she worked out, she read just enough. She was well-fed, she maintained social contacts, she maintained a facade. She lived well and she lived loudly. It was painted glass though, under which was hiding sludge and shit.

To say that she was doing well would be a lie. Mia really wasn't doing well, she was surviving. As she flopped back onto the couch, and drank another half bottle, she came to realize that maybe survival wasn't the be all and end all that it should be. Dr. Farrow was right and that was a bitch of a thing for the universe to toss at her. Fat lot of good that realization did for her though. What was she supposed to do? Get married, shit out babies and be a soft little mother? Was that even what she wanted? Her head lolled to the side and she, again, looked out at the night sky. Alcohol and contemplation go hand in hand.

As she considered where exactly she stood in life, Mia realized that she was far too sober for this. She also decided that future her could pay the price; Mia was sick of being careful and planning out every step. Much like most of the night, sometimes improvisation was key. That and just saying 'fuck

it'. She rose from the couch again, swearing this was the last time. She strode over to the small cabinet by the sink and opened it, bottles of liquor and wine stood before her, fingers brushed a small wine bottle. Queasiness rose up as she remembered why she bought that. "For you and I baby, when I finally pop the question." She forced her eyes closed and snatch the bottle of amber fluid next to it.

Mia practically ripped the cork out with her teeth and downed a few mouthfuls before the pain started to mercifully fade. The light caught her eye, from the window a shimmering dance, slices of star light. She walked towards her window and opened it. It was just a torchlight reflected on a puddle of filth on the street.

She laughed.

"Fuck you!" She yelled, jamming her finger into the aether as if she had a collar to jab. "Fuck you Nummari! FUCK YOU ADRIANA!" Mia drank a bit more. "You took my heart and gave it back and I don't fucking care!" Suddenly, the floor rose up to greet her, planting a high-speed kiss on her cheek. Mia laughed and hiccuped a sob. She didn't want to see or hear anymore, her limbs folded into a ball and she buried her head in her hands.

Fuck this thrice-damned city.

Grinding Gears

Waking up was always a difficult affair. While minds are eager to get started on the day, (and of course the desire for a new puzzle tugs at one urgently), the failure of the evening always weighs one down. Adriana was such a person, she did not want to wake and face the day. Especially not today. She didn't remember getting into bed, she stumbled home and collapsed perhaps—it was possible Eislia brought her to bed—she couldn't say for sure.

Consciousness dragged her back kicking and screaming from soft dreams. Silk gave way to barbs; consciousness pressed on Adriana's brow, she forced her eyes open. Adriana was pressed against Eislia—in bed. Well, that was to be expected, Eislia always seemed to be a hugger. Not that Adriana disliked hugs, she enjoyed them, it was just that it was hard to allow herself to enjoy anything this morning. After what she did with Mia last night, Founders, it really happened. Panic clenched her chest, she gripped the cloth of Eislia's shirt tightly.

“I’m...so sorry.” From Adriana’s throat squeezed a flaccid apology. Those lovely large arms wrapped around her, she could feel Eislia breathing, her heart. All so calm. There was a slight skip, then a clearing of her throat, before Eislia responded:

“I am...hmmm...sorry for what?” She asked, the pause in the air seemed to be Eislia’s attempt to gather her words. Or at least that’s what Adriana thought. How did Eislia not even suspect? The state of her clothes, the lipstick on her, the messed hair and the fact that Adriana practically stank of sex. Or did Eislia need Adriana to confess it? That made sense—it was the right thing to do after all. She tightened up a bit, her spine coiling.

“I...Mia and I we, had sex last night.” The words, spoken so quietly, Adriana feared Eislia didn’t hear them. She felt the large arms shift, not tighten. There was no bearing of anger, or violence, nor outrage. However, she could detect the slightest feelings of tension. Eventually, Adriana looked up to meet Eislia’s gaze. The (much) larger woman looked down at her with confusion on her features. She didn’t look mad; her eyes held only the usual serenity within.

“I don’t understand why you are telling me this...i-isn’t that a private affair? Or, is that something that should be broadcast?” Adriana had to sit up in bed, her spine contracted with hydraulic force. She scoffed and shook her head. A hand rested on her back. “Adriana...you know that I am new here, and all of this. All of it is so new to me. I know that I want to be close with you, yet I lack the tools to...Are you upset with

me?”

“Upset? No! I....Eislia, I was unfaithful to you! I slept with another woman!” tingling warmth crept up Adriana’s chest and neck, this was not going how she thought it would.

“Wait, you slept with her now? I thought you had-” She paused and nodded. “Ah, a saying...yes.” Eislia must have read the lines of confusion clearly written on Adriana’s face, because she cleared her throat and tried again: “Yet, we have not made some kind of—exclusivity pact—have we?”

“I....we did say that we wish to...” Adriana sputtered. “...explore a relationship, yes?”

“Well...this is what I wanted.” Eislia said, she sat up to wrap her arms around Adriana again. Heat flashed across her paper skin, the arms were so warm, so strong. A moment of indulgence and she leaned into the touch, then blinked up into her eyes.

“It’s what I wanted too, I want to be a good partner to you. In my culture that generally involves...a sort of monogamy?.” Adriana was made starkly aware of how little she knew about all of this, it was just her and Mia fumbling around. Neither of them were taught or guided in how relationships worked, or what should normal or not.

“But, why must that be? Is it enough to have your heart? To share a life. Why can there not be room for Mia? I might not understand her, but that is my view of her not yours.” Eislia

paused. "I have also barely met her, outside of a professional sense, that is." She let out a breath, Adriana had to sigh softly as she felt Eislia's chin rest on her head. It warmed her heart to feel that closeness. "You obviously have strong feelings for her." Eislia continued.

She had spoken a great many logical words. The coldness of it mingled with a warmth and concern Adriana hadn't felt in her entire life. A wide, gaping, yawning chasm of pain and anguish she thought she'd built walls around. Eislia's words were so soft, yet well-considered. Much like how she usually was. Such a strong spirit she must have had. Adriana wasn't sure she could ever reach such serenity herself.

Adriana had to carefully sort over these new developments. She wasn't used to any of this, and had been expecting a blow up. Anger might have been easier to process. "I think I understand." Adriana finally said softly. "But...at the time, I was unfaithful, as under my impression I had betrayed you, and willingly did so." She leaned further into the touch, as if she was so afraid that in this moment, Eislia would let her go.

"Then if you wish to be guilty over that, I cannot stop you. But I would much rather us move forward, Adriana. If you are asking for forgiveness, I already have given it. I only ask you to stop this cycle of guilt."

"I'm trying!" Adriana clenched up, the surge of anger ran hot nails up her spine, forced a gagged sob out of her. Fuck, she hadn't meant to be feeling so many things. It was completely out of her hands. She kept trying to control all

of these emotions—to marshal them in some way—but it was impossible. A penny in a dam’s leak. Every time Adriana thought had a lead on her emotions, they dashed ahead. Every time she thought she could hold them, they burst free.

Eislia, to her credit, simply wrapped her arms more tightly around Adriana. Something between them felt intangibly close. It was like Eislia could read her mind, though it was more likely she was very receptive to any of Adriana’s reactions. Yet again, her mind let no mystery dwell in it. The irony of the magi not believing in fantastic things did not escape her at this moment. Adriana let out a loud sigh, then pushed away from the embrace, not so much in rejection, but so that she could look up at Eislia. “Thank you for being patient with me, I have said this before...but thank you. I will try to allow myself these things you want me to have.”

The morning was wearing on no matter how much time their emotions and tribulations required. Life was beckoning at an alarming rate. Adriana needed to be out of bed and get to work. She didn’t have the luxury of lazing in bed and staring into Eislia’s eyes—such wonderful things they might be to gaze into. Thus, she had to force herself out of warm comforts and shed her clothes.

The giant of a woman rolled onto her side, and Adriana could feel her watching as she stripped off the now-wrinkled finery from the party. She hadn’t even had time to get into sleeping clothes, Adriana had been making a habit of that lately. Eislia hummed, that deep, resonant tone easy to pick up, even among the bustle of fabric. “I hope you take my words to

heart, but I also understand you are finished listening.”

“It’s not that.” Adriana said quickly. “It’s just that I have to get to work, it’s been an odd few days, I require a routine to calm my mind. Normalcy, I beseech thee.” Adriana chuckled and turned to look at Eislia, as if her smile was proof enough that things were ok.

Eislia’s own grin grew as she took in Adriana’s form and it was only then she realized she was standing naked, in the morning light, in front of someone. Adriana wasn’t much the type to do nudity. She’d been nude of course, in the shower, during lovemaking (sex if she was being honest). However, this was new for her. The warmth and affection that Eislia was showing, was capable of. It fell over Adriana’s form, a blanket of warmth. She trailed a hand up her own side. “Um...I suppose I got a bit carried away with changing, didn’t I?” A grin had worked her way onto her lips. How was this happening? So much has changed in so little time; but then again that is how life works.

One time, she thought her entire path had been charted, but things had changed. A small mistake, two souls too stubborn to admit. And things radically altered. Adriana rubbed her thumb against her finger. She composed herself a smile though, and tilted her head at Eislia. “Hmm, it might be more productive if you admired the kitchen, instead of me, so that we could both start the day with a meal?” That got Eislia’s attention. She snapped to and rose from the bed.

“Of course, it’s been quite the eventful past few days, hasn’t

it?" she said, padding over to the kitchen to begin her meal wizardry. Adriana's hands felt like rusty wires, pulling taut too many times. It was from last night. She had used a not-insignificant amount of magic, a fair deal of more esoteric spells, to boot. The cost made itself known as she continued to rub her thumb against her fingers. Any excess energy had worked its way out, but the muscles and nerves still left raw. Not as bad as it could be (not requiring any first aid, at the very least) still, concerning.

She stepped into the bathroom to wash and change so that Eislia and her could have a note of peace among the symphony that strummed between them. Tempest's fury ran through the air separating them. Adriana felt as if she could reach out and strum the currents. Once she got her suit on though, the mood shifted. At least, in Adriana's impression. She felt more grounded, her arms even seemed to stop hurting. She looked at herself in the mirror and smiled as she pulled her hair into an ordered shape. Everything slid over with ease.

The day seemed conquerable now.

In fact, as soon as she walked over to her desk to gather her usual accouterments, she was feeling as if the world was her oyster. Fingers slid over the fine copper of her staff. The wooden handle stained a dark, rich umber tone; brass buttons adorned one side, one to retract and the other to extend. It was very handy and useful in her line of work. Oftentimes, a stick in the right place with the right application of pressure did wonders. 'And it did save Mia.' She found herself heating up at the thought of her former partner. She needed to work

this out, and hey, maybe Eislia's advice was sound: Perhaps she did need to move to some other step of their interactions. A relationship? That seemed impossible to attain; a ship long sailed.

On the other hand, it was hard to ignore Mia's actions from the other night. The only problem was that that elf was very unlike Adriana: She could fuck anyone and feel nothing. Whereas Adriana had her feelings entangled in any fling she'd attempted. It's very likely that this was just Mia being...Mia.

With a sigh, she slid her staff into its familiar pocket in her jacket, along with her spell book. She hung her jacket on the hook however, but she could take some time to eat a proper meal. Adriana set herself down at the table, leaning over to watch Eislia cooking. She had on the sweats and sleeveless shirt they had purchased from the clothing store the other day. As usual, the woman towered over everything, but looked nice. In fact, she looked so regal in anything she wore; as if Eislia carried with her a dignity nothing could rob her of. Adriana had first-hand evidence that she held such airs even in rags.

It seemed as if Eislia was learning Adriana's habits, as what was set down before her was exactly to her tastes: A bowl of grains, a slice of pallid fruit, (she wasn't sure what it was) and a cup of coffee. "I'm sorry...uh, about the kitchen joke I was attempting humor." Her little confession only drew a curious expression from her roommate.

"Mmm? I didn't even notice, you were right...we both need to get started today." Eislia offered with her usual even-toned

baritone. Adriana perked a brow.

“Oh? And why is that? Have you found work?” To her query, she received a nod.

“I have been helping a few of the locals here with general duties. Some of these electrical systems are...poorly maintained.” She said, lifting the cup of her own coffee to take a sip.

“We’re on our own down here, Eislia. We haven’t had proper Spark Tech in this neighborhood in...some time.” She sat back, glancing out the window to the street below. “I confess that...I have not been the most outreaching lately. Things I have done...so poorly lately.” Adrian felt a pain at the side of her head, one which demanded a touch. Before she could reach up to rub her temple, Eislia had done the same to gently cup her face.

Her warm hand practically consumed Adriana, there was no panic nor concern that dwelt in Adriana’s heart. Only a fuzzy excitement. Eislia hummed and looked into her eye. “I understand, you have been hurt before...one day you will share it, just as one day I hope to share what I learned before I came here. If I can.” She sat back in her chair and ate a spoonful of grains. “At any rate, yes. I am helping around the community, and in exchange many of the neighbors have helped me.” She gestured to the little jar with silvers and coppers piled in it. “Favors as well as more material payments have been certainly appreciated.” Her voice, a deep timber, so wonderfully grounding. Adrian felt like she could pass through any storm with that voice as a guide.

“Well, if I were any creaky floorboards or clogged drains, I’d be quaking in terror right now.” Adriana hoped that her smirk conveyed the humor of her words. The idea of using them to hurt Eislia was as repulsive as ash in the mouth. Adriana noted that she hadn’t had much of her food left. It was strange; how easily and quickly Eislia had altered her cooking to her tastes. It was nice, smooth and simple, but also filling. She finished off the last sip of coffee and got up to dispose of her dishes. “As thanks for all of this, let me be the one to clean up when I get home?” She smiled at her roommate (well, her partner, but it was so hard to accept that just now) as she threw her jacket over her shoulders.

“Mmm, I can accept that.” Eislia rose from her seat, getting on her boots and a sturdy looking utility belt. She looked like a consummate worker: Broad shoulders and a massive frame, built for strength but also capable of great quickness. Adriana could see how she’d been some kind of soldier in her before-life. They hadn’t talked about exactly what Eislia used to be—anytime Adriana asked, she got bare responses—they would soon though. There was time for that, time for so much more as well.

Fluttering wings touched her heart as Adriana stepped outside with Eislia, locked the door and headed downstairs. It was everything Adriana had dreamed since she was a little girl. Everything she felt was outside her grasp and unavailable to her. Gripping oil in her fingers and watching it ooze down to the dirt at her feet. The constant reminder that she could never possess what she desired. Here and now though? It seemed as if her dreams solidified; and how quaint that they took the

form of a massive warrior woman? How very romantic.

The streets were as they always were: Sullen, cold and heavy with foot traffic. At least at this time of the day that was the norm. Steps muffled and mingled with other cadences, the clatter was normal for Adriana, but she knew that it was less so for her companion. She looked back to check on Eislia and she was indeed looking a bit out of sorts. However, as always she seemed to carry on with a casual grace beholden to her. Once they walked out of the throat of the cul de sac that Adriana's building was cradled in, they stopped. "I'm assuming that you have more to go in another direction? I need to get to the Spark Rail station." Adri pointed over to the corner.

"Mmm, yes a few of my um...clients? Is that the term? Anyway, the people I need to help are in this building." She gestured to the black-stone building they were standing in front of, people had to make a wide berth just to push past them. It was clearly one of the older buildings in the neighborhood. Certainly, it would have its fair share of technological woes. Adriana looked up, trying to see what state any external wiring was in, she looked back at Eislia, and dipped her head: "Well, it almost seems pointless to say: But, do be careful, ok? I'd gladly ask that you do be extra cautious? If just for me."

Eislia's only response was a smile and nod as she turned on her heel to head towards her first job of the day. Adriana sighed; her hands placed on her hips, watching her new lover walk off. Tension torqued her neck, demanding a hand to smooth it. "Hmph, her and I are both foolhardy then? That's a bad combination." Two martyrs rarely make for a long-lasting

duo. Adriana considered this little observation as she paced down the small side streets to her own job. Time passed as if a leaf plucked from the wind, and soon she found herself at work.

The soft scent of wood and ink greeted Adriana as she stepped inside the office. She took a moment to let it consume her, waft over her. Her feet felt more sure as she stepped to her desk; she grounded herself with work. For today, after the night she had, she really needed a grounding day. The small rituals helped to weave her mind back into a tight cord: Her jacket placed over the back of her chair, a loop of the office to make sure everything was in place. She made sure to turn the primitive coffee maker on, her boss liked it, Adriana could not stand the brand of coffee he used.

She sat at her desk and let out a sigh; it was also ideal that she appeared to be the first one there. It allowed her to make sure that she was fully ready for her work day and prepare to deal with interactions.

It wasn't going to be a long day, Adriana knew that for sure. All she really had to do was quickly translate a few older scrolls to be appraised for an upcoming auction, then work on that cask. That damned mysterious thing that seemed to be a thorn in her side. It was a bizarre thought, but Adriana found herself wondering if the cask was connected to the recent discoveries in her life. It was certainly unknown: it was ancient, older

than anything she's seen. All of the dating techniques told her it was very much older than the cities themselves. This was, of course, impossible.

Impossible felt like it was a common bedfellow for Adriana, lately.

The morning's work went by quickly, she was able to get all the required tasks done in her usual record time. All it took was some clever interpretation, and then a few spells to properly assess that the scrolls were indeed from the correct time period. Quite a lucrative find, Marcus really was a genius at digging up treasures. Adriana almost wanted to ask them for an expedition; it would be rather fascinating to explore the past of the world.

Alas, that was not where fate called her, and Adriana was ever a slave to such things.

She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms behind her head; knots of tension that refused to work out. This was, for anyone else, confounding. For Adriana it was the closest she'd get to relaxation. She flexed her hands and rose from her seat. It was close to lunch time and there was no need to push herself when the past few days had thrown so many unexpected curves at her.

Food and rest were concepts she could not ignore any longer. She could feel a momentum to life lately, something that pulled her inexorably in a direction. Adriana only hoped it wasn't going to be towards disaster. "Oh, Adriana." She

turned to the sound of Hana's voice. "Marcus needed to get that cask thing identified, they have potential buyers and well...it's causing an uproar it seems." xe said as xe handed over a file. Adriana glanced down at it. "We have no idea what this thing is, Adriana..."

Adriana blinked. "Wait, like...what do you mean?" As if this object couldn't get more weird and vexing.

"Like..." Hana tapped the file, Adriana opened it. "Chemical composition is something we've never seen, it's light, strong as steel...it's crazy Adriana. Like, this thing is..." Xe paused. "Well, crazy!"

Adriana flipped through the file and shook her head. "Phew, who knew huh? Ok, I'll get right on it, um...would you mind maybe grabbing me a sandwich? I know it's not your job it's just... I can't go around not eating all day all the time." Hana cocked a hip and placed a hand on it.

"Oh? Actually taking care of yourself? That's not like you Adriana...something change?" That question was far too probing for Adriana's tastes. She tried to laugh it off.

"No no, maybe I'm just beginning to see my own limitations for once. I'll get right to work on it, if you can do me this favor?" She asked, handing over a few coins.

"Sure, I'll grab you a sandwich, maybe something spicy to wake you up!" Xe grinned and turned on xer heel to walk out of the office. Adriana sighed.

“How very cruel.” She sighed and walked to the back room where all of the artefacts were stored safely. Sometimes, they were cursed or trapped, so magical seals are often wrapped around them. Some of the more dangerous ones are ‘donated’ to the Arbiters for even more secure storage. Half the time, Adriana wondered if it was to keep it from the common people’s hands. Those thoughts were too lofty for now, she had to focus on work.

The door to the storeroom was cold to the touch, it was pure Gonesteel, sealing in any magics with its counter agents.

It sat on the table at the far end of the room, as it had been for the past few days. This odd mystery, this frustration, this labyrinth. Adriana walked up to it, taking out the pair of arcane gloves she had on her—it was always better to be safe. She sighed and placed a hand on the lid of it. “Well then, back to my little problem; what exactly ARE you?” She raised a brow. “What kind of gifts from the past can you give us?” With a hum, she sat down to continue her analysis.

Adriana could feel that nothing had really changed. This box wasn’t decaying magically, while it seemed to be a beacon for such energies it did not exactly give them off either. Most of the magical artifacts she’d encountered had a kind of arcane decay to them. In fact, it was one of the easiest ways to determine age. All magic in the world of Requiem decayed. It was the rot of the world, the trickiest part of enchantment. However, while this cask had shown no actual signs of aging, or losing any magical potency, its markings and design were unmistakably from a different age.

For over an hour, Adriana puzzled over her current object of obsession; taking notes and making as many recordings as possible. There was only one thing left to do—actually open the damned thing. That seemed a bit easier said than done. However, Adriana was good at solving problems, and she'd have to simply trust that she could puzzle it out. She leaned back in her chair, her ruminations interrupted by a sandwich placed on the desk next to her. "Oh Hana, thank you-OH FOUNDERS!" She yelled, and brought a hand up to defend herself in shock at the sight of Mia standing beside her.

"Why hello there hot stuff, come here often!?"

"Oh fuck off Mia, what are you doing here?!" Adriana demanded, clutching her chest to try and still her racing heart.

"Yeah we tried that last night; didn't work out well, did it?" Founders, Mia was full of shit when she needed to be. That is to say, all the damned time. Adriana sat up a bit, affixed her with (what she hoped was) a baleful glare, and pointed at her: "You do not come to my workplace, I thought we agreed on this!?"

Mia simply shrugged in response and walked over to lean against the wall. The way she moved, the way she favored her side; something happened. Her makeup was dark and her chestnut hair was partially combed to the side, obscuring her face under pristine curls. A large red hat matched the fashionable trench coat she wore in both style and shade. Mia smirked as she looked down at Adriana. "Well...we did, that's true. But then I realized I don't really give a fuck and just came

anyway. Sounds good to you?"

"It sounds like shit, but also par for the course." Adriana answered back tersely.

Mia shrugged, still leaning against the wall. Ok, that wasn't much of a fight; however, Adriana could still sense this was one of those times that a 'no' would not be taken. This was very unusual, Mia had never taken the most remote interest in Adriana's work: not magical items or ancient texts or anything else like that. Yet here she was, pushing to spend time at her work. Well, break into the back room (which feels more Mia, to be honest) "Fine, fine...it's not like I can stop you Mia."

"Good girl."

"Never call me that again."

"Ooooh, fine fine, such a bore." Mia pushed off of the wall and walked over, Adriana could feel her eyes on the cask. Why the hells would she even care about it?

"It's not a makeup case, Mia." Adriana snapped, it only earned a derisive laugh from Mia.

"Oh funny, funny. No no this is...." By the time Mia was at the desk, she made a go at resting her hand on the lid. Adriana grabbed at it. Grabbing at Mia like that was something she usually would never dare try; but one caution outweighed the other. Both of them locked eyes.

"You can't touch it, Mia. We don't even know the slightest about it. It could be trapped, it could have some kind of curse on it." She held up a hand and wiggled her fingers. "That's why I have these."

"Leave it up to you to wear protection, babe." She smirked. Mia pulled her hand away, not breaking eye contact. "Yes, well it has to be opened right? Have you even done that?"

"I have been yanked around by you for the past few days." Adriana hissed. "I haven't had time for anything of the sort!"

"Well it's locked right?" Mia asked.

"You are assuming it is locked already, Mia? That's not very scholarly of you." Adriana grinned up at her, puffing up a bit at her little victory of wittery.

"I mean, have you tried opening it?" Mia interjected, smashing the little bit of silence that had caked onto the conversation

"Yes."

"And?"

"...it's locked." Mia's little smirk of triumph brought Adriana's nerves to a raw point. "OK...rudimentary, but true." Adriana sighed. "Can you go now!?" Hands landed on Adriana's back. And she felt Mia's breath on one side of her face. She shivered.

"Adriana, you are the most frustrating thing in my life. I hope

you know that. I just...need you to open the fucking thing, is that so hard?"

Adriana bristled at the contact, her mind hurled violently back to the other night. To her betrayal. She hated this proximity; this closeness was vile to her. Adriana gripped the edges of her chair, and as she spoke she felt a smile on her lips. "I'm so happy that I have such a standing in your life. But...why are you so insistent on being here, Mia?" Her questionably-labeled 'companion' sighed and went back to lean against the wall.

"I just need the little trinket you have there, alright?" She gestured to the cask "And I was hoping you'd have opened it, then I could just take the case, and that would be that. But Noooooo you have to make a huge stink of this!" She scoffed.

"How dare I not have time because you sent me on some thrice-damned errand." Adriana hissed back. She was sick of her half-sheathed claws; the constant hesitation to act on her feelings. She felt blood on her tongue and the desire to bring her frustrations to bear on Mia. A selfish desire, the same desires that ruled her actions last night. She turned in her seat to face Mia, who had affixed her with a curious stare. She caught something in her eyes, that evasive elf...something was there, but it was impossible to place. It was far too much to deal with right now, and she owed Mia nothing (at least, Adriana kept trying to tell herself that.)

"Adri..." Mia's voice softened to a painful degree, ash and steel filled her heart for a flicker of a second. However, her voice was

(so very) disarming. "...ok, look. I hate to do this, I actually do. But there's like..." She hesitated, then scoffed. "Gears turning that you aren't aware of. And I get it, I get it you have like no reason to trust me. But Adri...I am trying to help you ok? Just...open that shit up, so you can get your stupid relic and give me the cask, like...today." The plea was alien, it was so very odd to see her so emotional; it almost hurt. Those thoughts stayed her tongue for a while.

"Alright...um, do you want to watch? Because I will simply be looking this thing over and attempting a few boring techniques." In response, Mia pulled out a chair. She let it slowly drag for a few inches, then sat on it; backwards, of course. "I can wait."

And with that, the rest of her day passed in a marked unusual state: Examining the cask, taking samples, doing the work of a relicist as she often dreamed of. Mia was there, a heavy presence, a reminder. A wound that marked her past, as if it were a stake driven into her shadow.

They made a little agreement: Mia would stay in the back room, out of sight and hurt no one who came in. Adriana would continue to work as if it were a normal day. She was to lock up tonight, so she'd be the last one out of the office. Then, she would open the cask and they could put this behind them.

Finally, a shred of consideration from the cosmos; at least she

didn't feel the pressure to talk someone else into letting her close without arousing suspicion. 'One small consideration', she thought to herself. 'Here's hoping it keeps going.' She finished.

Adriana was in the middle of sorting away whatever small projects needed to be done by the end of the day. As Marcus and Hana made their escape, Adriana made sure to have the safes and doors locked up. All that was left was to spend hopefully just a few more hours with Mia hovering over her. If she could get this done and over with, she'd be a happy woman.

She raised a brow and pushed open the door to the storage room. After a second of thought, the lovely idea that Mia was just some dream hit her. However, the reverie was broken once the elf stepped out of the shadows. It was so odd; it was as if the shadows wove around her, then released their grip when asked. She smirked at Adriana, placed a hand on her cocked hip and nodded. "Everyone gone?"

"Just showed the last of them out. We're locked up and no one should be bothering us. How are you liking life as a stored magical artifact, Mia?" She shook her head at the quip, tipping her head to Adriana.

"It was ok, I stole one of your co-worker's lunch and found enough to occupy myself." She said snidely, it was enough of a lie where Adriana was not fully sure if she was being honest or not. After all the crap she'd dealt with already, she let it slide. "Whatever Mia, I might as well get this over with so I can get rid of you again."

“Something about you today Adri...you’re so much more of a bitch than usual. Is the giant back home fucking you sufficiently?” Another step closer, more fire danced under Adriana’s skin. “Because...I can help with that.” The slithering smile Mia wore made Adriana want to be ill—rather than aroused. Sadly, it seemed Adriana’s body was a betrayal to her mind yet again. Adriana marched over to Mia and jabbed a finger at her, snarled, and glared.

“Stop saying such fucking...disgusting things Mia. You have no idea of the nature of our relationship!”

“OH, it’s a relationship now, isn’t it?” She asked, crossing her arms and raising a brow. “Wow, look at you actually doing shit for once.”

“It’s not my fault I’ve found someone I actually like Mia! Or, is the problem that it wasn’t you!? What did you expect? You treat me like garbage; do you think I forgot what got us into this entire position!?” Those words held the edge Adriana had long been searching for, the elf stepped back, a wounded expression on her face. Triumph was quickly replaced with shame.

Mia seemed to gather herself, she took a breath, and formed her face into a semblance of strength. “Adriana Cosmilli. You are...my fucking antithesis; the thorn in my side and the fucking blight in my fucking guts! Alright you know what!? We’re doing this.” She huffed and rolled up her sleeves, met Adriana’s gaze with fire. “I fucked you over, we both made a little fuck up and I sold you out ok!? I’m sorry! It was the

single stupidest thing I ever did.” As the words spilled out, the crack of her voice made Adriana realize her mistake. “I fucking loved you, Adri. Unlike anyone else, you were my fucking soul-mate and I fucked you over. Do you have ANY idea what that says about me!? What the fuck am I? Just a...” She sighed, deflated and flopped her arms to the side. “I didn’t want any of this Adri. I didn’t want to be fucking abandoned, I didn’t want to be with you, I didn’t want to get tangled in all this bullshit...”

Yawning distance was the gap between them, the angst and anger. Mia and Adriana were filled with lava, severe emotions set against each other. In the years past, when Mia and her were just kids on the street, it was all about supporting one another. Adriana’s mind flicked back to the times they slept in shifts, when they had to help keep one another safe. Mia would steal clothes and books with her deft hands. As Adriana’s magical skills grew, she would create protective seals to hide from the gangsters. They had a perfect alliance; knives in front and back together. Adriana missed it, she hated that she couldn’t ever bring herself to truly hate Mia. Hate her the way she needed to to treat her like this.

She dared herself and took a step forward, and another. Before Mia could try to escape, Adriana had her arms wrapped around her, pressing her as close to her chest as she could manage. “Mia, I don’t hate you. It’s just it...it was easy to be bitter and stuck. But we can’t keep doing this.” Mia, a wounded bird, looked up at Adriana; tears in her beautiful eyes. Somehow, seeing her like this was so wrong. Mia was not supposed to be sad. She wasn’t supposed to feel anything; she was supposed

to be a shit heel.

“Adriana....I still... I-mean I lo-“

Her words were cut off by the loud explosion and the world turning into sheer white-hot agony.

When Hell Comes, You Play the Devil

Fire is our gift.

Fire is our blessing.

We light our homes with it, invite it into our hearts

It heals us. It burns us.

Right now, all Adriana could consider vis-a-vis fire was how very, very much it hurt. She groaned and rolled on to her side. A light was pouring from ahead of her, consuming her. Shapes moved out from it. Hands were on her, she was moving. What in the nineteen hells was going on!? “Come on, Adri! Wake up and stop fucking gold bricking it!” The voice was familiar. Adriana felt as if she should know who it is...her fuzzy brain was slow though...

Oh.

It was Mia.

“Hello Mia.” Her voice was distant and muted. Adriana thought that was really odd, because it was her own voice and therefore it should be like, totally present. A loud crack from the wall beside her struck Adriana out of her fluffy thoughts. Reality snapped back to her, carrying the weight of silly things like ‘time’ and ‘matter’. She hissed out a breath, before she could see the source of the noise, she’d been pulled through the back door.

It was a harried, dizzying few seconds before Adriana realized she was half-running, half-leaning against Mia. Mia’s beautiful face was contorted with effort as she managed the weight of the taller woman and managed to propel them along. After Adriana regained control of her senses, she pulled herself off of Mia. No words needed, they both ran down the back alley, Mia leapt up and grabbed at the rung of a fire escape’s ladder. She held her hand down for Adriana, again, wordlessly, they moved in sync. She took it and was hauled up onto the ladder. It was the easiest thing ever.

Trusting Mia was easy as breathing, Adriana hated that.

With a grunt of effort, Adriana managed to get up to the escape, both of them ascended the ironwork stairs just as their hunters finally revealed themselves: Three redeemers walked out of the back room of the shop. Clad in pale armor that Adriana had never seen before, but knew by heart. They were the clenched fists of the Founders. They were the brutal reminder of one’s place. She’d never actually caught sight of them before, but

she'd heard stories.

"Redeemers!?! Fuck, shit....fuck! Holy shit, what the fuck is going on!?" Mia's uttered curses were enough to let Adriana know that they were indeed, up shit's creek. Adriana leaned against a chimney, looking at Mia and took her in. She was wiry and tense, completely against her usual bearing. She paced and gripped the back of her head. "We need to get off the fucking streets, Adri."

"Yes, that seems like the stupidly obvious choice, Mia!" Adriana scoffed, able to actually check herself over now: A few bruises, some cuts, it was mostly that her head was so shaken from the sudden explosion. How did the Redeemers know? What did they want, for that matter? It wasn't like there was anything that her office did to attract such attention.

"Break's over, bitch! Let's get going!" Mia was so much faster than Adriana, and much more fit. She really hated that about her.

"Ok, but where?" A few shouts and the sound of heavy footsteps had both of them fleeing for the roof's other edge.

"Fuck if I know...." Mia scoffed and looked around, then grabbed her arm. "Use your magic, get us there." Mia pointed over to one of the other roofs. One across a rather wide street. "We can lose them in the Barrows and hope they have shit noses; lose our scent and try something else." Despite the numerous metaphors at play, Mia was probably right. Adriana grunted and nodded at her. She reached down to

her pockets and withdrew a feather. As she held it aloft, she offered her energy up. Cast it into the wind. The world of Requiem, for whom magic was a faded memory, but dreams were never forgotten, and it answered her energies with a resonant response. Soon, both of them were swept up in a whirlwind. Adriana leaped into the air. The city seemed to sweep by, the only sensation that was real right now was Mia's arm around Adriana's waist.

The landing was as graceful as two people tumbling through the air could expect. Feet and legs got tangled and they ended up on the rooftop about each other. Her ever-faithful handler had ended up on-top of Adriana, she was sprawled out on the surface of the roof. Her enticing smile was accentuated with a hand planted on Adriana's chest. "No time for frick-frack, finger wiggler. Let's get going." Adriana felt that damned and familiar heat risen deep within. She thought of Eislia's words, of how she should be true to Mia...She thought of that acceptance and wanted to take it into her, to have such a wonderful gift that she could hold. Could she? Before her mind clung to such things, Mia was there to slap her back to reality. With a hand of silk, she helped Adriana to her feet.

"Do we even have that fucking box!?" Adriana groaned, it was too easy to assume that's what all this was about. But that thing had been a spiteful thorn in her side since it was dug up, the connection wasn't hard to make.

Mia grinned and pulled the cask from one of the many inter-dimensional holes in her jacket. "Grabbed it when shit hit the fan." Adriana sighed and laid her hands on it.

“Whatever the fuck this thing is Mia, it’s dangerous...we should just leave it here and get out of trouble, hope they’re happy and wait until this blows over.”

“We can’t.” Mia said with a steel tone.

“Why not?”

“We just...can’t ok!? I told you that this was like...a fucking important thing right!? Like, the gears and all that!?” Mia was always a tightly constructed song, a spear, an arrow, endless intent. Normally, that is. Now however, Adriana watched her unravel in ways that twisted her guts. This was a side of Mia she hadn’t seen often. Only when things were desperate. Adriana swallowed cotton down her throat and glanced around, she was too tight-nerved to really explore the surroundings with her magic, her wind ran wild. Fields of perception stretched out before Adriana; fields of concrete and steel. Her home wasn’t exactly home to much plant life. Grass was a concept so foreign to her that it might as well be starlight, but she caught flashes of it. Illusions or maybe an aftermath of the concussion she likely had. Or maybe it was the lack of sleep and overuse of magic lately; but for a moment she swore she was standing in a field of green.

Coldness crept across her face and she blinked; Mia stood there, concern written on her features. “Adri? Where’d you go babe?” ‘Babe’ that nickname must have slipped from her mouth, Mia hadn’t called her babe in a lifetime. Well, not in that tone.

Adriana blinked again. She reached up to place her hands over Mia's which were cupped over Adriana's cheeks. "We're in the shit up to our chests, Mia. If we get out of this...we need to figure our bullcrap out." Mia's eyes squeezed shut. Adriana hated to see it, but division twisted her beautiful features. Mia shook her head.

"Fuck off, we need a hole to hide in. I can't deal with this shit right now..." Her cheeks were the betrayer here, flushed a deep red. Such a shade that Adriana wanted to kiss her, she relented and stepped away. With a nod, Mia led Adriana off the roof, down another fire escape and onto the streets. They were now, semi-officially, in the Barrows; a thicket of rickety buildings that made up a swath of blocks—a haven for some—a danger for many. For Mia and Adriana, it was one of the many places they had called home before.

Shouts, calls and the fury of a chase gave way to a crush of bodies and murmurs. Adriana and Mia moved at a slow pace, they walked as if they belonged there. In many senses they did, they always will belong here. However, they didn't spend long on the streets, quickly ducking into a small storehouse and down into one of the many tunnels. Carved veins that threaded through the entire city; a tool for many a purse-snatcher.

They emerged from one of the tunnels into a small alleyway. Enough twists and turns to make them both sure they lost their pursuers—for now. Mia carefully picked her way through the trash-filled enclave and towards a rusted steel door. Adriana followed with as much care as her partner showed. Both of them were versed in the steps of this dance. Much like that

battle they had at the crater, all their actions were read off the heart. With a few quick motions and taps, Mia unlocked the door which came loose with a louder metal-noise than either of them were comfortable with. They both slid inside and closed it, the door made a resounding thud as it closed again. The sound hit Adriana's chest and she tensed a moment, but nothing else happened. No one was interested in their location at the moment.

The safe room was incredibly sparse: A gray room of dingy light and dingier furniture. It was mostly castaways and throw outs. She stepped inside, after a moment of hesitation draped her coat over the back of a chair. She rested her hands on it and finally let out a breath. "One of yours, or Nummari's?"

"Mine. She'd never keep a safe house out in this shit hole." Mia was tracing her fingers over the counter of the small kitchenette, as if something was tugging at her recollections. "I-I had this one up-kept...just in case." She laughed softly. "Thought I was paranoid but here we are." It was then that Adriana noticed it; this was one of the first places she'd safeguarded for them. Her mind flicked back to when she carved the sigils, invoked the old-tongue and warded this pathetic little room from the world. How did she forget such details?

"Mia." Her words came out as snakes under a door frame. Adriana held her hand out, soft light danced in her palm. The door behind her and the small window shimmered slightly, she tugged at it, wove the thread of old magic in her mind. With a few twists, gestures, she altered it. "I...was so sloppy back then. There, better." She looked to Mia, who had taken a

step towards her. Daring seized Adriana, in the rare times she was in its grasp, she always obeyed. With another gesture, she held a small glowing orb in her palm. "You remember this? My first spell...you had to dig around in that crazy old coot's shop to find the scroll."

With wide eyes, Mia approached more. She seemed akin to a wounded animal, hesitant to get too close to the hunter. Her hand reached out and she stopped. "We're not kids anymore, Adri. The world's changed and so have we."

"But one thing didn't change—even with this past year of us hating each other's guts: We always protect each other, Mia." Adriana flexed her fingers, and pressed them together. The orb responded in kind, pressing against the fingertips, then popping. A shower of soft orange sparks filled the room. Harmless light that danced in a dead-air breeze. She reached out and wrapped an arm around Mia's waist. No resistance was brooked, only a wide-eyed elf looking up at her long-time partner. Adriana leaned close. "No force in the universe can change that Mia, I realize that now." Mia let out a soft whimper, as if some rebellion died in her chest. She leaned up to kiss her, their lips meeting softly this time. These were silken petals in the wind, no anger-mingled lust was held in this kiss.

It was natural—it was gravity—Adriana and Mia were as inevitable as the death of Requiem.

Mia pulled away. "We should be talking, we should be planning." Her voice held words of reason; but her tone was

far too saccharine for them to have much weight. Adriana pulled her even closer, so that their bodies were pressed tightly together.

“We should.” Adriana’s words seemed to reverberate from deep within. She felt the strand pull tight in her chest, her heart ached for Mia. As much as Mia was anathema; she was also her draught, her panacea, her revelry. “But right now, I don’t want to.” She murmured, her lips a sliver from Mia’s. Adriana pressed herself close to Mia. She kissed her, not like last time; she didn’t rush. This time, they met with a deeper yearning. Slowly teased and relented, they danced and pushed away, met again. Two pieces of a puzzle that begged for oneness.

Mia gripped Adriana’s collar and pressed her closer, the kiss deepened with fervent need. Both of them were in sync—as they often were—both of their needs laid open between them. Adriana’s breath hitched, gripped in her chest as Mia’s hands slid heat trails down her back, yanking up her shirt and undoing buttons. She felt fabric slip from her, replaced with Mia’s hands. “Hmm, I love how tight you keep yourself, Adri; A girl appreciates a good pair of shoulders.” Even with her usual bon mot Mia’s voice was a predatory coo, laced with pleased tones that threatened ecstasy. Mia worked fast, and with skill—as she was known for. Soon, she found herself laid on the couch, with Mia straddling her hips.

“I like to be appreciated, all evidence that seems to point to the contrary notwithstanding.” Adriana chuckled and kissed her again, her passion was a breath that needed oxygen. Mia

gazed back into her eyes, a fingernail tracing her neck.

“I love you like this, Adriana.” She grinned, her finger tracing down between Adriana’s breasts. “Everything about you is like a fucking vortex. I tried to fight it.”

“I did too, Mia. Fuck the world that held us apart, and fuck doing that ever tries to again.” Mia laughed at the words and looked deep into Adriana’s eye. To Mia, Adriana was her prey and her need. She was food for her lover’s maw, Adriana never wanted anything less than that.

With no more words, Mia moved herself over Adriana and pushed down onto her cock. Her arms wrapped around Mia to hold her as she began to rock her hips. Both women let out groans that mingled into each other just as their bodies did. Both of them craved the perfection of the other’s flesh. The two of them found their rhythm as easily as they always did, everything came easy to Mia and Adriana. Adriana grit her teeth and bore into the pleasure. She felt Mia all around her: her scent, her texture, everything about Mia consumed Adriana. She could never fight it, nor did she ever want to again.

Adriana gripped Mia’s firm rear tighter, she kneaded the flesh and savored each sensation. Quickly, they both worked towards a crescendo. It took neither of them long, Mia unraveled in a cry and arch of her back—Adriana followed her in only a few strokes more. They didn’t have the luxury to draw things out. Mia cried out her name, mixed with Adriana’s own voice. Soft lips that often hid such barbs pressed against

Adriana's neck. Mia's touch was perfection; cold agony and warm desire were in her form woven throughout. Adriana pulled her lover close to her as they sprawled out on the couch.

Limbs tangled and breath merged, Adriana couldn't think of any other place she'd want to be right now. That's really what it was in the end—an entanglement. Adriana was so enmeshed with Mia that she sometimes had a hard time knowing who was her and who was the other. Light carves a shadow's definition, and in that sense Adriana was happy to have Mia. She was her limit and border; she let Adriana know herself in ways she could never do so alone. As much as she might have lied to herself this past year, Adriana wanted this in her heart. That was the mystery she'd been picking at since last week. For some reason, every desire in her heart pricked into alertness then. Like any good mystery; she had the answer right in front of her face. It's just with this one, she didn't want to accept it.

The refusal to see this all seemed so silly, in hindsight now.

Mia made a soft sigh as she nuzzled into the crook of Adriana's neck. Her stomach twisted in knots, the warmth bloomed from her chest and she was barely able to repress the swelling of emotions—the ever steely predator that waited for her. Ever always, Adriana's emotions were a constant stalker. She had to marshal them at all times. Here, with Mia, it felt astronomically impossible to do so.

Desire crept up her spine, Mia made a soft sound and rolled over to snuggle tighter against her. “Founders Mia, how the

hells do you do this to me?" The elf flicked her ear, opened one of her eyes, and spoke.

"Cause I'm magic, babe." Mia's smile spoke of victory and mischief, her natural state. Laughter danced a jig in Adriana's throat. A few more moments of this and she rose from the couch.

"You might be magic, but we're still in trouble." As if a spell was shattered, the enchantment faded. Mia's hand found itself on Adriana's thigh.

"Yeah, we are. And we'll get out of it. Cause now I have a reason to fucking care again." Mia's voice tensed, not in a way that held fear for Adriana. It was that protective air she took on, all those years ago, whenever the two of them faced trouble. Mia was younger than her, actually. But, the way she fought to protect Adriana for all these years, one would think it the opposite case. "Alright..." She pushed off of the couch, even in her undressed state, she paced. Adriana had to pause in her redressing to watch her. "Alright, we sit here a bit, lay low and hope they lose the scent, then...I go to the manor and you go to Eislia. I think you might have to explain all this shit to her like...sooner or later. Maybe not the whole story, but like...you know?" She made a little wheeling motion with her hand. "She's some kind of fucking...warrior tank right? So if anything goes really wrong, I'd rather have you with her. And I'll meet you at your place as soon as I can, sounds good?"

Adriana listened for a moment, she was already aware of the importance of this cask; as a rat is aware of the trap. The

sooner it got into Lord Nummari's hands, the sooner they would be safer. And the threat of Redeemers could be a shadow again. She sighed and nodded along. "Fine. I...I don't want to part ways yet, Mia, but I get it." She took her hands, Mia's lava hot and Adriana's cold nerves. Mia's gaze was a challenge, but a promise.

"Adri. We're circling the wagons, we need to move fast. But, babe it's gonna be ok." Words tried to come to Adriana, but the lump in her throat prevented anything but a quiet sob. She hadn't heard this edge of Mia's voice in a lifetime. She nodded though and leaned forward. Even if it seemed impossible, their embrace felt even more intimate than their lovemaking just before. They held that for a moment, both of them urging to catch up on all the lost time. Adriana silently cursed all the nights they missed; huddled in their beds alone. It was such a waste. Like opulence, Adriana hated waste.

It wasn't too long before Mia and Adriana were washed and dressed. The safe house's shower was not exactly pristine, but they both managed to get washed up. They dressed each other, a sacrament to their pair. Adriana smiled as she ran her hands over the familiar leather of Mia's jacket. "I still remember how happy you were to swipe this thing..."

"And I remember how happy you were to show off all the enchantments you could do to it." Mia shot back, she reached up to run her fingertips over the back of Adrianas' hands. Unlike before, Adriana did not withdraw from the touch.

"I guess we were both little shits, back then." Adriana's cheeks warmed at Mia's hearty laugh.

"Yeah, guess we were, Adri." Mia turned to face Adriana, those big brown eyes slicing into her heart deeper than any blade could. "Then again, we still kind of are." Adriana laughed, shared in the mirth her partner felt. "Right right...ok so. We need to focus on the actual reality of, like, the Redeemers coming at us?" Mia scoffed. "The lovey-dovey shit needs to wait." She went over to grab the object of everyone's focus, the cask, and set it down on the dust-ridden kitchen table. "Yeah ok so business: Here it is, we need to get it to the Nummari estate." Mia stated flatly, no room for argument.

"Right, but..." Adriana countered. "We should at least open it, I was just about to when we were interrupted." Adriana came over to the table as well, the whole time she'd been watching Mia, fear picked at her spine, the cask had been such a source of danger, she didn't want Mia so close to it. The dusty surface of the table felt like sand under her fingers as she pressed her palms to it. "I mean, all this trouble and you owe me that at least." Mia simply shrugged at the demand, but she gestured to the cask.

"Go ahead. Be my guest."

Adriana sucked in a breath as she looked at the cask. It seemed to pull her in. Drive her compulsions. Her vision warped around the very form of it. It became the center of her entire perception, greedy for her eye to bore into it. Carefully, she laid her hands on the cold surface of the cask's lid. Her thumb

ran over a rune, tracing the patterns that were alien as they were familiar. She felt home touching it. Hands worked as bidden by command, Adriana traced each rune, she pressed down buttons as if she'd done it all before.

The world darkened, sight dimmed and sounds muffled. Everything pulled into one point. The lid opened and for a microsecond, Adriana saw everything all at once. Time folded in on itself, a child's plaything: She saw golden spires, an endless void, lights dancing all around her. She walked among beings that she had never seen before. She was home, in the barrows, years ago. She was here today, she saw Mia's smile. They were back on the night when they met Eislia. All of it, rapid luminescence, yanked her back and forth. In a second, it was all undone.

The smell hit her first. That of mold and dust. The table's rough surface came to her second. Mia's face was the last. It was always Mia that brought her back, held her down. She saved Adriana from her curiosity and thirst for knowledge. In all the ways that Adriana appreciated though. Mia wasn't holding her back, she was grounding her to the here and now, as she needed to; Mia reminded Adriana to live in all the most wondrous ways.

"Adri!? You ok, you fucking zoned...holy shit is that platinum!?" Adriana blinked and looked down at the cask. It looked like a holder for two datarods. There were numerous runes and writings on the inside of the lid, but she caught her gaze at the contents. They were pure, stainfree rods of some kind of steel. Upon further inspection, she did indeed note

they were Platinum. She picked one up to work her hands over it. What could they have on them? How damned old could this thing be!? Where was it from? She wasn't aware she spoke the words aloud; but Mia smiled and answered her.

"No fucking clue but this is bad right? I mean....no no we can deal with this!" Mia was pacing, she paced when she had to think. "Yeah no no same plan. Fuck Adri, what ARE those!?" Mia's words bounced around with as much fury as her heels.

"I have no clue, but we need to know." The words slid from her tongue, slivers of steel forged by other hands. She shook her head.

"No, no, we close this up, we give it back to the Lord Nummari and we fucking forget about this bullshit!" Mia had Adriana's attention now, a hand to her throat in word not deed. She was always such a shit kicker that way. Adriana had often joked that she should become a politician.

Mia always chewed her out when she said that.

"Wait...hold on." A spark crackled in Adriana's mind, the kind of bright deviousness with it. "No one knows what's inside this, save you and I. And you were told to retrieve the cask....not any specifications on its state nor what's inside." She worked her fingers against her thumbs, her mind continuing to work. "Let me have these rods, let me look them over and....and try to solve this mystery."

"Mystery! I!? Adriana!" She seized Adriana's shoulders, the

grip tight enough to numb. Mia was close to Adriana now, face pressed right up to her, no inch given. "This isn't some game, Adri!" Mia protested, working her hands through the air as if she tried to grasp metaphors physically. "This isn't some...puzzle you can solve, or a problem to conquer! This is big, it's serious! I mean, this is Lord Nummari here, Adri! Her direct word was to bring this cask to her. She was specific, and believe me when I say: She was firm about the request!" Mia sighed and ran a hand through her hair, the panic and fright was more than apparent. After a second of reprieve, a beat, she continued. "Adriana. We have to be careful here, that's all I'm saying. I think, if you ask me, we take this to her intact and we move on from this bullshit and...I mean things are different now, but maybe we can be better and just..." She took Adriana's hands and it dawned on her for the first time that she could tell; Mia's hands shook.

"I want that time too, Mia. I want that time to...figure this out, to get back to us...Alright fine, fine...You're right." With a flick of her hand, Adriana closed the lid to the cask. Part of her was regretful of losing this chance to examine something that she had never seen before. The other part was glad to have this confounding object removed from her life. "Mia, I...I don't want you to face Lord Numarri alone." Mia's face softened and leaned into the touch Adriana gave her with an open hand to cheek. She closed her eyes and Adriana took in Mia's beauty for a moment. Only for a moment. The elf shook her head.

"Eislia's going to miss you. It's been an eventful day already." Mia snorted out a laugh. "She's going to start worrying." Adriana could not help but feel warmed as Mia opened her eyes.

This soft side that she thought Mia had long-ago murdered; she thought she'd lost it forever. "I can take care of this, really, I can." Her eyes betrayed her, as they do for many before them. Adriana couldn't really rob her of this reassurance. Her and Mia were grown women and it would be wrong to not honor her decisions.

"Alright, I understand Mia. But promise me: You'll come back to my home and we can all sit down and talk this over." Adriana held her a last time before the parting. Warmth and need sundered by space. In time that compressed to a pinprick, Mia took the cask and left. The safe house; one of their first refuges, was now empty again.

Mia had probably taken a more covert route to the upper levels, skitting about underfoot as she often was used to doing. Adriana's journey home was slightly more intense. She forced herself to calm down, walk casually and not rush home. Normally, the various levels of Redeemers were an unnoticed set dressing to her daily life. They were like pillars or paintings: visible, but often only glanced over. Now though, she was spotting them everywhere. Daggers in the crowd, thin, noticeable, and deadly. Somehow, for the whole trip, she didn't die of anxiety. Somehow, Adriana had managed to play it cool. By the time she got to her familiar neighborhood, she was a being entirely composed of nerves and stomach acids.

The only time it felt like she could breathe again was when she opened the door to her home.

She barely took a step inside before large arms ensnared her. Adriana wasn't even able to let out a noise as she was grabbed by Eislia and pulled inside. The hug was warm and entirely satisfying. "Adriana, what happened!? You're late!" She pulled her away from the embrace to look her over, the worry in Eislia's eyes would make anyone's stomach twist. Adriana felt the need to assuage it as soon as she possibly could. She reached up to touch the side of Eislia's face. Such wonderful, handsome features Eislia possessed. Adriana drank them in as she debated between lie or truth. Finally, she spoke:

"I'm fine. There was a complication, well more like a few." She was set down so she could stand on her own, Adriana felt a bit of a swoon from the lack of touch. "Mia was...well, Mia came to my workplace, which I assure you is a rare thing. She needed my help with something and was very, very, insistent. In fact, she stayed the whole day in the back room. Must have been boring as all hell for her." Eislia must have found something amusing about that as she laughed softly, shook her head, and put her hands on her hips.

"There. I knew it. I was right." Adriana had to blink up at Eislia for a good few seconds, she tried to puzzle out Eislia's comment.

"Well, I'm fully ready to admit you are right about most things, but what is it this time, Eislia?" Adriana smoothed her hands over her pants, eased the wrinkles, and she waited for the response. Eislia kept smiling as she walked to the kitchen, it was only then that Adriana caught the lovely scent: meat. A hand went to her stomach to quell the rumbling, but she could

not deny her hunger. That was a common story for Adriana lately; she was terrible at denying any of her appetites.

The past year was spent in self-appointed exile. Constant denial and admonishment meant that her needs went unanswered for so long. Now that she was allowing herself even a small pittance of it, she drank deeply. Adriana hummed softly, she watched Eislia go, admiring her backside as the other woman knelt down to pull something from the oven. “Well, I was just amused by how you look when you talk about Mia.” Eislia explained evenly, setting the cookware on the stove to open it up, she examined the contents and nodded to herself. With a flick of her hand she turned the stove off.

Eislia dominated the doorway while she stood in it, leaning on one muscular arm to watch Adriana. While she was so soft and kind, there was also an intensity to her gaze: She could analyze and sift through so much data laid out on faces. Adriana wasn’t the type to digest such information, but she admired those who could. With all her secrets laid bare like this, she simply shrugged. “Well...how do I look? Exactly.”

“You smile in a certain way. Um, regardless, continue.”

“Right well. Mia needed the cask- ‘ She caught the look that Eislia gave her, right, she hadn’t mentioned it to her yet. The fact that it had only been a few days since all this began hit Adriana with steel rods to the back. She sucked in a breath and wrung her hands against each other. “Um, a magic item dropped off at my office. It’s been confounding me for the past few days, and she was insistent I do it now. She needed

it, in fact wanted to take it for Lord Nummari. But I wanted to open it and make sure it wasn't something dangerous, I suppose..." She cleared her throat. "Well...I was opening it, in the process of it, when bam! There was an explosion and the Redeemers stormed the place! She and I got away bu—"

"Wait, what? Why would they do that? How...how can they just do that?" Her question was innocent. Unbearably so. Adriana could only give her the softest look she was capable of.

"They can do whatever they want, if they feel they have to." The silence dropped between them. Both women knew very well how this could happen. It was allowed to happen as it was by design. Fear, an iron fist, benefits the ruling class more than anything ever will. Both of them would rather the truth be unspoken. Maybe Eislia had hoped that down here it was different. But her masters are just as cruel as the ones here. Adriana found herself rubbing her fingertips against her thumbs—a nervous habit— she tried to calm herself down and continued. "Mia and I escaped, I don't think any of them saw us, so our cover should be intact. We lost them in the barrows and hid out in a safe house for a bit and then..." She sighed.

"Wow, really? How did you last all this time without engaging in sex with her?" Eislia mumbled to herself.

"It was a...moment of passion!" Adriana protested, Eislia simply continued to muse. "Passion being a keyword..."

"OK, ok....Right, well after that we...we got down to business."

“The -actual- business and not the ‘business’, business, yes?” Eislia’s eyes begged clarification, a request that Adriana was getting used to as of late. She smirked and put her hands on her hips. Adriana could not fight the mirth in her voice as she said: “Oh, look at that, you have been learning slang?”

“Many of the workers have been educating me.” She said proudly. Any tension that lingered had long faded with her glorious smile. A sunrise to ward off the night.

“Right, well -actual- business. We um...I mean I opened the cask and...I’m not sure. I saw something...” Adriana pressed her fingertips more firmly against her thumbs. “It was like a dream, a vision....” Her mind slipped back to those images; a thin sheet of paper scrapped over a relief. Mind-fingers grasped for anything of purchase, nothing took hold. She shook her head, pressed fingertip to temple, and let out a shaky breath. “But...right, the cask had inside it some data-rods, ones I’d never seen before.” She hesitated. “Lord Eversei wanted the cask though, and Mia wasn’t taking any chances. So, she took it back with her. And that’s how I spent my night.” She punctuated all of that with a nervous chuckle.

“Hmm...that’s...a lot...” Eislia finally surmised. The distance between them finally closed, large arms wrapped around Adriana, she let out a breath and sucked in fresh air. Until this second she hadn’t been aware, but her muscles screamed at her. She’d been standing stock still in place. “Tell me about the visions.” Adriana gazed up at her, a sense of awe washed over her as she beheld Eislia. She really was a vision to behold. At the request, Adriana could only shake her head.

“I don’t know what it was...images stitched together...you know it was like I was flitting around in time? Like...I was seeing all of these moments, from my own life, from other points of view...just everything in one huge jumble!” She was hugged close, she didn’t realize how distressed she was. Tension broke and Adriana’s muscles relaxed. Eislia’s voice was bedrock, her hands silk-wrapped steel. Forged, she could only guess, in such violence; and yet capable of softness. She was like Mia in that sense. Mia had clothed herself in the softness she had long cut away from her insides, but when she let herself, she was still able to be what she was. Mia was blades and breath, a soft hand with hard knuckles. Adriana gathered up one of Eislia’s hands into her own and kissed the knuckles. Perhaps Adriana did have a type: Perhaps those closest acquainted with blood and grit could be trusted with her tender tissues. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore, I want to talk about you, Mia and me and...all of that is too much it’s too big: I want this.”

“I understand, I just was curious that is all.” Adriana sighed as she was embraced again. “Well then, you need to eat, and rest. It’s been a long day-and night- for you.” Adriana could only nod at the words.

Adriana only had a few hours to rest before her office opened again, time had made such a fool of her. She stumbled and chased after spare seconds, as if they’d offer her true reprieve. The rest of the night, with Eislia’s help, Adriana managed some fleeting rest. She couldn’t help but wonder what became of Mia. Was she ok? Did Lord Eversei snuff her life out? No no, she couldn’t think like that. She had to focus on staying

the path, and prayed that Mia would be ok. The meal and Eislia's warm embrace brought sleep to her on quicksilver feet. Adriana belonged to no one now, she experienced the brief freedom of slumber.

Each hour was a feast among famine.

What Comes up...

Adriana belonged to infinity; it begged her return.

She stood in a field, but not like one she'd dreamed of before. When she was a little girl, Adriana had been to the outskirts of Forthiron city. She had seen the large, unfathomably massive open fields of the wastes. An adult had stood with her there. She had told Adriana that it used to be all green— in the far away times— and as she had gazed out at the scene, she swore she saw something verdant on the horizon. The genesis of her imagination perhaps? Regardless, Adriana had, long ago in her life, seen a massive expanse.

But what she stood in made that seem like a cramped corner. The blackness stretched before in all directions, defined only by the millions of pinpricks of light. It was so beautiful that her only response was to clamp a hand over her mouth to choke out the sob she emitted. The air was cool, but in such a way that her skin craved it. She was so safe here, it felt. Adriana wasn't anxious or scared, she wasn't overcome with the teeth

and maw of worry that so often was. It was...nice here.

It was home.

Adriana tried to remember that voice, how it spoke to her with such a soft tone. A hard edge resting on the outskirts of cadence though, like water over a rock. It was so long ago, back when she first staked her claim in the barrows, years before she met Mia. That time in her lie seemed like a fuzz-coated dream; impossible to grasp onto and even more vexing to hold. The only thing she could really remember was wanting to be home; to build a place for her to hold dearly.

Her mind, pulled in taffy strings a half-dozen directions, needed to be grounded. She shook her head and looked around, searching for any precious definition. It was all endless stars. Yet, she was standing on something, she had to be. Her shoes brought a clinking thunk, which sounded through the air as she stepped backwards. She whipped her head around, pushed herself away from the void. Reflection, a phantom-Adriana stood in boundless space as she placed her hands on the domed glass. A window, it was a window that looked out into the stars. She looked down, she was standing on solid ground, that must have been some kind of hallucination.

Adriana glanced around again, desperate to recognize this place she found herself. Her senses, desperate to make reason out of madness. Alas, this place was completely alien to her. She was in, what must have been, a corridor. There was no one else here, just her standing in front of a massive arching curved wall of windows. All of them held the cosmos in their

view as if it were the most everyday sight that could exist. The ground, no floor, was metal. It held a blueish-silvery hue that was shared with the walls as well. Even the ceiling was a puzzle: light emitted from it, bright, clean pure light. It wasn't fizzling or flickering like any light spell lamp she'd seen before. There was no noise, nor heat which was usual for the light sources she'd seen before. This was a miracle, used to light a corridor that apparently no one used.

This was impossible.

She heard noises behind her, the staccato of heeled-boots hitting the unknown-metal floor. Adriana turned her to face the familiar sight which belonged to the familiar sound, before she could see Mia come into frame her head snapped to the side. Searing heat shot across her face, the slap Adriana was hit with was brought with so much force that she was nearly rocked off her feet.

She felt a loose tooth.

"Adriana, what the FUCK did you think you're doing! You can't fiddle around with forces you don't understand you stupid piece of shit!" Her cheek was currently throbbing and her jaw felt like someone tenderized it for dinner. As she brought her gaze back up to see her angered partner (and get her feet back under herself) she noted that Eislia stood behind Mia. She nodded with each profanity that Mia spewed forth. For some reason, she felt like it had been ages since Mia swore at her.

She tried to speak, but her collar was seized and she was

yanked off her feet. Mia had pulled her so they were face to face. “If you pull shit like that again, opening up some fucking unknown-ass cask without thinking, I’ll gut you and leave you for dead!”

Eislia nodded some more to punctuate Mia’s point. “I think it might be time to come back to us, Adriana.” She said, she reached forward and planted her massive hand on Adriana’s head. With a great force she was not at all surprised Eislia possessed, she was pushed back. Adriana tumbled ass over ankles and hit the hard ground, the world spun around and met her with frankly rude force. The pain from the slap was dwarfed by the agony of having her face smashed into a metal plank. The world kept spinning and she tumbled again, over and over before hitting something—oddly soft.

She was bound in a material hard yet yielding, soft in ways that only flesh can be. Yet steel lay beneath the surface; uncompromising, adamant. She pulled away, gasped for breath; she felt the night air hit her skin.

She’d been sweating.

“Adriana, Adriana, wake up!” She was pulled from sleep into familiar darkness. Her room. Eislia sat beside her in bed, jostled her with a large hand. However, Eislia’s gaze was not locked on Adriana; it was locked on something else in the room. With a muted grumble, Adriana reached over to flick the lamp on. The spell flickered into life, illuminated a very

familiar figure. Mia.

“Hey lovers, how’s it going?”

“Fuck.” Adriana sat up and rubbed her face, looking over to Eislia who was already risen from bed. “What time is it?”

“Just after five, Adriana.” Mia answered, seeming to ignore the massive woman in the room.

“Oh my, this seems like the best time to make some breakfast.” Eislia intoned. Her feet padded across the floor to the kitchen, like most things she was around, Eislia dwarfed the apartment. She stood at the doorway of the kitchen and put her hands on her hips, looking down at Mia. The elf in question herself, sat on the chair that she seemed to love so very much. Lit by the lamp’s flickering illumination, Mia was utterly beautiful. She seemed to have returned to her old self: Sharp, confident, composed as a song. A symphony even, one Adriana could imagine the composer bled for. Adriana ran a hand through her hair and shook her head. Mia’s smile spoke volumes, summary being: Mission accomplished.

Mia glanced up at Eislia, the tension between them radiated off with such heat Adriana thought she’d get singed. With a shake of her head, Eislia walked to the kitchen to start cooking. Adriana wasn’t sure if that was a declaration of war, or resolution. She hoped it was the latter.

“So, you didn’t have any problems?” Adriana asked, her mind clung to the vision of Mia’s desperate eyes, just before they

parted ways only hours ago. It felt like years instead of under a day; all the time Mia and her robbed from each other felt even more an affront to decency now. The gorgeous elf shook her head.

“For once, things went smoothly. Lord Nummari was happy to receive that fucking thing and now we’re rid of it.” She rose from the chair, crawled into the bed and straddled Adriana. She uttered a gasp; but, wrapped her hands around Mia’s midsection. There was a pause, a second that melted into minutes before Mia’s shifting hips broke the spell. Adriana blinked.

“Mia, what’s the play here?” She asked, gazing up at her, a statue in repose. The smile her elf wore was playful as a cat with a mouse. She didn’t answer straight away, Mia simply traced a sharp nail along Adriana’s features. She fought a shudder.

“I dunno, I’m kind of unsure here, Adri. The past few days have been uh....really shitty. Frantic, mile-a-minute. And now we’re on the other side of it, again.” Her fingers threaded through Adriana’s hair. And all she could do was take in Mia’s scent. To be so still with her, so close. “And by the way? The Advocates didn’t spot us, and apparently, they aren’t making the connections between your office and you. I can’t tell if it’s laziness or a ploy. My advice is that you, for sure, show up to work today and act surprised at the mess.” She capped her point off by flicking Adriana’s a tuft of Adriana’s hair.

“Then I guess I’d better get ready to go.” Adriana groaned and

blinked her eyes. Mia's laugh gave her such strenuous pause, and with great effort she freed herself from her embrace to take a shower. Never before had she welcomed the cold water with such adulation. She scrubbed what felt like a century's worth of grime off of her—now she knew how that poor cask felt after sitting in dirt for Founders knows how long. Damp moisture clung to Adriana's form as she stepped from the shower, the clammy sensation of a cold humidity filled her microscopic bathroom. She dressed, as always awkwardly hidden away. She really didn't want Mia to make her usual comments.

Adriana adjusted her tie and pushed open the door. Mia was back on her favored chair, seemingly chatting up Eislia; the stoic cook laughed at some joke freshly-told. She winked at Adriana once she spotted her. "Hey Adri, I was just telling Eislia that this entire arrangement is weird as all hells. But, I'm also not your mom, so whatever."

"Ah, with the way you two were tittering I thought there was some vulgarity offered between you two." Adriana said with mocked deflation. Mia shrugged, Adriana started to gather up her usual items to forge out into the outside world: Staff, book, jacket, all well-arranged. All awaited her touch.

"Yeah, well...what am I gonna do? She makes you feel mushy, I get you hard...can't fight that Adri." Warmth spread over Adriana's cheeks and Mia's laugh told her she'd claimed her prize. Of everyone in this city, Mia was always able to get a rise from her. Mia pushed off of the chair, placed a hand on her hip and gestured between the two others. "No, I mean...you and I

still have to work some shit out, but we've been entirely about protecting each other since we were kids. And Eislia...she's new, but I can adapt. This past year's taught me that I'm fucking falling apart, Adri. I can't do this lone-wolf shit." She'd crossed the distance between them in two paces (It's not like the space was large in her apartment) and took Adriana's hands in her own. "And I can see you're the same. We always worked better together, doll-face."

Adriana let out a sigh; one of relief, or elation? She wasn't sure. Mia gestured to Eislia. "I might not 'get' what you two have but...what the fuck, Adri. We're on a dead planet and we're probably gonna get snuffed out by some asshole or another. I mean...all the shit we've just dealt with is proof enough things could go wrong on a dime. Might as well enjoy ourselves while we can, right?"

"Wait." Eislia came out, setting down a few plates of food. "What exactly was all of this trouble over?" She wiped her hands on her apron. "What you were talking about before, yes? What is this cask?" Mia looked over her shoulder, her smile brightened as she spotted the food. Mia trotted over and started to dig in.

"Adri can answer it." Mia said with a mouthful of pancake. "How did you make this!? Holy shit....Ah, right...you must have got some stuff from old man Fawlsy? That weird farm of his?" Mia's questions were waved off by Eislia, who had turned to Adriana.

"As I said, it was this...cask. Um, it had writing on it, runes

I'd never seen before." Adriana licked her lips and rubbed her fingers over her mouth. "When I touched it, it opened up, it must have had some kind of...cipher lock, or just a pressure one, I'm not sure."

"And what was inside?" The calmness that Eislia usually wore faded in a moment, she turned away and strode over to the chest Adriana had set aside for her with her things.

"Um....it was..." She glanced at Mia, who had sat up and wiped her mouth off. "It was these data rods. I didn't get a good look at them, but they wer-"

"Pure platinum?" Eislia said she had that odd black box in her hands, the one she had had on her when she came here. Adriana watched as she opened it, an odd green glow emanating from it. Before Adriana could protest, Eislia waved the device in front of her. The massive woman, who's face she had only seen wearing kindness, was now writ with worry.

"What the hell is going on!?" Adriana demanded.

"I can't believe it, I....hmmm..." Eislia turned away and closed the box, she glanced back to Adriana, then to Mia. "You need to go to work to keep up appearances. Mia, you need to come with me."

"Wait hold on, Eislia! Stop. You're going a mile a minute here." Adriana reached out to take her arm, shock hit her; a wave of cold water, as she spotted how damned panicked Eislia looked. "Explain. What's that device? What are you doing?"

Eislia sighed and carefully set the box down on the table, she held her hands in front of her, working her thumb against her other hand's palm. A kneading worry-habit that Adriana hadn't seen her perform before. In fact, the whole time she knew her, Eislia radiated a calmness that felt unnatural. Stoic would be an easy word to apply to her, especially with how cool-headed she was back in the interrogation session she and Mia had with Eislia. Founders, that was barely a week ago, wasn't it? Time was working evil dances on Adriana's mind. With another heavy breath, Eislia looked at both Adriana, and Mia. "I did come here from up there, as I said. But I know I came here not just to get away....I did have a mission. I simply do not know what it was. I just...something about that cask, the datarods. There were details and words that seemed to bubble to the surface." She gestured to Mia. "In order to get to those specific memories I need you, Adriana, to go into my mind again via your spells. But, the way that my body works I have a massive storing of energy."

"Ah right...I um, deduced that when we first met. It nearly killed me."

"Right, and any concentrated, purposeful dive would kill you guaranteed!" She exclaimed, tapping her palm with two fingers. "And...we can't have that, can we? So, I need some Gonesteel." It was Mia's turn to protest, she shot up out of chair and got into Eislia's face.

"Wait, what!? You can't just get that shit, I mean you can't walk into a hardware store and buy some!" She huffed, Eislia simply shrugged.

“I was afraid that could have been the case...which is why I need your help, Mia.”

Adriana could not help but feel nervous about all of this. Any kind of transfer of energy is dangerous with magic, but this was an extreme case. Adding onto all of this, was the fact that Adriana wasn't exactly some memory-dive expert. In fact, her little enervation trick was just a spur-of-the-moment improvisation. She didn't even think about what she was doing, all she wanted to do was get Eislia to stop hurting Mia. Well, other-Eislia. Adriana let out a sigh and rubbed her eye. “Alright, well, I leave this task to you two. And Mia?” She shot her a glare that she hoped would catch her chaotic elf's attention. “Be nice.”

“Die in a fire, Adri!” Mia said, in a sing-song voice. She came over to wrap her arms around Adriana's waist, the gulf closed like a breath of needed air. She never wanted to take paces far from her again. Mia looked up at her. “Be safe, don't do anything stupid.” She pushed away and hurried Adriana out of the door, leaving her standing in the hallway. Adriana let out a sigh and leaned her head against the paint-flecked door. The lights flickered, almost as if they bore the weight of her sadness. Hard shadows cut against the walls, Adriana steeled herself and started off down the hallway.

Weather is a constant Forthiron, just as it is for the rest of the world. It is a reminder of the faint pulse of the very world they stood upon. The hollow corpse of a realm. Except corpses

don't usually twitch with revival over the span of centuries. So maybe more of a temporary corpse, or perhaps the death twitches of a world took far longer than a person. Adriana took a moment to marvel at the fact that she was debating world-corpses right after her love life seemed to click into place. Rather typical.

Regardless, the weather today was horrid. It was raining and at a fairly fast clip, splashes of water hit her brow as Adriana stepped outside. With a wave of her hand (she decided it was the right day to start off with magic) she cast a simple spell. The raindrops coalesced, and formed a barrier against further moist incursion. She spied a few people looking, but opted not to pay it any mind. It's not like she ever tried to hide her magical attunement, and in this city it would be foolish to do so. How one would even go about hiding such a thing was a grand puzzle to Adriana.

Then again, who was she to judge?

The spell now manifested and held on its own, Adriana tucked her hands into the pockets of her jacket, as she braced herself against a chill. The familiar sounds and smells were a warm blanket for her frazzled mind; Familiar paths she could trace her cognations along. Thumb pressed to finger tips, Adriana let out a breath and sucked in fresh wet air. She wasn't even aware she'd held her breath for so long. Worries were such comfortable bedfellows, Adriana was not sure she could let hers go for sometime.

She turned a corner and walked into the office, utter chaos

greeted her: The front door was smashed in, desks toppled, and the back room's door was laid waste. Of course, she knew all of this. She knew the why and how, but of course she had to play the part. Marcus and Hana were in the process of picking up the majority of the mess, mostly by righting desks and chairs. They both looked up as Adriana entered, the only thing she could think to say was: "What...in the hells happened here!?"

"We were kind of hoping you'd tell us, Adriana." Marcus said, standing up and stretching. "We were actually worried that something happened to you, but here you are, waltzing in like nothing happened. So...I'm assuming whatever this ruckus-" And they gestured to the mess around all of them. "-happened after you left?" Adriana nodded. "Ah, and...everything was normal when you did leave?" Adriana nodded again.

"Well....yeah, I mean I closed up shop and it was all as everything usually is." Adriana said, she shrugged and rubbed the back of her neck. "So, no one knows exactly what happened? Did...I mean were we robbed?" Marcus sighed and crossed their arms.

"Take a guess exactly what was stolen, because Hana and I checked, there's only one thing missing from the entire office." Marcus' tone told Adriana all that she needed to know. Well, she already knew. The act, however, eternally demanded her to keep this up. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair.

"So, yet again, that weird box is a source of woes? It's like it's

been a bad luck charm since we found it...maybe this is a good thing?" She said, trying to toss a joke their way.

Hana sorted at the jest, he was stacking up a few file folders on a shelf. "Yeah, maybe. But what are we going to do? Are we going to get in trouble? I mean....should we like...file something?" Marcus simply snorted out a laugh and shook their head.

"The Arbiters don't care...why should they? It's not like we're even close to a big fish in the grand scheme of things. Just one small office of knickknacks." They sighed and rubbed the bridge of their nose. "All we can do is..." Marcus sighed and looked around, putting their hands on their hips. "I'll see if I can get Jonas to drop by and fix this door. The rest of the damage is something we can deal with ourselves."

"I know someone." Adriana volunteered. "She's uh, new...a new friend and um, she's pretty handy. I'm sure I can ask her to help out and it wouldn't cost much." She shrugged limply and gestured to the back room. Marcus seemed to think this over for a moment. In terms of management, Marcus was the closest the office got, with the actual owner being some noble over in the upper echelons of Forthiron society. This entire office was more a good faith gesture on their end. Something to make the appearance of magnanimity. There were a few other clerks who worked here off and on, but the majority of work was carried out by Hana and Adriana, with Marcus doing most of the acquisitions. It dawned on Adriana how much she utterly, truly, loved this silly little office. It was so immaterial, so unimportant to the larger world, or even beyond that, but

Adriana didn't care. It was the small lives, the hard work, the little things that were oftentimes the most important matters. She sighed and waited for Marcus. Eventually, they nodded.

"Adriana, your word has always been gold to me. So, if you say she's good for fixing up the office, I trust you." They grumbled a bit as they went over to fix up the coffee station; by some miracle, the machine survived the Arbiter's rampage. Adriana took a moment to meander over to her workstation and assess its state: It wasn't too bad, some papers and files were knocked to the floor, and her chair sat tipped over. Adriana righted her chair and draped her coat over it, as always. As if the gesture begged normalcy's return. She quickly 'reorganized' her desk. Mess was the order of the day for her, as much as Adriana's mind craved order. That somehow never spilled into reality. As Adriana sorted around, she saw a small scrap of paper. Flipping it over revealed a photograph. Mia's much younger visage smiled back at her. They were at a faire, just the two of them. Someone agreed to take their picture (she was fairly certain Mia threatened them). The entire day they had was laid out in her mind's eye. It was magical. Adriana plopped herself in her chair, her cheeks hurt from the smile she wore, but she wore it well.

Those days were so far gone they felt unreal at times. Given the fact that the past year she'd been trying to forget all about them, the memories returned now as a tidal crash. She had to take a moment to calm the surge of emotion. It was vapid and distasteful, but a side effect of the condition of life. Adriana tucked the picture into her breast pocket and stood again. Her voice was a ragged truth she fought to conceal. "Why don't

"I go out and get us some coffee?" She asked, looking over to her companions.

"Ah, that'd be appreciated, Adriana. You know what I want and I assume Hana wants a—"

"Midnight tea, extra sugar." Adriana smirked as she spoke Hana's order. "I do remember things about people, occasionally." Adriana chuckled and winked at xem. Hana giggled and shook her head.

"Yeah, well...thanks Adriana and it's nice to see you happy like this." Hana's voice was so sweet and sincere, it warmed Adriana's heart. Other people might have not meant such things, but Hana did. With a nod to both of them, Adriana threw her coat back on and stepped into the cold air once more.

The day had taken rapid twists already, so much so that Adriana could not help but feel like she was on some deranged roller coaster. Odd that for the past year, the days bled into weeks. Time flowed as readily as a gut wound, seeped and sloughed into oblivion. Her life was a safe, cozy, and gray experience. One that she had the luxury of being a passive observer to. She knew the whole time she was broken; but she didn't bother to truly grasp how bad it was. Everything had been unremarkable, weighted. Adriana had a hard time getting out of bed some days. Other days, she was buzzed; possessed with an electric energy that demanded attention. It

kept her up days on end. Now though, she can feel a kind of safety, fallen over her. She could only imagine the soft threads of a blanket draped over her form.

Mia, and Eislia; two women who couldn't be more opposite, apparently held the key to this new feeling. Both of them anchored Adriana; both of them were her saviors. She hummed softly, the sound clean and crisp. Her steps felt like as she exited the office's threshold and out the small side alley it was nestled in. The street was bustling with many bodies—often a threatening crush—today it was a reminder of her place here. The people who hurried from job to home. The minds, bones, and guts that made up the living mass. The people that Adriana was born from, the people that she belonged to.

Forthiron was her blessed home.

She smiled and stepped into the cafe, the bell's musical jingle a sweet song of arrival. Adrian shuffled into the line, waiting for her order to be taken. She didn't mind the wait as she usually did, it gave her time to gather her thoughts and adjust to the altered stimuli from street to shop. Lina, the girl who usually took her orders, smiled at Adriana as she stepped to the counter.

“Oh wow, hey Adriana! How's things been for you?” Her lovely dark eyes met Adriana and the oddest change happened. She didn't feel wrong for appreciating Lina's beauty, she didn't feel shame, she didn't feel alienation. She felt warmth. Adriana smirked and put her hands on her hips.

“Well, same old, I’m just getting an order for the office to perk up my compatriots after our office was trashed.”

“Oh yeah, I heard there was a huge ruckus last night! The grapevine even told me that it was the Arbiters!” In between this casual exchange, Adriana offered her drink order, and did a good job (at least she felt) of feigning surprise.

“Hmm, Arbiters, well....maybe we should bill them for the damages!” Both of them laughed and Adriana paid for her drinks and took the tray. “Have a good day, Lina. And...stay safe.”

“You too, Adri!” She smiled and waved her away. Adriana turned on her heel to leave the shop when she nearly ran into someone. A semi-familiar face greeted her, Adriana had to take a moment to register exactly who it was. “Ah” she said, as she realized it was the magi from that other night. This time, they were wearing a heartbreakingly expensive jacket: bright blue with a white fur collar, their pants were tight, their boots were fine and the hat that adorned their head was tastefully exquisite. For a moment, they looked like a fine doll, with features so immaculate that the hand ached to touch. Then however, those features hardened, cold eyes stared into Adriana, but a smile curved the frost-painted lips.

“Ah, our mystery guest, the dance continues...” They gestured to the street outside. “Why don’t we take this next song to share a few steps? This one hates wasted fateful meetings. The threads wove us here, it would be a sacrament to abandon that.” Again, those eyes glanced her over, then rested on the

tray of drinks Adriana had.

“Oh...right, right! My office isn’t far.” She pursed her lips, was that a threat or simple statement of fact? Was Adriana trying to let them know she wasn’t alone? That help could be summoned in a call? She wasn’t sure what game she was being played here; she only knew she had to play it.

“Good.” The sole response she got as the magi turned and let. Adriana stumbled up beside her, her balance of the tray in a precarious position; her hands. The shift from shaded interior to brighter exterior didn’t phase Adriana and she sighed a bit at the cool air. “Many things sing to me one that you were much more than eyes told. I feel justified in being so right, but matters of smaller import first: Why the need to make me a fool?”

“Ah, shit...right...I’m sorry! I was so nervous and you are extremely beautiful tha-“ she was cut off by a hand in her face.

“More insults?” They hissed. “Truth is a rare steel in this life, but even a shred was expected.” They paused. “A job?”

Adriana felt trapped, even in the open air of the streets—she could simply run away. This felt a bit more though, it was one thing to have business be business, but the idea of embarrassing such a lovely creature. It did feel a tad profane.

And thus, against her better judgment, she nodded.

“Personal?”

“Ah, in a sense...a...favor for a friend, I was roped into it, to be fair. And...for what it is worth I AM sorry that it had to play out that way.” Adriana’s senses told her that it was perhaps the right move to make a personal plea, the magi raised their shoulders and let them drop in a shrug.

“Hmmm, favor for a slight: Adriana, you will take me to dinner, and hear my case.”

“Wait wait...dinner? And case, what case!?” She sighed as the tray she held onto prevented her from raising her hands in surrender. “Hold on, what even is your name? I feel it’s really improper for me to be accepting a dinner date from someone whom I don’t even know the name of!” It was a valid protest; but also a gambit she hoped would work. The magi smiled at her, looking up into her eyes, they reached up to place a hand on her chest. Ice met fire, it took all her strength and will not to have her heart beat like a drum.

“The fates gave this one the name of Vikaros. But the surname is unearned by the magi Adriana.”

“Well, fair enough right? I...I guess I can help you with this. When?”

“Tonight.” They stopped and gestured to the open-office entryway. “Do not let this discordance keep you, Magi. I will see you when it is time.”

“Wait, but...” It hit her that this...Vikaros might know where she lived. It felt moot to try and be evasive, so she just sighed.

“Of course; see you then.”

Magic was the most curious thing. Somehow, this appealing creature, who's form was a magnet to Adriana's eyes, slipped from her vision. As if the entire world blinked, as if a sheet was thrown over her eyes, and nothing. A fading blue into the crowd. She rubbed her face with her free hand and sighed.

Of course fate wasn't going to let her off easy.

Allies & Enemies

The day was a mire of dust and sweat.

Hard work; actual labor, was not exactly Adriana's purveyance. Most of the time she kept her hands clean of any hard work. However, Adriana made sure to keep herself in shape. Her body was not as honed as Mia's, whose was akin to a blade sought purpose. Mia kept her body refined and deadly; Adriana kept hers functional. Today she was very thankful for such functionality. Because right about now, Adriana was sore and tired, but not dead. Luckily, Marcus gave her the next day off.

By the time she climbed the stairs to her apartment, all Adriana wanted to do was sleep. While the thought held a seductive pull to it, she knew that deep in her mind, she would not be able to rest yet. She had that little dinner date with the mysterious Vikaros, who knows what they have planned for her. Things were getting more and more complicated by the second. Threads slipped from her fingers, slicing through flesh and rending careful plans to gory mess.

Adriana fumbled with her keys, and managed to get it in on the third try (she couldn't help but chuckle at the idea of Mia making a joke of that) and swung the door open. Mia and Eislia were there, with a trunk that she outright recognized as Mia's. "I'm bringing some stuff here Adri, it's been a year so fuck it, we're gonna barrel through this." She said just as Adriana came in. Despite her jelly legs, Adriana smiled at the sight of both of them. Mia, of course, looked flawless. Eislia was in her usual apron, her kind eyes looked over to her.

Eislia spotted the sorry state that Adriana was in, for she came rushing over and helped her sit on the bed. "Hmph, you look a bit worse for wear, no offense; sit, sit. I'm working on dinner." Adriana tried to protest, but as her jacket was helped off, she felt all protest die a solemn death. Adriana leaned herself against the headboard, closed her eye, and sighed. No time for such things right now, her eye snapped back open

"Ok...let's start with you two: What happened today? Why is one of Mia's chests here, and did you get the steel?" Eislia smiled at Adriana and bowed her head, turned back to the kitchen and continued to cook. Mia came over and sat down on the bed beside Adriana.

"Alright, so...things went smoothly at work right? Your cover is intact?" She looked at her, a hand placed on Adriana's cheek. Mia's beauty was like a blade against the throat; dancing atop a racing pulse. Her guts twisted in a pain that reminded her of a stab wound. Adriana reached up to squeeze Mia's hand. Again, time melted away; past crashed into present.

“Yeah, it’s fine. No one suspects anything.” She didn’t add in the part about the whole magi-date thing. Not yet.

“Fine...fine. We can work with ‘fine’. Um, the day was uh...a learning experience. I was able to show Eislia around a bit; we stopped off at my place and I grabbed a chest of some things, cause fuck it...I want to spend more time here. And...well, I was able to call in a favor and get this.” She slid into Ariana’s palm something cold and hard. A slip of metal, gone steel; it was easy to tell. The metallic object pulled at the threads woven through Adriana’s being. Trying to pull in her magic. Just as anything made of the metal did. It was like a dull ache, but not unbearable—especially with her feet hurting so much.

Adriana rolled the slip of metal in her palm a bit, felt the weight of it, the quality. “This’ll do for what we need, that’s for sure. I mean I have no idea exactly what Eislia’s going to do with it, but it’s pure.” Any magi could tell from touch alone, the tightness of her chest was clear confirmation.

“Yeah, well if it was impure I’d be having words with the asshole who skimped on me.” Mia snorted as she leaned her head on Adriana’s shoulder. “Please. Please tell me I can just, like, lay here all night?” How did she know that there were complications that stood in front of that request? It was like she was baiting Adriana’s needed response. She sighed.

“About that...” Mia looked up at Adriana, instead of a glare, she was met with a smirk from her partner. Yeah, Mia knew. Sometimes Mia was insufferable with how much she knew.

“Yeah, thought so. You don’t normally work your jaw like that all the time.” Mia tapped Adriana’s jawline, tracing the finger down teasingly. “So, what’s up? What new complication are we dealing with now?” Adriana sighed as she wrapped an arm around Mia. All along, this was her goal, her means, the algorithm by which her life organized. To be here with Mia, and safe. She took in a deep breath, the perfume of cooking filled the room. She looked over to see Eislia busying herself at the oven, her joy radiating through the small space. “We need a bigger apartment.” Adriana mumbled, eliciting a light smack on her chest from Mia.

“Focus miss romance, what’s the complication?” Mia, yet again, was the steel grounding to Adriana’s fanciful mind.

“Right, complication: Do you remember that Magi from the function—the one where we stole the book?” Mia nodded. “Right. So...they tracked me down.” Mia sat up, the look in her eyes was that of the ‘take care of it’ variety. Adriana waved her hand. “I don’t think they know about my affiliations. They want help with something and....well I’m going to be meeting with them tonight.” Mia deflated a bit, as if a puppy was denied a toy. No longer being the subject of such Mia-based harassment, instead she received the protective side of Mia. She was unsure how she felt about no longer being a target for the edge of it.

That might say way too much about her than she cared to look into right now.

“Well, guess you can’t help it. Just uh....” Mia sat up and looked

around, spying the decrepit far talker machine resting on the desk. "Give us a ring if it gets hectic or bad or...your gut tells you to, ok? No maverick shit." She laid her hand on Adriana's chest again, this time, Mia leaned against her more. Adriana laid back to try to playfully evade, but Mia followed. They kissed. Such sweet nectar that had been so long in the harvest. When they parted, Mia held her gaze on Adriana. She could see the savoring in her eyes. "Promise to not be stupid." Not a question, a statement. Adriana nodded. "Good, now let's get you slutted up for this little dinner date!" She pushed off of Adriana and padded over to Eislia.

Eislia chuckled as Mia came up to steal something from the pan she was cooking with, the two of them exchanged glances, and Adriana felt warmth in her heart again. At least they got along. Adriana got out of bed herself, she rubbed her aching back and sighed. "Right, let's just...keep it to my style ok?"

"Well, I mean I only have what YOU have in the place to work with, Adri." Mia countered. She headed over to the closet Adriana hung most of her suits in. Mia tsked as she rifled through the assortment "Your last outfit was decent, if a bit predictable. But you need to show this magi that you are modern, hip, and cool!" She sighed. "And fuckable, that's just a given."

"Mia, what are you doing? Just tossing me at EVERY interested party? I don't even think they fall into that category."

"I'm just being a good...partner." She made a face. "Still trying to get used to that title-but I'll learn-Anyway, it's more that I

want to just...give you your best foot forward, you know!?” Her smile held within it deceit, but the more playful side of such a thing. Adriana was too relieved to see Mia in such spirits to worry about it though. Eventually, Mia pulled out a few garments. She pursed her lips, then nodded. “Alright, that works.” She set them on the bed.

A dark pair of pants with some button up shirt that Adriana didn’t remember buying, along with a vest that looked like something she got on a whim. She placed her hand on the fabric; soft and satin-like. Mia grinned. “You bought that when you first got real money from the Family.” She said, Adriana looked up to her.

“Damn...you don’t forget anything, do you?”

“Yeah....Wait hold on.” Mia looked over her shoulder at Eislia, who was putting the finishing touches on dinner. She looked back at Adriana and stepped closer. “A lot of shit is happening, a lot. And I know that like, in the grand scheme of things this thing doesn’t matter...but that night, the little mission you did for me?” Mia tilted her head, waited for Adriana’s nod which she gave dumbly. Satisfied, Mia walked over to the chest and opened it, taking out a small leather-bound book. “I dunno, with everything going on. I guess...I’m sick of hiding shit from you.” She pushed the book into Adriana’s hands. “Check the last date.”

Adriana flipped open the book; a journal, and leafed over to the last entry. She read it in silence, a smile on her lips pressed her cheeks. The entire time that she knew Mia, she had been

hoping and searching for her parents. On the surface, she joked she didn't care: They were probably addicts or drunks who dumped her at the orphanage. Her scoffs and laughs hid the pain Adriana could clearly see. This whole time, it was a wound the world and fate had inflicted on her. A wound that made Mia angry, it made her spit and claw. Her being all fangs. As she read the entry, her mouth opened a bit. A lead. All this time, Mia had been looking. All along.

Adriana's smile grew even wider.

She grabbed Mia into a hug. "There is nothing about this that's minor or small, holy shit! You have a lead! Mia, we can actually start looking for....I mean even if it's just answers. Mia...we might be able to find your people!" It was hard for Adriana to hide her excitement at this. Even if Mia was trying to downplay it, she herself could not.

"Yeah well, I dunno. I just wanted to tell you. And also...you helped get this. All I had was a vague lead of a possibility of something like this being in that safe, but I lucked out, I just...I'm." She hesitated. "You and I? We'll hunt it down?"

"Without a doubt, Mia." Adriana nodded

Mia sighed and patted Adriana's stomach. Electric butterflies danced from the site of her touch, Adriana sucked in a small breath at the closeness she was now relished. "Damn, what the hell are we winding up into, Adri?"

"Each other, as always." There was no hesitation whatsoever

to the answer. It was fate and Adriana readily accepted it. Her relationship with Mia was a river; set in both origin and termination.

“Alright, whatever.” The devilish elf stepped back. “Way too much mushy stuff, Adri. Go get cleaned and dressed and I’m going to see about final checks for all our more sordid deals.” It was as good an excuse as any, but Adriana knew that Mia simply needed an out. She had to run for some air. That was fine, there was (as she said) a lot going on. Above most things, Mia was a creature that needed space. She could not be still, as Adriana could, she had to be moving. Endless vectors and velocity for her.

Mia gave Eislia a wave and stepped out of the apartment, a last look at Adriana with a wink at the end. Pleading and joy, comedy and tragedy; Mia.

“Well, at least you have time to eat, yes?” Eislia came up to place her hand on Adriana’s shoulder. “An unexpected date should not disturb a well-made meal, hm?”

With the chaotic flurry of the past day, Adriana was grateful to sit down to dinner with Eislia. Not much time to savor everything, including the company. However, Eislia was as patient as she always was. After scrubbing the grime of the day off of her in the shower, she threw on some comfortable clothes and sat herself down for a shared meal.

It was a lovely reprieve, even if it was marred by Eislia’s anxiety. Adriana could clearly tell that the prior business was

bothering her companion. How could it not? From what Eislia said, it was troubling. The idea of her escaping the Ultimacy? Even that was hard to fathom. On top of that, some secret mission or deed? And having that potentially involve this cask; it was quite a bit. For the first time since meeting her, Adriana felt sorry for Eislia. She was always so resolute, so stalwart, it was hard to think of her as scared, but what she did took guts that Adriana was certain she herself lacked.

Instinctively, she reached out to take her hand in the middle of Eislia's description of the dinner's preparation. She stopped, and looked at her. "What is it, Adriana?"

"Nothing, I just. I hadn't considered until this moment how brave you are. I hope that this place, the city...that this life, is the succor you were seeking." Adriana was never one for comfort, it was in short supply in Forthiron. She had a bit of experience with her and Mia; they often huddled together at night and tried to keep each other going. This was a bit harder, the fear was more ephemeral, less present. Still, she wanted her words and gesture to matter to Eislia. The returned smile told her it was at least appreciated. Eislia's smile was so painfully warm, silk draped over steel. Such hardness must have been her norm, yet she was so soft and kind.

Wondrous.

"Yes it is." her deep voice came out barely a mumble, her hands reached for her cheek and Adriana caught a rather girlish look in her eyes. As if she had been swept off her feet. To think she could be the part of such a unique woman's fairytale was

effervescent.

“Good. I hope all of the complications that are coming with it aren’t dimming this dawn for you?” Eislia shook her head.

The meal passed with little event, and Adriana was happy that she could say the words she wanted to; to offer her admiration to one who deserved it. She’d been spilling her guts so much to Mia, it only felt fair. Both felt sincere in their own ways. Both women filled such sacred places in Adriana’s heart. It was so strange, but natural. She didn’t think that she was the type for polyamory, and yet it was as simple as breathing to her she could not imagine the lack of it.

After Adriana helped Eislia with the after dinner cleanup, she changed into her chosen outfit and bid her good night. An actual parting that felt jovial in nature. A celebration of their meeting again, not a grieving over the severance. She stepped out of the apartment complex and into the cold air. The peeled paint of the doorway was like bark against her fingers, broken and dry. The moon was out and it bathed the city in a pale shroud of ghost lights. Adriana smiled to herself as she watched the lunar light play with the magic in the air. It created an ethereal pale spark with each meeting, a dance only she and her fellow magi could see. Her gaze was caught from it though, as she heard approaching footsteps.

Vikaros was here.

They smiled and bowed their head in greeting. "Caught up in watching the moon fire?"

"Hmm, yeah I used to do it all the time when I was kid. Thought I was mad for a long while...No one else seemed to see it but me." She felt a hand on her arm and looked into the eyes of the other magi. A slight upturn of their brow. Ruby lips that held more secrets than truth.

"Hmm...ever the mysterious one; weren't taken in as a child? The watchers never found you?"

"The watchers don't go to the slums." Adriana said dismissively. Her hand did not go to Vikaros'. A pretty face wasn't the sole key to earning Adriana's touch. It's not like she was going to leap into a trusting engagement already.

"Fair point, a shame, you seem very sharp."

"I got past you didn't I?" Adriana smirked.

"And a few guards, and several enchantments....and about three inches of Gonesteel, so yes... your deeds sing of a certain sharpness."

"Oh wow, is this how compliments work with you, cause I think I'll pass." Vikaros laughed as they took Adriana's arm and led her down the street.

"This food-place sings to me." They gestured down the street. "It is safe, and as in tales I have heard, neutral. Or, is your fear

so large as to be a mountain?” they teased. Adriana sniffed and adjusted her tie, it felt tight all of a sudden. She could not help but think about Mia’s seeming enthusiasm for Adriana dating more people. This was a different case, and she wasn’t sure how much Mia knew or was just joking. Vikaros was beautiful, that’s clear as day. Beautiful things, however, can hide danger. It was more than obvious for Adriana.

After all, Mia taught her that.

They both walked into the previously-discussed ‘food-place’, (definitely a front,) and sat down at a corner table. Adriana felt pin pricks on her skin, heated points of urgency. The dining room was dark and well-furnished. With an understated pallet of dark browns and savory reds. Meat walls, the thought made Adriana snort, but she forced her attention to Vikaros. It wasn’t hard. Although, if this was neutral ground, she was a fairy princess.

How simple Adriana’s life had become: a series of changes that urged reaction. She was shaped by events that she had little control over. From Eislia’s arrival to Mia’s turn. It was all welcome, of course, but she’d noticed that lately she was much more impulse driven. Now, for instance, she found herself openly admiring the magi in front of her. A cut gem, chaos sought perfection. Their magic, she could feel, was raw—it spread before her—yet, it was so very controlled. Whatever constructs of the arcane arts that Adriana had learned were all from her own instincts and books of long-dead mentors. People she’d never met, who gave her guidance of the most valuable sort. People who probably would have never lifted a

finger to help her. The shadows of their intellect left carved on the pages. Repeated and copied, years of magical study at her fingertips.

Despite all of that, she had no actual teachers. No one to actually tell her how magic works. To reveal to her the divine aperture, the means by which all things sat entwined. Lovers with tangled limbs, such is the nature of magic; to bind.

Vikaros, however, was a fully-trained magi. They'd so much as said, but also, Adriana could tell. Something about their stance and makings that screamed discipline. They sat across from her, waiting for them to be alone. Adriana removed her jacket and draped it over the back of the chair, she shifted in her seat, suddenly felt the urge to arm herself. "Well, now that it is calm and quiet we need to discuss plans, yes?"

"Yes, naturally." Adriana looked around, scanned for flashes of steel or sparks of magic. Her spine screamed to her that she was in the lion's den. Best to abscond without flesh rent. But, here she was, her gaze flicked back to Vikaros' beautiful eyes. "So, what plans are in store for me, and what can I do that won't violate any of our delicately balanced...treaties?"

They laughed softly and tilted their head at Adriana. Authentic or deceptive reaction? She wasn't good enough as faces to determine, so she opted to assume the latter.

"I need to refine myself." She started.

"You seem to ooze refinement; are you sure?" Adriana raised

a brow, risked a bit of flirtation; she took the slight waver in Vikaro's voice as victory.

"Ah, well in some ways I do." They took the compliment with grace as they took everything, it seemed. Vikaros placed a hand on their chest, fingers traced their collar and Adriana forced her gaze to not linger. "I have lived this life, as a doll would; set in a purpose and placed in a window..." Their voice drifted off; hesitation. "This is not...pleasing to my mind anymore, I do not wish to lean upon, I wish to be leaned upon. I am not as expert in combat as I would like to be. And if we are both being truthful...it would behoove us to prepare for the worst, no?" Adriana sat back in her seat, she nodded her thanks as some wine and water was brought to the table. A second's hesitation (was it drugged?) hit her. She took a glass and sipped at it.

"But what kind of compensation am I getting? I mean....you are asking me to better arm someone who could potentially become an enemy one day? That seems...unwise, right?"

"Hmm, this is a truth you speak. But I have a reward already in mind: I have something you might want." They set something on the table, a book that seemed to be bound in metals of silver and copper hues. "Tools for the smith, perfection for your craft." They smiled. Adriana looked down, her fingers twitched. She wanted to grab it up and devour the knowledge within. She relented and sat back, waited, and held onto her patience. Adriana was always bad with restraining herself around anything arcane. It consumed her much as the passions of life consumed Mia.

Yet again, they were an odd mirror to one another.

Adriana tore her mind away from Mia (she found that harder and harder to do lately) and focused on the task at hand. Technically, it would not be a violation of any terms if she provided any sort of instruction to anyone else. Adriana's techniques, spells, and experience were entirely her own, save for the means by which she learned them. Due to her unique status in the world, she had to come up with a lot on her own; books can only teach so much. Therefore, she was perfectly within her right to offer such instruction.

She also had to admit it was hard to pass up the chance to see what this magi was like...in a fight. Head out of the gutter, Adriana, she chastised herself. The wine was rather good, she noted. It dawned on her that she had not given an answer, simply took a drink and looked to the server to place her order. She opted for something simple, and looked at Vikaros. "Well, I accept...on the condition that if I feel in any way that this is a setup. I'm out and you don't contact me again. Got it?"

Adriana smirked as she analyzed their reaction. Vikaros did not show much. They were a different beast than Mia, or Eislia for that matter. Both of them, in their own ways, wore their emotions on their sleeve. Maybe it was to Adriana's benefit she was never a master of reading intents and face. Or, maybe Adriana was sufficiently lucky. She assumed it was something in between those two. After a moment, Vikaros nodded.

"Agreed. What time is best for this new song? Do you need to compose or can you simply...start straight away?" She so

desperately wanted to say ‘there’s nothing straight about me’ but Adriana withheld. Her mind flitted back to Mia and Eislia, both were expecting her to be gone for a while, might as well strike while the iron’s hot.

“Tonight. Everything I could possibly require to instruct you is um, on hand.” She wiggled her fingers to punctuate her point. Vikaros raised a brow, slender fingers resting on a delicate chin. After a moment, those pursed lips curved into a sickle-smile yet again.

“Acceptable. Now, shall we enjoy this meal? It would be a waste not to.” Their orders were placed before them as if on command. Adriana had to admit, it looked good. Food looked good again to her. She felt as if life was there to be drunk in, no longer spat out. No longer does pleasure bring hot-guilt and irritation on the skin. She grinned. Maybe things were turning around?

Even if Adriana had just reignited her relationship with Mia, she still had to give her space. So, she did have the time for this training session. Regrettably, she also knew that Mia would not love the idea of her training a rival magi. The thing was that Mia did not know that and what she didn’t know couldn’t hurt her. Founders, Adriana felt so smart right now. Regret of folly was for future Adriana; that bitch owed her plenty anyway.

She stood in a courtyard, a neighborhood far from familiar

territory. She did know enough to request a spot that was more neutral, thus, they were in a slice of land that neither family had claimed. Such zones were rare, but useful overall. Everyone needs a meeting place that meets such requirements. Even if their meeting place wasn't as neutral as Vikaros had said, they at least agreed to more even terms now. Adriana wasn't sure, but she got the sense it was a show of trust. 'Look what I could do, but didn't' sort of thing. Misguided, but everyone who works this life has fucked-up senses of trust. She decided to let that slide and move on for now. Adriana idly wondered if any of these thoughts factored into a regular citizen's mind on a daily basis. She huffed and removed her jacket, setting it aside.

The cold air struck her arms as she rolled up her sleeves, turned to face Vikaros. They stood, impassive and inflexible, and Adriana sighed. "Ok, you look like you're in class, ease up." She shifted her feet apart and held her hands loosely. "Like this, you need to be mobile and active. This is combat, you will be getting stabbed and shot at. Spells are obviously your concern, but everyone is going to try to get you." She smirked. "Think of yourself as the main thorn in everyone's side."

"Hmph, alright..." Vikaros did as Adriana instructed, loosened up their stance and held their hands at less stiff angles. "But how does one counter that?"

"I mean....end the fight early, holding back is for a protracted encounter. And well...having a good martialist you can depend on? That's worth its weight in gold." She almost mentioned

Mia, but had to hold back. Damn she really was back to her sappy old self. At least, a bit. Vikaros nodded at this and tapped their chin with a finger.

“Understood, I shall sing kinder songs to my allies; give them reason to take up the dance for me.”

“Um....yeah, I mean....sure.” She cleared her throat and started to weave a simple spell. “You have limited stores of energy, which you know, and so efficiency is your main ally here. The two things you need to do is worry about the close ranged threats and address the long range ones.” She plucked from threads of arcane weaving two shards of un-reality. Adriana flicked them at Vikaros. “We’ll start with your shielding and deflection. And see from there.” The other magi’s eyes went wide—Adriana could see the whites from here—and barely caught the shards in time. “Hey hey...If I wanted to kill you don’t you think I’d be smarter about it?” She asked as she caught Vikaros’ glare.

“Moving on.” Adriana cleared her throat. “You also have to worry about burnout. Now...we’ve both experienced that, right?” A nod. “Not fun. Agony even. You can guess that in a fight, it’s about as useful to be in that state as dead. So avoid it. The main thing to consider is to keep yourself never close to the edge.” She flung a few more shards out. “Keep your energy usage smooth. For you that won’t be a problem.” Adri tried to keep herself calm, but the memories of such moments tore their way back to the forefront. Pain is such a harsh teacher that burns their lessons in one’s mind. Impossible to ignore.

“Fair point.” They sighed and readied themselves. Adriana plucked more and tossed them at Vikaros, taking a lazy casual line of attack. She curved each toss, the shards barely perceivable to the naked eye. They were an excellent way to rend flesh—as anything in their path was slightly unmade. A thread ripped from a vital point of cloth. Oddly, they are the most basic tool of any magi. Adriana preferred the style and fear effect of lightning though. Pure energy that is as untamed as it is dangerous. A beautiful explosion of anathema.

Her hands moved seemingly of their own accord; more shards were flung through the air, arcing around cover to strike her target. To their credit, Vikaros deflected each strike with ease. They were extremely refined—a jealous sentiment—Adriana admitted. As a magi, she had been chasing such purity her whole life. Those who were handed everything, whose training was sterling silver, were her object of envy. Familiar strings of anger opened up in her veins, the heat of it setting her collar damp. Adriana drew in a breath to calm her emotions, she needed intellect, not passion right now.

Adriana changed tactics. Vikaros was good with basic attacks and those that came from different angles, it was best to try to get them off balance. With a grin creasing her handsome features, Adriana pulled a trick from her sleeve. She wove energy through the air, two fingers to the pulse of the world, and strummed. Vibration and wind rose up from her. The small gust swirled past Adriana, swept over the courtyard’s cobblestones, and hit Vikaros. The force was enough to get their feet out from under them Adriana pulled her arms back. The winds answered, mimicking her motion and the hapless

magi tumbled ass over teakettle and landed in a refined delicate heap at her feet.

The look in Vikaros' face read volumes to her: confusion and anger were notes to the song of admiration that played out in their features. They held a hand up which Adriana took and graciously brought them to their feet. "So, you might not face that all the time, but you have to watch out for any dirty tricks. Remember....no one is going to play by your rules out here, ok?" They dusted off their clothes and let out a sigh. Frustration flowed out with each breath. Adriana could tell; she'd been in the same position when she was all alone learning new paths through the arcane tapestry.

"Understood. Do not break the rhythm on my accord. More." That was the edge Adriana had been seeking, the edge glimpsed back at the party. She smiled.

"Alright, let me set up some targets and we'll work on priority." She grinned and patted their arm, then turned to figure out how to cobble together something. Adriana's mind flitted back to the odd encouragement Mia had given her. She still wasn't sure how to parse that. They had been so far apart for a year. The wound was still jagged and fresh. Maybe Mia was just compensating for the space between? The yawning gap begged mending; Mia and Adriana were not healers of any sort. She shrugged to herself as she tied some trash cans to broom sticks. It wasn't a major puzzle to work out. It was more akin to a knot, one that was slowly undoing itself. In time, her and Mia would be set right. Their own affections held gravity over any fate that dared split them. These past

few days were evidence of that. No wonder they had pushed each other back to arms length; it would have been so foolishly easy to slam back into one another.

She found herself laughing lightly as she finished setting up the target dummies. It was such a stupid, simple solution. Adriana and Mia treated it as if the world had died. As if their petty little relationship mattered to the very cosmos itself. It was just two kids-dressing-as-adults being jackasses. She shook her head.

That was all behind her now.

She paced over to Vikaros and cracked a grin. "Ok, they." She pointed to the dummies. "Are colour coded. I will call out a colour, you hit the right dummy. I'll speed up as the 'battle' wages on. And throw surprises your way. Sounds good?" Vikaros nodded, their brow knit.

"It is clear that you hold trust for me, and I extend it as well." Adriana blinked.

"Oh, shit! Right right I mean yeah I'm not going to hurt you, Vikaros. You bought me dinner."

"You barely ate any of it."

"Not relevant!" She hissed.

Duality

When she returned to the apartment, Mia had taken extra time to enjoy the dinner that Eislia had cooked. As a kid who grew up on the streets and had no idea where her next meal was. You always finished your food, especially if someone was feeding you (provided it wasn't poison, that is.) One never knew where the next meal came from, and for Mia she had to make sure her body was fueled at all times. No finger wiggling to get her out of a situation. It was all Mia. Well, Mia and steel—the second most natural bedmate she could think of.

She leaned her feet up on the ratty old table that Adriana called a dining table. It was most likely something the weirdo had dredged up from a dump somewhere. “Man, where did you learn how to cook like this!? I feel like I’ve never been this full in ages, Eislia!”

The larger woman, the absolutely massive woman, Eislia came out of the kitchen. She had on some apron that looked like it belonged to a grandma, furthering the bizarre dissonance

of her overall look. Memories slammed her in the face: that night when she and Adri fought Eislia, or, that other Eislia. It was the first time she literally couldn't kill someone. Not for lack of trying. Mia tried to blink away the scene as it played out. It was relentless though, that night bubbled up viciously into her mind's eye; those eyes. That blank, cold determination as Mia watched the blade come down. It was only Adriana's staff and quick wits that saved her. Founders, yet again.

It wasn't fair to Eislia to dwell like that, so Mia sighed and looked at her. "Well, I do not exactly know how....I simply do." She shrugged those massive shoulders, prompted Mia to raise a brow.

"Heh, weird. But I mean you kind of cornered the market on weird haven't you?" She smirked as Eislia put her hands on her hips. She frowned, which would probably make Mia feel bad, if she were the sort of woman who felt bad about things.

"Maybe I do, and maybe that is just how things are?"

"Well....Adri seems to like you just fine. Never saw anything like that with her."

"Ah." Eislia took off her apron and set it on the chair which she sat at. "I suppose you and I do need to discuss that. You were quiet when we were on our little mission...I had hoped you'd talk about things then."

"I don't mix business and personal crap. Uh....often." Mia smirked. "But yeah I guess that we do, huh?" To Mia's

surprise, she really was serious about this whole ‘making it work’ thing. Including actually buddying up to Eislia. So odd that Adriana was into this multi-thing; but, she should have guessed that about her partner. Adriana’s heart was always so friggen big. She felt so much, even if she crushed it all down. It felt so damned natural that she’d have too much love in her heart for just one woman. Mia shook her head. “So yeah here’s the deal: As you already know Adri and I grew up together since we were kids. It’s been a weird kind of back and forth thing...We were friends at the core, but you know both of us were...” Mia sighed and fidgeted with a fork, her fingertips pushed against the steel’s surface. “...It’s such a fucking cop out to say that life in Forthiron is hard. A massive cop out to say that it was hard for us and maybe I did shit I shouldn’t have or...didn’t want to.” This was turning into something Mia didn’t want to have happen. Why was she spilling her guts to this woman? She leaned forward and stood up, leaned close to Eislia and frowned. “Ok, no no no! I’m not saying EVERY little thing to you! Look, the bottom line is that somehow, you got through to her and yeah, sure I think it’s weird...but whatever. I’m not gonna isolate her and play the jealous bitch, I know how this shit ends for women like me.”

“That might be a rather fatalistic outlook, don’t you agree?” Eislia’s features were granite calm, not a facade too; the real deal. Everything about her was painfully honest, Mia learned.

“Fatalistic? Realistic? Same difference. I’m just saying...I dunno? I’m ok with this? You’re weird, but from what I can tell have her best interests at heart so, I dunno.” Mia accented her words with her palms slapped on the table. She pushed

off, and in two paces she flopped onto the bed. Paint-peeled ceiling stared back at her. "She's special, I'm not. I get that. It just hurts a bit."

"What hurts." The damn rock asked.

"Being...discarded like this. Not mattering. Having to make my life you know?" She rolled onto her side. "Fuck it: I'm an elf with no family, no ancestors; severed." She made a snipping motion with her hand. "No speaking with ancestors, no exchanges of secrets, nothing. And it...sucks you know? No easy way out for me. No magic either! All I have is myself to make my way through this shitty life. I don't matter to anyone in this city. I never have and I never will." She sighed. "But...to Adri? I do matter. That's what keeps me going. And I guess." She blew a raspberry, flopped back onto her back, and rested her hands on her stomach. "You also mattering to her hurts a bit, ok? I'm selfish, big deal!" Mia was hopeful that this little display was enough to at least get Eislia off her back. Truth was tossed into it, like pills in dog food.

"Well...Mia, I would just say that you have her. Adriana has a bond with you I could never take. Maybe you need to..." She hesitated, Mia rolled her head to the side to look at her. "Take some time to let this recent wound heal."

"Fuck that and fuck 'time heals all wounds!'" She sat up. "I'm SO sick of healing, that's all I did this past year!"

"Did you? I saw your apartment, you had enough beer bottles in there to build your own glass house with which to toss

stones from.” Eislia countered.

“Oh, har har.” Mia scoffed.

“The point is. We are...relatively safe, things are stable. Use that, drink it in and appreciate it.”

“Well, ok sure...whatever. But what about this whole, dream dive thing!?” She gestured to the gone steel, which sat on the desk where Adriana kept all her books. Eislia’s gaze followed her hand, the massive warrior-bitch frowned and shrugged her massive shoulders.

In Mia’s opinion, Eislia’s arms were a bit much. Like, come on girl, chill. She kept these thoughts to herself though. Stupid giant woman.

“I am...unsure. The signs point to something serious, but I remember so little that it could be nothing. I am hoping that it is, in fact, nothing. I hope that this cask is just a matter of a similar series of sensory interpretations that triggered a memory. It is...hard to tell.”

“Right, cause you and Adri were babbling on about some like, other memory...thing?” Eislia only responded to Mia’s question by tapping her temple. Mia nodded, as if that helped clear it all up. “Sure....so uh....let’s just assume things aren’t fucked up and this isn’t something that you have to care about...what’s your plan?”

“Is...this conversation shifting over to life plans?”

“Hey, you sucker-punched me with feelings, it’s only fair, I think.” Mia flopped back down, she rolled a bit, drew in a breath and sighed. “Adri needs to fucking clean her sheets.”

“Fair enough.” Eislia got back up, gathered the dishes which Mia in no way offered to help with, and started to get them cleaned. She could hear her massive footsteps as she paced to the kitchen and back. The clink of dishes. Oddly comforting sounds. Mia wished she knew what home felt like. “Well, I simply want Adriana and I—and you by the way—to have a good life. A simple life. My only great ambition is getting to work on the spark rails.”

“Really? Why there?” She asked.

“Mmm, I like machines, I think that I have some kind of connection to them, either I used to work with them or I simply always admired them.”

“Eh, I guess that makes sense.” Mia nodded as she continued to bore her gaze into the ceiling. Working on the spark rails? She couldn’t imagine it; All that smoke, the stink of lightning magic. It would not sit well with Mia. She wasn’t the ‘work’ type of person. She was more the ‘make other people work for you’ kind of gal. “So...just that’s it? No ambition?”

“What are yours?” Eislia countered. Mia had to stop at that. Did she actually have any ambitions?

“Um...It wouldn’t hurt if I could find out what happened to me, who abandoned me?” heat rose from her voice, a pain stuck

through her; anger swelled inside her and claimed its due from Mia's brain stem. "Maybe...I'd like to have the chance to face them; my parents." She sat up, working her hands into claws and sneered. "Was it worth it, huh!? Well I didn't need you, you fucking loser-ass parents!" She shrugged it off, her armor had been barely hanging on lately. "The usual."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "This little... reconciliation wouldn't end with two dead older elves would it?"

"Depends!" Mia spat back.

"Understandable." Eislia's impassive nature was frustrating, it made her impossible to argue with. She flexed her hands, rage numbly tugged at her nails. Her emotions lately, had been rebellious, betraying all control she'd built up over her life.

Such was the effect Adriana had on her.

Eislia's presence was massive in the room, behemoth. Mia made a mental note to never ask her to sneak anywhere. Her very being seemed to call attention, not just with the mass, but her spirit was a cacophony. For a moment, she turned away, her gaze catching a sight: sat on the nightstand was an old pict capture. She scooted over and picked it up. A younger Mia and an oddly-smiling Adriana started back up at her. Bubbling effervescent bile hit the roof of her mouth. Her hand clamped over her mouth; the past always dredged up such lovely filth.

She traced her finger over the image of her own face. One unburdened by so much, yet to be forged by blood and deed. Mia was amazed at how bright her eyes used to be. Dark, yet shining; the light at a cave's mouth. She sighed and put it back down, they had gone to the faire. "She was so fucking stubborn getting that prize." She finally spoke aloud. Footsteps thudded behind her.

"Oh?"

"Old memories, shut up, it's...it's nothing." She sighed. Nothing means anything. Not to the world at large. Her and Adriana, all their problems? They meant jack shit to this big, dead, pile of refuse called Requiem.

"Mia..." Eislia's voice drifted off, and she caught a note of sympathy. Founders, she hated sympathy. Before her guts could settle into true revulsion though, the warrior continued: "I think I am cleaned up here, why do we not go out? It might be fun."

Never one for hosting duties, Mia wasn't used to showing people around. The only people she spent time with off and on duty were Adriana and Dr. Farrow. The latter of which she barely interacted with outside of work. Or rather, outside of her shoving Mia's guts back inside her. She did, however, have a few haunts, and it seemed logical to start there. One such haunt was a dive bar named 'Stabby Jimmy's'.

Mia hoped Eislia wouldn't get too disappointed to find out; there is no Jimmy.

She stepped inside with Eislia in tow, having changed to a much more fitting number. Her leather jacket still clung to her like a curse. The protection and access to weapons was too much of a comfort for her to abandon. Instead of the typical pants and blouse, she opted to go for a bright red dress (that was tight in all the right places) for tonight. Fun outfits like this brought eyes on her, but also brought underestimation, just as she liked it.

The bar was relatively full, a filthy floor with walls that looked equally trod upon, the entire place was dark and filled with smoke. The 'dance floor' or whatever passed for one was filled with people writhing and gesticulating. She was pretty sure the usuals were here. She rarely noted faces. Most didn't pay her any mind. Either they recognized Mia, in which case they knew not to bother her, or they didn't recognize her and were fluent in resting bitch face. Either way, she was good at averting too much attention when the need called.

Eislia however, was a different matter.

She strode in and the room converted into a sepulcher. Everyone went silent and all eyes were on her. Clearly, she was not used to such things, which was an odd thing to think. Kindness was rarely a Mia forte, but she extended some here with a guiding hand over to the bar. It was as if the entire population of the bar had been waiting for the giant's actions, because as soon as she moved everyone settled back into their previous

algorithms.

Smoke painted a masterpiece over a canvas of stucco. Mia flicked her eyes up and watched its heavy-hearted work on the poor ceiling's finish. Once she was done, Mia plopped herself down onto one of the stools, she had a great idea of how good her ass looked at present. The switch flipped so sharply she could feel it, casting a flirtatious gaze to the barkeep, she got him over to take her order first out of the myriad of demanding voices.

Mia smirked at her little accomplishment just as Eislia orchestrated herself into the stool next to her. "I wish everything was not so small, everywhere...." She mumbled and rested her elbows on the bar.

"Yeah well, I guess it comes with the territory; what with your size." Mia said dismissively, she flicked a hand at the barkeep. "Two whiskeys and keep them clean ok?" She slid over a bit of extra money just to make sure. Mia turned to Eislia, and looked up at her. "So, you've seen the more domestic side and you've gotten your hands dirty. How do you feel about the relaxing parts of the city?" Their drinks arrived just then, and Mia held hers close before she slid the other to Eislia.

"It is entirely foreign, yet familiar." She remarked. Her face was a mix of a forced stoic blankness and confusion. It made Mia's grin an irresistible urge.

"Yeah, I guess it would be." She dropped her voice. "So, what was it like back home? I mean, I can barely wrap my head

around it. But...I gotta ask right? When am I gonna get this chance?" Mia asked as she took a sip of her whiskey. The taste hit her throat with the same satisfying burn it always did. The slight tinge of need she felt unwound in her gut and she sighed. Mia worked her knuckles against the surface of the bar.

"Hmmm, it was...different. There were strict times, Mia: Times to eat, times to train, very little times to..." Eislia's words caught, and she looked around, her stern frown gave way a smile. Odd how resilient such things could be. "Very little times allotted to talking, sharing, or being...people. We used our sleep times to talk, to be with one another, but it was not like this. This is...complex looking."

"Eh, yeah well...Adriana and I had years to get used to the world. I mean, we grew up in it!" She chuckled, then reached over to tap Eislia's arm. "So don't blame yourself for taking a while adjusting ok?" She pondered a moment, hooked her elbows on the bar counter and looked out at the packed crowd. So many people in a tight space felt like she looked at an accident waiting to happen. What a nerdy thought. She snorted and shook her head clear and drank more whiskey.

"Is Mia, the rapid-blade, being nice to me?" Eislia looked down at Mia and smiled.

"I'm just playing the game smart, as I told Adriana." She matched her gaze, a soft look that was so odd on Eislia's features. "I get what my role is and I get where it leads, I looked at all that and said 'fuck that' and am uh...you know? Shifting paradigms and all that crap." She paused, then smiled

up at her. "Also, ok...that nickname is kind of cool; I'll take it."

Eislia's laugh was surprisingly pleasant for a woman with such deep cadence to her voice. It was something that looked alien for her to do, yet came so naturally. Eislia looked like she was the kind of person who never wanted to do harm. But Mia couldn't help but think of that night; the way Eislia looked. How smoothly violence came to her. It was no wonder Adriana found her so appealing, she always had a thing for dames and violence. It did make her wonder how deep that stretched. How much of Eislia was composed of undoing. Was she built? Made? Or forged like Mia? Was Mia always a killer? Her mind flicked back to the photograph, when her and Adri were so much younger. Was she a killer back then?

A sigh escaped her.

"Penny for your thoughts, Mia?"

"By the founders, drink your fucking whiskey, Eislia." She grumbled.

"Is it so bad to talk about things?" Sadly, she music in this bar wasn't loud enough that Mia could just pretend she didn't hear that.

"In my experience." She shifted her stance a bit. "It can be a tad deadly. You and I aren't on good enough footing for that now, maybe later, savvy?"

“Savvy.”

Let it be said that Eislia was certainly born with a gift for gab. Not that she was an over-talker, just a very effective talker; and that was what concerned Mia. She was worried that she might make Adriana feel something stupid, do something stupid. Adriana was very prone to stupid already. Hell, it was the stupid that caused her to reach out to Mia in the first place. But that was at least an arrangement rooted in survival, this could be something worse. Whatever Eislia was talking about before, the Ultimacy, some escape? Some mission? All that shit smelled rank to Mia.

However, it was only tangentially her business.

Music and dance weren't on the cards for tonight. Not that she didn't have things to celebrate, just that she was a bit too worried about Adriana. In fact, even if she had wanted to show Eislia around, the stress worked along her spine. Her back felt like it had steel rods shoved in it, her posture refused to relax. She sighed out another breath on her maybe-third-maybe-fourth drink and sucked in smoky air. She did not want to back down; did not want to give in to her worries. And so, it was a paramount relief when Eislia spoke up:

“I think we should get back, I would rather be reachable by Adriana.”

“You worried?” She asked, shot her a look and flashed her fangs. “I guess I did tell her to call if she needed help.” Mia downed her last drink—she'd lost count of which at this

point—and got up to leave.

The horizon swayed and tilted, luckily for Mia she was indoors so she couldn't notice how off keel she was to it. Therefore, she reasoned, one could get sloppy drunk, and as long as they did it indoors, there would be no worry of vertigo. She laughed at the thought and made her way to the door. A strong hand guided her, but she just assumed that was her imagination.

Maybe it was Eislia? Nah that's insane.

The blood rush hit her, clarity chasing the haze away with flame and pitchfork. Mia snorted in a breath and stood straight, looked beside her and noticed that it was in fact Eislia helping her out of the bar. She pushed against the (very) muscular side of her. "Ok ok, I'm actually ok, just processing the booze."

"I am aware I know little; but you are going to have to explain that." Eislia stepped back, the two of them walked alongside each other.

"Elf thing, we can process shit real fast or slow, you just..." She waved her hands. "Let it take hold or not. Great for poisons, and if you wanna get drunk and then not...I mean ok I'm still a bit drunk, but less than someone else."

"Interesting. I was hoping that we could test my limits. I was curious if this...'booze' could have the same effect on me." She huffed and walked along. Mia let out a breath, adjusted her jacket and perked an ear; leather on stone picked at her

brain. Cognition of ancient instincts flared to life. Mia's steps didn't falter. She led Eislia down the street and took a more meandering path to the apartment, in fact, she tried to avoid going there directly. She kept an ear out for if her suspicions were correct. After three blocks the footsteps remained the same.

"Anyway, this severed thing...I was wanting to ask about it, as I could not get a straight answer out of the few other elves I have come across."

"Shhh!" Mia hissed.

"I mean, I will apologize for any rudeness, but-"

"No! Fucking, Shhhh! Quiet." She dropped her voice, and did her best not to be expressive or drop any hints to their pursuer. "We have followers."

"Ah. From the bar?"

"Maybe." Mia rolled her shoulders and led them to an alley that she knew terminated after a dozen or so feet. Might as well be one hundred percent sure. "Hope you don't mind a possible ruckus."

"I have been a warrior from birth." She answered matter-of-factly. "I prefer not to, but I will defend myself." Founders, she was so lame.

"Well, bully for you, just follow my lead." Hands stuffed into

her pockets, Mia let out a breath and turned to face the mouth of the alley. Three figures were there. She couldn't tell what gang or family they were from, and she couldn't tell if there was a finger wiggler among them. It was a safe bet to assume the answer was 'no' they instantly looked like small timers. Not big enough to recognize her, it seems. Ok, maybe Mia had a bit of an overinflated sense of ego.

They advanced without a word, Mia sighed. "Fuck....Adri's gonna be pissed at us..." She mumbled under her breath, shifted her stance and watched. "Ok boys, whatever you have planned, just...don't. It ain't worth it and I really don't want to clean up any messes tonight."

"Just drop the money and walk away then." one said. A sigh cut through Mia's throat. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Oh for fuck's sake..." She mumbled, rubbing the flesh of her eyelids. "A mugging? Are you kidding me? A mugging!?" Mia put her hands on her hips and glared at the three random fucking criminals who decided to have the worst luck in the damned city. "Look, this is a really, really stupid mix up. And as you can see from my friend here." She gestured to Eislia. "We aren't just two cheery tomatoes, easily plucked. So...let's just all walk away, ok?"

They responded with the body language of predators; flanking and shifting stances. Mia's trained eyes caught the flash of steel. A knife, maybe a few daggers. Small game. She sighed again and flexed her hands, ready to draw her own. "Ok fine, but whatever happens, you can't blame me boys, I warned

you.” With that, she charged. Never a quarter asked for, never given. She wasn’t interested in giving them time to prepare.

The first one tried to yell.

Tried.

She was far faster than a bunch of half-drunk humans though. Mia’s hands flicked out, both gripped steel, she had two hatchets that she selected for this particular scuffle. Her dashing leap sent Mia between and past two of them, both of her arms swung in a smooth arc. She felt the slightest, most beautiful feather-light touch as steel nicked soft flesh. Mia hit the ground with a roll and wheeled around to face them. Flesh parted and blood followed. One of them gurgled and gripped his throat. Claret fluid gushed from between finger tips, soaked clothes and eventually boots. The other had already collapsed to the ground, his death far quicker. Mia slowly rose, with both weapons held at her side. She eyed her last bit of meat; her quarry. Last man standing, time for him to make his play.

He attempted an exit. Attempted, being the operative word. With a twist of her hips, her entire body moved along one fluid line, the hatchet flung from her hands and found home. Back of the leg just above the shin; usually a perfect way to stop someone from running and bleed ‘em real good. She threw it a bit too hard this time and removed the leg at the knee. He collapsed to the ground in a broken mass. Mia paced up to him, circling. She clicked her tongue and tsked. “Ooh too bad, but like I said: That was your last chance.”

“Please no!” the same old song, one that personally bored her. The only person she wanted to see begging was Adriana, and that was for different reasons. Maybe she shouldn’t be thinking about that right now, but Founders she loved seeing pain on people’s faces.

“Sorry! Wrong answer!” She countered, her ax came down and cleaved the head in half, she knelt down and started her work: Chopping the stainless-steel ax head into soft grey matter. Up and down, again and again. The motion, a gorgeous dance, the arc of blood that splashed on her face was a nigh-orgasmic release. She kept going, and going, until her hand was numb from impacting the ground.

Mia’s breath hitched and she fought to catch it. She took out a handkerchief and started to clean her gore-slicked face. And as she looked over to Eislia, she liked her a whole lot more; all the stoic warrior did the whole time was watch. No attempt to stop her, no moralistic protest. Amazing.

“Well? You gonna like, help me?” Mia huffed “Or watch?”

“You had it well under control.” She countered, Eislia shifted her weight from one foot to the next. “So, you are proficient at more than just drinking.” The little quip hit Mia as well as any slap.

“What!?” She huffed “How dare you!? I can fuck well too!” She jabbed a finger at Eislia, her frown shattered into a mirthful grin. Ok, it was kind of freeing that Eislia wasn’t bothered by all this, she had to admit.

“Jesting aside, what do we do? I am unaware of the um...social etiquette here.” Eislia’s concern wasn’t long-lived, nor was it for the dead souls slumped in her sight.

“Eh, nothing. I have certain protections and they weren’t acting on a family’s orders.” She kicked one of the bodies, they didn’t really bleed enough to have made that amusing. “So, we walk away and pretend nothing happened.”

“Less than ideal, but this is the world I find myself in.” She said with a casual shrug. Eislia followed Mia to the mouth of the alleyway and fell into step with her. “Question though: Why?” It was Mia’s turn to shrug, the cool air was a reprieve. She was charged and slick with blood. Mia stopped and looked down at herself. ‘Shit.’ she thought.

“Um....ok, so the easy answer is that they are idiots. Now, I need your help, can you like...lend me your cloak? I can’t walk around like this.” With an cautious nod Eislia threw the large cloak over Mia. If she were her younger self, she might have giggled. Founders, she had no much weird energy back then. Now though, she cursed under her breath. “Fuck I need more whiskey.”

“I suppose this is....” Eislia hesitated. “Mia, I have a favor to ask of you, if we are doing favors now.”

“Just ask it, you big weirdo.”

“Right. I was just...I do not know all of my circumstances. And given what happened just now I was hoping I could ask you if

any..." More hesitation. "Violence could be handled on your end? I do not want to risk giving that other state any traction." Mia wrapped the cloak around her and pulled the hood over her head. It felt safe, a cloth armor to protect against the world. Too bad she was too mature for such crap.

"Sure, you got it. Long as you protect Adriana no matter what. If it comes down to it."

"No matter what." Eislia agreed.

"Then I'm happy to do the stabbing. I mean...not that that's going to be a problem. You gotta understand Eislia, this isn't common!"

"It isn't?"

"No, it's not. This city is a shit-hole, but there are rules to it all." Mia sighed and waved her hand, the tattered black cloth making it look like a bat's wing. "The families oversee all this shit, and they try to keep things peaceful. But...idiots are idiots. Just...don't worry; I keep Adri out of most of the severe stuff."

"You protect her. I often get the sense this has been the case for sometime?"

"Yep." Mia popped the last syllable as she trotted along, thankful for the cover that the cloak brought. "But I don't feel like talking about the past." Mia had to look up to shoot Eislia a glare, which diffused the effect but fuck it. "As I made it

clear before.” Eislia nodded, seemingly content with that. She was content with a lot, Mia noted. After a few more steps of forced silence, she groaned. “Ok I’m gonna ask this, though: what the hell is up with your skin?”

“Please elaborate?”

“Right right, the whole...I mean...” Mia reached up to feel her arm. Founders, she was toned, but that wasn’t important. “It feels just like skin, normal-ass arm skin, but my blade couldn’t cut through it. So...what gives?” She felt the need to add “Skin doesn’t work that way.”

“I gathered from your little demonstration back in the alley that was the case. I am not sure why I am like this though...just that it is some part of my...” She hesitated as always when words seemed lost to Eislia “Making.”

“So, you were made to be like that? Yeah I guess that makes sense from what you said.” She made a vague motion with her hand. “You know? What with all of the...stuff that I saw you did.” she scoffed, they rounded a corner, the sky opened up before them as much as it could, as framed as it was by the endless buildings and wires that cross-crossed overhead; a web of metal and rubber. She sighed and looked up at whatever blips of lights she could make out from the many layers of whatever was up there. “I still can’t buy it, Eislia. I don’t know why, even if the evidence is staring me right in the face...”

“I think it might just be how you are, Mia. You live in a world of digital states: dead—alive, loyal—disloyal. It’s hard to

work in the realm that I come from, or Adriana does, for that matter.” Mia glared up at the giant again.

“What does that mean!?” It was painful and irritating, but jealousy had wrapped its fingers around her throat once again. She had to stave it off, and had to compensate for it. She wasn’t going to become the jealous dame, the one easily cast aside. Fuck that noise. Mia just needed time to let herself adjust, let herself trust. She owed Adriana that much. They rounded another corner, came out of an alley’s maw and stepped closer to the neighborhood Adriana’s home lay claim to.

“I just mean that she is a magi; they stand between the worlds in many ways. And I, well, come from another –” Mia held up a hand to silence her. Her temples throbbed at the very mention of it, the absurdity was profane and unwelcome.

“Right...From... Up there.” A thumb jabbed upwards, she sighed. Eislia nodded.

“But, I was saying that I understand why this is hard for you. Perhaps tonight will help your belief?”

“I’d rather have whiskey over belief any day of the week.” Mia didn’t believe in much, she trusted the sharpness of her blades and quickness of her hands. Her willingness to spill blood, to love Adriana like an open wound. Her willingness to open herself for that damned magi. That’s what she’d take to the bank or the grave.

Mirrors that Beg Shattering

Adriana came home with high spirits, her mind ablaze with possibility. When she parted from Vikaros, she had her book placed in hand. A cold look with a razor smile and words promising further meetings. She certainly wanted to keep training them—it felt good to instruct—it just worried her, the alliances they both skirted. Adriana wondered if that meant something for her future, though. Maybe she could add ‘becoming a teacher’ to her dream list.

Maybe she was going a bit too far.

With her brand-new spell book tucked away in her jacket, Adriana’s smile was titanium. She pushed open the door to her room, only to be greeted with humidity’s clammy touch. She let out a scoff and spotted Eislia sitting in the chair reading. A plaintive look brought answers as the sound of the shower caught her ears. She closed the door and hung her jacket up, removed her shoes and came over to sit near Eislia. The large woman looked up and smiled, so domestic; a knight with lance

and shield, yet bakery was her passion. “Ah.” Adriana said, glanced over to the bloody clothes. “How many did she kill this time?”

“Three; and they were attempting to mug us, I gather.” She said as she tucked her book away. She must have acquired it in one of her work trades recently. Adriana grinned and reached over to brush her fingers along Eislia’s arm. Nails scraped along well-muscled flesh, tracing the contours in silent contemplation.

“So...potential mugging aside, how did it go?”

“Mia is stubborn, but she wants this to work. I feel good. Certainly better feeling about that than...what we are about to do.” Anxiety was writ across her features, as obvious as a kick to the head. Adriana sighed and easily slid into her lap. She took a moment to appreciate the fact that she’d never done this with anyone before. She was so used to being tall, wide, a bit bigger of frame than any of the women around her. To hold is one thing; to be held is another.

“We are going to do this at your pace, you call the shots with this. And hey...Mia’s here so we’re safe, right?” Eislia laughed softly at Adriana’s joke.

“You are right, and...” Her large arms wrapped around Adriana, cradling her. “I wanted to say that if anything feels like it is endangering you to get out. Right away, no hero-stuff alright? I will not allow it.” Adriana let out a breath, her emotions required tempering so often now. They became a

long-forgotten ghost for so long, a whisper of flame. Now they have been fed and awakened with hunger on their lips. She looked up at Eislia.

“Fine, that’s more than acceptable...I have no idea what’s going to happen, but at least last time she sort of...let me go when it was time? So maybe this time she’ll be just as accommodating?”

Eislia could only shake her head. “I am very good at swallowing changes of circumstances as they arise, but the idea of there being other me’s is a bit hard to accept. I suppose we share real estate.”

“Well, there’s plenty of it.” Adriana chuckled and patted her chest teasingly.

After a long while, Mia came out of the shower. She wore the airs of complete vexation, working a knot through her hair. It always takes a long while to get blood out of one’s hair, especially when there is so much of it as with Mia. Regardless, she looked sour. Adriana wasn’t sure if this was due to the impending ritual, or some conversation she’d had with Eislia. It’s likely that the elf didn’t much know herself. Mia required time to sort out the machinery of her mind, at times. Emotions took a while to digest. Well, emotions that weren’t preservation-based.

She padded over to her favored chair—a cat stalking its territory—and plopped down into it. She had on some loose and

expensive looking pair of pants and a blouse that seemed like she was born in it. Her gorgeous hair framed a face carved by the Founders themselves. Adriana always found her breath quicken when she scanned over Mia's features: a round face, dark eyes, full lips and a cute nose. Her brow often wore worry on it, but her smile came easily. She might mock and tease, but she gave of her heart like it was second nature. Mia was beauty wrapped in fetid foul armor, underneath which was glorious softness. Adriana shifted in her seat.

She'd been staring. She knew Mia loved that.

One detail Adriana neglected to notice was that Mia had laid her favorite saber across her lap, lounging in the chair with a silken outfit and steel in reach, held appeal in so many ways to Adriana's mind. "Ok, so when you guys do this I am going to be watching. I'll make sure nothing fucks this up. Well, from the outside...You two shit heads are responsible for getting back intact and...whatever else could go wrong, we clear?" She glared at Adriana, but her finger was also pointed to Eislia.

"Mia, I'm like, thirty percent certain this is going to go smoothly." Adriana grinned. Mia shut her up with a 'shush'

"Cute, but fuck off."

"That's not the threesome we'd arranged for."

"Oh shut up and fuck off more!" She groaned and threw her head back dramatically, her vision caught on the ceiling before speaking again: "Are you actually ready and confident?"

“I read over the ritual of enervation, and I prepared myself...As much as I can, that is.” Mia snorted at that but seemed to relent.

Such an odd thing, to see such allowance from Mia. The thought struck Adriana that Mia has been doing so much to make this work lately. A frankly stunning amount of reach she put forth. Adriana resolved to do more for her, to set some olive branches aside for Mia. It was just a bit too hard to figure out exactly what she could offer her right now at the moment. Adriana’s mind sizzled, anger at herself really, she’d pay her back for her patience.

Adriana stood and walked over to pull out the chair from her desk. She took out a stick of chalk and got to work. As Mia and Eislia watched, she started to sketch a spell circle on the floor. Mostly it looked like a network of lines, geometric shapes that held no purpose for those unversed in the arts.

It didn’t take long to make the ritual circle. A path of markings that served the purpose of binding. When one brings magic into the world, it can cause all kinds of counter reactions. Usually, this is subtle, a casual push and pull that the universe abides by. However, with more extreme incantations this could cause undesirable side effects. For Adriana, that’s more along the lines of attracting attention she didn’t want.

When the little brawl happened, she of course had no choice but to act quickly. It wasn’t like the berserker-knight was going to let her draw a sigil or two. It was also less of a risk, because it was taking place on Family business. But their little

ritual here was supposed to be strictly off the record and she intended to keep it that way. Adriana sighed as she stood up to inspect her work.

“Founders, finger wiggling is so fucking weird, Adri....” Mia piped up. She glanced over to look at her blade-slinging partner and smirked.

“And yet, you love that about me.” Adriana quipped. Mia simply let out a sound akin to a choked rabbit and shook her head.

“Oh Adriana shut up and just...get in the fucking chair.” She quirked a brow. “I mean...is...that how it works, or!?”

Adriana held up a hand. “Actually, Eislia, you should probably get in the chair. I don’t have a single clue what this might do to you, and I’d rather you didn’t hurt yourself.” Eislia, to her credit, played along. Both of them were aware that she couldn’t get hurt from a simple fall. If Mia’s sword did nothing a wood floor wouldn’t either. She sat down in the chair, her knees stuck up just a bit. Everything was just a bit too small for Eislia, always.

“I suppose I am ready, as long as you are?” Eislia looked up at her, the gravity of the situation hit Adriana; her life was in her hands.

Adriana, with the Gonesteel in one hand, working her fingers in odd patterns in the air. “No, but I highly doubt I’ll ever be ready...”

“I suppose I cannot argue with that.” Adriana continued to draw sparking runes in the air, the circle’s complexity increasing with each line, as she did so, they started to draw themselves. The circle took on a life of its own. “Well then. Mia, Eislia: We ready for this?”

Mia made a noise; a short huff. She paced back to the chair and sat down, sword across her lap again. “Yeap.” A short affirmative nod from Eislia gave Adriana the go ahead.

With a deep breath, Adriana drew herself inwards, she pulled at the motes that danced just outside of her vision and spun them into threads. Her mind fought back to that night; what did she do to trigger everything? That’s right, she pushed her energy into Eislia’s and in so doing was pulled in. A scary proposition.

She placed a hand on the crown of Eislia’s head.

The thing with most magic is that one feels it when they use it. While it is all around the very air that she breathed, when it was used it tore through one’s body. It made its presence known very strongly. In muscle and nerve. In fact, the agony from burnout was the nerves taking the brunt of everything. This time, this magic was as smooth as breathing. She felt nothing, there was no more Adriana; no more Eislia.

She awoke to a world of cold iron.

Adriana groaned her head pounded. The pressure was a constant wave of crush and release. Scattered pieces danced in her vision and she sought to bring them back to her cognition. Time flowed like quicksilver molasses; fast and terribly slow at the same time. Seconds were eons, centuries were mere moments. Adriana finally rose to her feet, the same steel platform that she had been on the first time stretched for miles ahead of her.

Her legs were jelly and her hands raw, exposed nerves. She flexed them and choked down a yelp. Her pain receded as she moved, as if this new realm had tried to repel her and now accepted her presence.

Eventually, her gaze caught a shape: Eislia, or...the inner mind Eislia (she still wasn't sure how that worked). Adriana turned and looked at the figure, crimson eyes bore into her. They had none of the kindness Eislia herself possessed.

Silence slithered between them on scales of serenity. The other one smiled. Adriana steeled herself. "In this realm, in all of this time, my thoughts stayed on you. Welcome back: Adriana, correct?" she grinned, it was hard to ignore the fact that this version of Eislia, like the other, had a sword on her back. The same sword that she deflected from Mia that night. Wind rushed up and caught that ragged, black cloak. Adriana had to pull up her furred collar against the chill.

"Yeah well, I try to be the stimulating type." Her courage wavered, but she forced a smile. "Ok, so uh....you weren't expecting me?" That was good, she wasn't aware of what

Eislia was doing in the real world. “I came here because Eislia asked me to, I needed to see why she came here or...I mean there was something about a cask?” She hesitated and worked her hands a bit. “She thought that this was the best way to get whatever answers I think we need.”

“Oh, is it ‘we’ now, Adriana!?” She laughed. “Now that’s a cute development. She got started quickly on that domestic life.” The Other-One—this thing that piloted Eislia’s form—laughed. It was a mere mockery of its bearer’s warmth. Adriana began to loathe this arrangement. It was a moment until the Other had stopped laughing and shook her head. “Regardless, I suppose it’s time to serve my function. Now... Adriana, you need to understand that when I give to you what I am supposed to that it will be it for me. This vital information is for...well, I suppose your eyes only.” She pursed her lips. “Eye, that is.”

Adriana tilted her head at the pointless observation. “Right... what, what do you mean?” She asked. There was no point in trying to mind game this person...this...construct? Whatever she was. Adriana mentally chastised herself for that joke: Mind-games in a mind-scape. Funny. She brushed her fingertips across her thumbnail.

“I mean that when I give you this information, I will cease to be.” She turned away to look out at the sprawling constructs of metal and cloud that stretched across this plane of steel they both stood upon. “I was created to die.” She said in a distant tone. Adriana walked up to stand beside her.

"We all are. That's life: None of us have ever asked for it, but we cling to it like it's gold." She let out a breath, steam danced in the air as it cooled. Her guts twisted at the thought of never living. Being made as a shell to be discarded once used. On the other hand, how could she say she was so different? After a moment, she braced herself and answered: "I'm ready."

"Well...there is so much and yet, time is working against us." She let out a breath and looked down at Adriana. "I am the parts of Eislia that were militant, that were a part of the rebellion against the founders." Adriana blinked as she took that in.

"Hold on; what!?"

"The Ultimacy is not the unified land of harmony you might have assumed it is. The Founders are cruel and capricious. They chase whatever fancy and pleasure that is set before them. It was their own neglect and cruelty that led to the world of Requiem being set on a path of decay. Not all of them though." She set a hand to her own chest. "There were others, there was one who stood up to the cruelty of her own kind. A simple file clerk, if you can believe it. She discovered...well, many dirty little secrets, and when her world was opened up to these revelations...she had to turn against her kind. Long ago, she set her plans into play. I was one of her right hands..." Her voice trailed off as she started at the distance. "We were, actually; Eislia and I were...close to her. When we were one. At the end of our rebellion, we managed to secure an extremely valuable device. She...Fell from the Ultimacy, and in my grief I volunteered to be the one to follow. To come here and guard

the package and find—" She drifted off as a loud, low rumble filled Adriana's ears.

A crack shattered the silence and everything began to darken. "-You, it was you; time is running out." The other-Eislia smiled as she watched everything start to fall. The world, the reality set before Adriana began to shed and dissolve. Leaves in the wind—pulled from the tree. "Adriana. Inside the cask is information on a weapon; a spell to be specific. Our leader said that when the time is right, a magi will find it. That magi is you. Adriana..." She cupped her face in those massive hands. Adriana gazed into her eyes and saw something close to what Eislia bore inside them. She felt her heart surge, an ephemeral energy between them affixed. Adriana felt a longing she hadn't realized she felt since she came here.

"You need to find this spell, and you need to master it." Her hands had moved from Adriana's face to grip her shoulders. Urgency in those dark red eyes sang to her of sorrow and need. "Adriana, they want to wipe the world. The Founders are going to kill everything here! That is why she rebelled. It's why we all stood up!" The massive woman was yelling now, she had to; as a roaring cacophony drowned nearly all sound out. Adriana had to force herself not to clamp her hands over her ears. It was like all of her senses were being overridden. But, she had to pay attention to the words.

"You must loose the arrow! You must loose it, Adriana!" Everything fell silent, and as Adriana looked around, it was only them. They stood in a small shred of the platform that had previously been eternity. A sliver of silver in a black sea.

“Please.”

“I will, I promise...we...we have to get out now, tell me how we get out.” The other-Eislia smiled at her words and stood. Slow and gentle as the giant she was. A weapon, an instrument made for one purpose. Herself cast in another form.

“We don’t get out Adriana, you only. I think you are smart enough to know what you need to do for this.” The words hung in the now-dead silence. Adriana’s throat was dry. She felt revulsion overtake her as bile threatened to spill up and out; but she nodded. Adriana reached up to trace the sigils, magic sparked along her fingertips and she looked the Other one dead in the eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You always were.” With a simple swipe of her hand Adriana severed the cord that bound her to this mindscape. The cord that bound the Other-Eislia’s essence. Adriana’s breath was ripped from her as reality thrust a dark blade through her. Her senses blackened, and faltered, then re-awoke. The darkness that took her was more a curtain pulled closed; only for a moment did she feel nothing. Then she felt everything. Breath in her lungs and tears in her eyes. Hands on her face; warm air greeted her as tenderly as Mia’s face.

Those dark eyes she could drink for eternity.

“Adri! Adri!” The world tumbled and fell out from Mia’s gloomy eyes. She slammed back to reality, the realization

hit her; she was being throttled by her elven partner. Adriana grabbed Mia's forearms to stop her.

"Yes! I've! Re! Turned!" She exclaimed. "Please stop trying to break my back, what happened!?" Mia stepped back the moment Adriana's talked. She needed space, hells, she needed many things right at this moment.

"Both you and Eislia froze up, started breathing weird and then...just snapped back." As Mia spoke, Adriana looked over to see Eislia. She was leaned over in the chair, holding her hand to her head. She looked like she was hung over. "You didn't wake you kind of....looked like you rose from the dead, I hated it."

"Ok...Ok well." Adriana took Mia's hands. Such odd things; so soft for her, but death to many others. She raised them to her mouth and kissed the knuckles, breath spreading over callused flesh. "I'm fine, Mia, it's ok." She looked into those eyes and they blinked. She stunned her, she actually stunned the great queen of stabbage, Mia. The monarch of murder—Adriana was beginning to love making these nicknames for her—pulled her hands away. She stepped another step away and tossed her hair with a huff.

"Fuckin'....weirdo....I was only worried a bit. Magic shit...weirds me out." She mumbled. Her darkened cheeks, though, were a dead give away of her true concern. The tables turning never felt so good. Adriana sucked in a breath and nodded her head to Eislia.

“Is she ok? And...did anything actually weird happen?” Adriana paused before adding: “Significantly so.” Mia was about to give her report, when Eislia spoke up.

“I am fine.” Eislia rose from her seat. “I have a headache, but did you learn what you needed to?” Adriana took a moment, she stepped close to put a hand on her arm. She let the warm silence settle between them, anticipation cracked in the air. The trio held a charged power between them.

“I will only reveal the truth.” Adriana’s tone was even as the horizon as she calculated this next move. “If we have a group hug.”

“What the FUCK Adri!?” Mia of course, protested.

“Hmmm. She might not agree, Adriana. Luckily I have a solution.” Eislia had already made her move, there was no time to evade or run. A laugh was wrought from Adriana as large arms swept her and Mia into a warm hug. It was heavenly, comforting, and grounding. All of the discordance from the vision and the dread it brought faded if but for a moment. She hummed softly and enjoyed the touch. Eislia was alive, she was fine, she was here.

Mia, however, reacted like a feral cat being grappled by an over-eager toddler.

“Argh! Fuck off!” She attempted to struggle out of the grasp, but it was iron. Eislia laughed and finally released her.

“Well, I was just following Adriana’s demands, and you told me that we’re here to make her happy.” Mia’s face reddened at that.

“No no, I said that all I want is FOR HER to be happy! But I ain’t her personal jester or....hugger!” She shivered.

“Mia doesn’t do hugs.” Adriana added, to which Mia nodded enthusiastically. “And awww, you want me to be happy!” Adriana teased. Mia wrapped her arms around her waist and gently, lovingly. Kneaded Adriana in the nuts. The impact was enough to knock the air from her lungs. She doubled over and managed to find the chair to sit down on, the whole while Eislia stood and watched. She could feel her presence at all times, and not just due to her size. Adriana held up a hand and puffed out a breath. It really was light, just unexpected. “This is how we tease, Eislia.”

“I wasn’t worried.” She said contemplatively. “Mia has revealed her nature to me.”

“Watch it with the cute shit, Adri. Now, give us an update: What the fuck is going on?” Mia perched herself on the bed, legs crossed. She rested a hand on her knee and looked at her, such daring in her eyes. It was still, as always intoxicating. Adriana sat up and let out another puff, the pain had subsided and she had her breath back under her. “Awww....I’ll kiss ‘em better later, Adri. For now let’s focus.”

“Oh, fuck off Mia.” there was no hiding the mirth in her voice though. Damn that elf to all hells. She only smiled and drank

in the praise.

“Right. Ok.” Adriana leaned back. “To put this as simply as possible and spare you all of the more metaphysical details...I know what’s in the cask; I know what Lord Eversei has in her possession.”

“Ok....and what is it?”

“A spell.” Adriana’s hands curled into fists. “...Something powerful and something that can um...” she sighed. This was Mia, she’d believe her. Adriana needed only trust in that. She sucked in another breath. “A spell that can kill the Founders.” She tried to bring volume to her voice, to cast aside the sanctity of their name. But years of habits forced it to come out a hush. Unless you swore, then it was easy.

Mia’s eyes went wide and for once, all smiles left her lips. She swallowed hard. “Ok....Why?”

“Because they aren’t happy with us Mia. And apparently... they’re gearing up to wipe us out. There was a resistance.” She gestured to Eislia. “One she was a part of. They found the spell, and made the cask to send it down here for someone to find.”

Mia scoffed, it sounded more akin to a choke; a bone in her throat. She shook her head. “Alright....so....ok that’s a lot, Adri...” She opened her mouth to say more, but shock overtook her. “If this was anyone else I’d think they were fucking with me, but...but it’s you so....” Her face went blank. “Fuck.”

Adriana watched as Mia's hands worked against themselves, her brow knit with worry in such a way it set Adriana on edge. "Ok, ok, ok....so....Fine, good!" She plopped her hands in her lap. "So it's all ok then? Lord Eversei has this spell and we don't need to worry about it. We just move on with our lives and it's all good."

Adriana raised her head to look Mia dead in the eyes. "No. We need to get it back." She knew this would set her off, but she had to say it. Mia leapt from her seat and glared at her. At this angle she towered over Adriana, somehow she felt that even if she were on her feet the effect would remain the same. However, before she had a chance to launch her verbal attack, Adriana raised her hand. "This spell, Mia, can kill gods...It is an arrow with which to pierce the heart of the heavens. We cannot let her have that. You know this, Mia!"

"We've been ducking under THEIR sight-line for decades, Adri. And what? Now you want to just...what? Go up to her and ask for the good ol' godkiller back!?" She scoffed and mimicked a mouth with her hand. "Oh Lord Eversei, yeah we accidentally gave you that fucking super spell, can we just get that back?"

Adriana scoffed. "We're not joking around, Mia."

"Yeah, no I get it!" She stepped towards Adriana, fire in her eyes reignited. She was a furnace never let cool for too long. "I get it more than you can know, Adri." She jabbed her finger down, as if pinning something with it. "YOU know that no one fucks with Lord Nummari, and I know it....very well! She has this, spell, of yours and that's not going to fucking

change, unless..." Her eyes widened. Cold steel wrapped around Adriana's spine as she forced her to say it. She needed Mia to say it. "You two whack jobs want us to steal it!?"

"If it is in this...Lord Nummari's possession. Then yes, we need to." Eislia said evenly. Adriana stepped closer to Mia before she could launch another attack.

"Mia, I know how hard all of this is to believe. But the other Eislia, the one locked in her brain, she told me all about what happened and this...this spell can." Her voice dropped. "Kill the founders. We can't allow such power in her hands." Adriana sighed "She'd use it for her own gain; we need it to save our world."

Mia sat back down, hopefully, that was what convinced her. "You...wait, wait, wait...not only are you asking me to help you STEAL from the most powerful fucking person we know...but you also want to then use that thing we're stealing to kill." she couldn't even say it aloud; kill the Founders. Mia shook her head and rubbed her temples. "You two are insane." She finally reasoned.

Mia hadn't left the apartment. Usually, she would isolate herself when things got too much for her. Instead she'd taken to alternating between sulking in her chair and hovering over Eislia. The aforementioned partner was, as usual, cooking. It seemed to be that everyone was brooding over this recent revelation in their own ways.

Adriana herself, was studying and reading up on whatever outstanding works she had on hand. She sat at her desk, Eislia and Mia's stress was so palpable that she could feel it in the air. They, all three of them, faced a horrible course of action. It was at this time that Adriana wished she had access to floor plans of Lord Nummari's manor. She'd only been there a handful of times. The first was her initiation which was not something she wanted to experience again. The second was her punishment; surprisingly light from what she had heard. Both times, the hall was where she was led to. And both times, she barely recalled it. The memories were hazy threads that were quickly snatched away.

She sighed and closed her book, glanced over her shoulder and looked at Mia. Her little constant source of vexation had been drilling holes into her via staring. Adriana turned in her chair to look further at her. Mia shrugged, her eyes flicked to the kitchen. Red lips curled as Mia smirked, Adriana tilted her head. Was she serious?

In the years since they've met, Mia and Adriana have invented their own little language. Simple gestures could tell stories and they were very sly about it too. Oftentimes, the two of them delight in getting a message across a room with no one the wiser. Right now, Mia asked for a roll in the hay. She didn't wait for much of an answer, it might've just been her being Mia as usual. As soon as Adriana turned away from her, she heard the creak of leather as Mia sat back again. She waited a moment, then glanced back.

Adriana watched her for a few more moments. A fleeting

glance here, evasive observation. Mia was agitated, very clearly. She sat on the chair bouncing her leg. Her favorite sword was in the process of being cleaned. Adriana knew that gear maintenance was Mia's main way of staving off worry.

It was time for them to have a one-on-one it seemed. Adriana felt guilt at ignoring her and didn't want that to repeat. She glanced over to Eislia in the kitchen and rose from her chair. "I think we might need some drinks for tonight, something um..." Her gaze shifted to Mia. "Sweet." She finished. Mia sat up, an eager look on her face. "Mia and I will be right back."

"Of course." Eislia said from her spot hovering over the stove. "Dinner will be soon."

With a nod to Eislia, Adriana gestured for Mia to follow her. She led her out of the apartment and down into the streets outside. She pulled her jacket up to herself, the collar of fur a warm comfort as they headed down the street. Mia was beside her, the two of them strode in such a natural way it was second instinct to them. She scoffed, "what's going on, Adri?". Her questions were interrupted by Adriana's movement. She grabbed her by the collar and pulled her into the nearby alley. When Adriana pushed Mia against the wall, she earned herself a wonderful little gasp from the elf. Mia was stronger than her, but leverage was on Adriana's side. She could feel Mia's breathing hitch, her pulse raced. It was such utter pleasure to see that excitement in every part of her lover.

"I'm just a bit upset with you, Mia." She hissed into her ear and placed a hand on Mia's throat. The elf let out a soft moan and

ground her ass against Adriana's crotch. She scoffed. "Filthy and easy, that's you in a nutshell." In reply, Mia moaned again. Adriana used her free hand to toy with the waistline of Mia's pants. Mia really had been trying so hard lately, and she really did deserve a treat. Adriana laughed softly in her ear, it had been so long since they've done this kind of play. Again, she felt the need to make up for lost time.

Adriana gripped Mia's throat tighter, and felt the rapid pulse pressing against her fingertips. Her little lover was already so worked up. Adriana knew how much Mia loved this kind of play. She might buck and fight, but she adored being pressed against the wall. Mia whined again, her whimpers were delightful. "Hmm...good girl." With a nice bit of force, she stuffed her hand down Mia's pants and parted her panties. Adrian pressed her fingers to Mia's pussy and gently massaged. Not too much force, just enough to get her riled up. Everything about Mia was a vortex that intrigued Adriana. She sighed and kissed the back of Mia's ear, gently nibbled on the lobe and as Mia was distracted enough from that; slid her fingers inside her.

They both moved into a singular rhythm as easily as ever. Mia's breath came out in short bursts, the frantic speed increasing with each stroke. Adriana was entranced by how good it felt to hold her like this. She arched her back and pressed her rear against Adriana yet again. She moaned and continued to grind her hips, but Adriana kept her attention on the task at hand.

It really didn't take long for Mia to unravel. Adriana was

being a bit over indulgent to her; the domination and public aspects were exactly her lover's desires. She came hard and fast, Adriana had to hold her hand over Mia's mouth so she didn't scream and alert any neighbors. Adriana guided her through the orgasm with strong, expert hands; she allowed Mia to break past the wave that hit her and settle back down to reality.

Adriana helped Mia to get rearranged and righted after their little frolic. It was so satisfying to be able to have such a powerful woman right at her mercy. She rarely indulged in such upfront positions with Mia, but when the mood struck both of them they settled into the master/pet dynamic rather naturally. Once they were properly composed, Mia and Adriana headed out of the alley and back towards the small shop that served as their cover.

"Holy shit, Adri." Mia laughed. Adriana watched as she lazily strolled along beside her, looking up at the sky. "I really hate how fucking much you satisfy me."

"That's bad because...?" In truth, she wanted to hear it from Mia. She wanted to hear how good she was at driving her over the edge. A little bit of ego stroking wasn't criminal, was it?

"Oh shut up, Adri! I know what you're playing at, you aren't getting it!" She said, folding her hands behind her head as she lazily walked.

"Hey, push that attitude Mia and I won't give you treats like that." She earned a sour glare from her partner, to which

Adriana laughed. She pushed open the door to the shop and gestured. "Let's get what we need and head home, ok?"

By the time they returned, dinner had been prepared and was waiting for them. It was a savory sort of stew, with unknown meat. It tasted so good that little fact mattered not. Mia, as usual, was enjoying her food. She really appreciated the finer things; dining on meals that Adriana could only dream of. At the same time, Mia was a woman of base passions. She could enjoy street food as equally as the finer stuff. She loved sex, she loved food, she loved life.

Adriana was simply amazed that they all fit so well together. She had her eye on the prize right now; she had to fight for this. It was hard not to think back to that dreamscape, to the vision she had. She looked at Eislia, then Mia. Her smile was a prison. She shifted in her chair once the meal was coming to a close, it had to be spoken. Adriana knew their course of action and she needed to lead the charge on it.

"We have to get help." Adriana finally said, slaying the silence with no remorse. "What we're proposing...There's no way this can be done with just the three of us." She rose from her seat at the desk. Mia had already gotten up and advanced on her, anger of course flashed in those gorgeous eyes. It was so natural for her, Adriana's heart ached

"And what the hells is your bright idea, Adri? We go ask the..." her eyes widened. "The other families for help..." Mia's shock

was obvious, she wore such features loudly. “Wait, you’re insane. Fully insane. Off the fucking deep end!” Adriana simply smirked and looked down at her. The extra height she had was even more of a boon than before.

“Oh Mia, don’t you know? All magi are a bit mad.”

The Noose Tightens

The resulting shouting match left all three of them rather hoarse. Well, Eislia didn't shout so much as plead her case very forcefully. Still, both of Adriana's mismatched partners weren't exactly up to talking. Herself included.

Their shoes all trod along with different tones. Similar songs, but varying instruments. Adriana had dressed a bit more warmly, as the day's hard frost was still clung to the streets and buildings of Forthiron. Mia flanked her to the left, she had on her usual dress. She swore that Mia never felt cold nor heat. She seemed to dress similarly year round. Weather be damned. Leave it up to Mia to scoff at something as inevitable as the weather.

The morning's mood was tense when Adriana called Vikaros. The plan was one that Mia highly, and vocally, disagreed with. She reminded Adriana many, many times that this was a bad idea and it would 'bake their asses.' The fact remained that this was their best option for getting the cask back from Lord

Numari. While trust was in short supply, a familiar threat was better than the unknown.

It was surprising to Adriana that Vikaros seemed eager to keep up with their correspondence. She wasn't sure of why, but it was a useful angle. She rarely had those.

"Look, I'm not saying the rat wraps are superior. I'm just saying the sauce is better overall." Mia was in the middle of a conversation with Eislia. The two of them had really become thick as thieves. Some might assume it was an act on Mia's part, but she rarely puts on airs. Adriana did also believe her when Mia said she wanted this to work.

"But....hmmm....the egg one has the cheese, though."

"Yeah, and cheese makes you not able to shit, I dunno, sounds like a sure shot to me."

"Fair enough."

Adriana had to stifle a laugh at that. A slight confirmation that her plans to make the two get along worked. Or, at the very least, not ended in bloodshed. When Mia was in the equation a lack of blood was a solid win.

Their destination was a slice of neutral territory again, like the training ground. This might have been foolhardy, but Adriana felt much safer given that she had Mia and Eislia with her. It was a bit up in the air, but Adriana was hoping she could convince them well enough. Besides, she was offering the

Numarri family on a platter, that's a hard thing to pass up. All she had to do was make sure that Mia, Eislia and her made it out of this alive. That was sort of the main challenge that stood before them.

The hard part was that Adriana had been there in the vision, that mind realm of Eislia's. She heard what had happened. The words had rung with a haunting truthfulness; this was far more dire than she could even impart to Mia. She was thankful (if not worried) that her elven companion was so staunchly loyal. Anyone else might have sold her out to Lord Numarri and called it a day. "Well you two..." Adriana flexed her gloved hands and tried to control her rising panic. "I hope you're ready for this."

"I'm ready to stand guard and watch you fumble all over this conversation." Mia said sarcastically. She held her hands together in a playful pleading pose. "Oh! Buh, buh, buh... Vikaros! Y-you're so hot you make my pee pee hard through my pants!" She squawked mockingly. Adriana sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Mia."

"Fine." She snorted. "Baby."

Mia was in rare form today. It might be stress or it might be all the adaptation she's had to do. With her elven companion it was hard to say. Regardless, she knew that the joking was just the veneer Mia wrapped her stress in. Mia would be ready if things went badly. Adriana was just unsure what the next

steps would be. She glanced up at the rooftops as they walked down the narrow streets. Old habits; but it was always best to check for surprises. Adriana looked over (and way up) to Eislia.

She was wearing her usual black tattered cloak with her harness and gloves. Her massive sword was slung on her back, and as usual she wore a stoic expression. "It's going to be ok, Eislia." She said with a soft smile of reassurance. "This is just a...business meeting, is all."

"Adriana. The need to soften me from reality is touching. But... I am fully aware of the weight of this task. The Lord you are pledged to likely takes loyalty very seriously, and I know that any defiance will not be met with kindness. We go against your keepers and this is likely to have dire consequences. But..." She hummed softly as she considered her words. "Can you trust these other factions?"

"Look, we can trust that they will devour each other. That's what the city is to the families right? A corpse upon which to feast?" She sighed. "For years they have been at each other's throats, with a tense peace between them. If it wasn't this excuse, it'd be another." She jabbed her finger upwards. "It's all just a meat grinder for them. But...it's better than oblivion. So, if I have to cause a small war to have a chance to save us, I'll take it."

"I suppose that is true. You can trust that you cannot trust them." She intoned, shrugging her massive shoulders. "It is simple for Mia and I, we have talked this over: Our job is to

protect you. For you the task is much more complex.” She smiled. “So Adriana: you have to do all the work.” Eislia finished off her point with a sharp nod.

“Comforting. In its own way, I suppose.” Adriana chuckled and patted Eislia’s side.

They approached the venue in question: An open courtyard that served as a tea house in the morning, and beer garden in the evening. A bit of a flip flop in terms of tones, but that’s just Forthiron city. There were a number of tables set out, with tattered parasols shielding them from the meager light of the early day. A few people were sitting there, but a cursory glance informed Adriana they were likely uninvolved. A smart move on Vikaros’ part—to surround themselves with civilians—they ensure no trouble would be wrought upon them.

Adriana, naturally, took the lead. She stood in front of the table Vikaros sat at. They were reading a city paper, one of the higher-end ones, with a tea set resting on the table. They lowered the paper and raised a brow, noting the two people who came along. “A solo was asked for.”

“I never said that.” Adriana smirked. She hoped her charms could smooth this wrinkle over. Vikaros gestured to the open seat across from them.

“Acceptable.” They folded up the paper and set it on the table in front of them. As they shifted in their seat, Adriana could not help but note the toned lines of Vikaros’ neck. Beautifully sculpted corded muscle, nerves and flesh. She let out a soft

breath to calm herself and could swear she felt Mia's psychic mockery. "Why has this song started? What possible encore could we play out?" They sat forward and folded their hands in front of them, leaning their chin on the folded fingers.

"Right." Adriana's nerves turned molten as she tried to collect her words. Passion was always such a vile shroud when worn. "Well....we have a matter of urgency that I think you might want to hear about; as this is a situation you might....find...advantageous to you and, of course, your organization."

"The organization to which, this one, may or may not be a part of?" Vikaros intoned and placed a hand on their own chest. Adriana sat down across from them, the shade of the umbrella casting the pair in a dark embrace. She licked her lips, and tried.

"For reasons I can't disclose. My compatriots and I need to acquire an item from a location that might be hard to get to. To be clear, we have the lay of the land, we know where to go and what path to take. (Roughly, she didn't feel the need to add, very roughly.) The fact of the matter is...we need manpower to get in. We need distractions and we need...well what you might be able to provide." She gestured with her hands out spread. "....we need to break into the Numarri estate." Adriana figured she might as well end with a bang here. Vikaros' wide eyes gave her enough feedback to know her offer at least held impact.

"Intriguing..." They drew in a breath. "It is tragic that the Magi's brilliant mind is twisted as such. Unguarded incanta-

tions can cause dementia.” Adriana scoffed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“We aren’t joking. Vikaros, I know who you work for and if you want me to invoke the name, I will. I am of more than sound mind, and I am very much in charge of my facilities. We need inside, and we need help.”

“Why? What are the terms?” They asked, raised a brow and appraised her ruefully.

“You get it all, you get a fucking hit on Lord Numarri. We get access to what we want and we leave. That’s it.”

“And what is it the Magi desires?” The situation took the turn she had expected. Adriana sighed.

“We just want to prevent something from happening, the...the balance of power might tip in the next few weeks.” Adriana hated this, but she was the one with the lower ground in this engagement. “Lord Eversei has gained access to something very...powerful. All we want to do is remove that, and get out. Then....you and your family get MUCH more territory...think of the mines that the Nummari Family has access to. The siphoner. The mana forges they have access to. Deposits of mana you only could dream of.” Vikoros raised their brow.

“If this one agreed. You are saying that all you simply want is to acquire this mysterious item and then...disappear? Leave the city?” Adriana shook her head.

“We have plans on our means out of here.” Adriana lied. “All we need is muscle from you.”

“And why does the Magi trust this one? Or the alliance they work for?”

“I don’t.” Adriana smiled. “I trust that this is too good a chance to pass up. Look over there.” She leaned back and gestured to Mia who was casually standing around. “One of the best stabbers in the Eversei house, and probably the city. SHE’S turned against the family for this. I’m not just fucking around Vikaros, this is...legit.”

They pursed their lips and hummed, Adriana could see the numbers and figures dancing in their vision. This was the catch of a lifetime. One that anyone would be a fool to pass up. Adriana could only hope that Vikaros was the ambitious type. The other day, when she trained them, she thought she caught a glimpse of such desires in their eyes. The time taken to consider this offer felt like agony, but Adriana was patient. She sat with her hands folded in front of her, smiling as pleasantly as she could manage.

It was still a bit lopsided as usual.

Eventually, after what felt like a decade, Vikaros nodded. “This task we are about to undertake, it could easily lead to our undoing.” They smiled, and Founders damn those lips of theirs. “This dance could be a mortal undertaking.”

“Well, isn’t everything? Isn’t taking a stroll at night?” She

could feel Mia's eyes on her, 'this is taking too long' she was probably thinking. Mia was also probably assessing the likely modes of escape right about now too. Adriana had already performed an assessment of her own. "But...the gains, Vikaros. Imagine those. For far too long, the families had been stuck in a stand still, how long can that last?" Adriana could feel herself pressing the advantage, but she hoped this was just enough of a feather touch to tip the scales.

Vikaros sat up, then waved their hand. A folding of space, a sizzle of magic and a small glass—a shot glass—appeared in the middle of the table. "With this....we bind ourselves to our word and our deed, Adriana Cosmili." With a sharp jewelry-clawed pinky finger, they pricked their thumb. A few drops of blood dribbled into the glass and they gestured to Adriana. She sighed and offered her hand. The prick was painless; it was the idea, the sight, of her own life blood mixing with theirs and the drink that hurt more. The thought clamored for Adriana's attention, the thought of: This might be a huge mistake.

Adriana was mildly concerned with how long it had taken for her to realize this.

The drink was held aloft, offered to both, Adriana's throat burned; not from the alcohol, but the promise held in the drink. "Now, the binding is complete, I trust this will go smoothly and pray we are both successful. When do we start?"

"Three days. I, and my team, need some time to prepare and get the necessary precautions uh, set up." She held up her hand "No need to offer help on that, we have it handled." This

was the part of the plan that Adriana feared. She knew what was needed and she knew Mia would hate it. They required very special, very specific magical assistance.

Adriana knew a few things about Lord Eversei. She knew she was a magi of unparalleled skills, so much so that some believed she was a pure magical source, a being that could pull from an nearly infinite source of magic. Which meant, she was basically a walking death machine. Whenever Adriana had talked with Mia about such things, the elf just looked away and dropped the subject. That told Adriana that it wasn't just some reputation that got out of hand. She knew that if Mia feared it, it was real.

Which meant that they needed to find a few powerful nullification rites. And such rites were difficult to find. Luckily she knew just the place where she could find such things.

"The Undermire!? Are you serious Adri!?" Mia had been foul-tempered the whole day, Adriana couldn't blame her, but it was even worse once the subject of their next destination came up. Eislia however, through the whole process was stoically compliant. They had all decided to break off from the meeting to hunker down and plan their next day. Adriana was very aware of the deadline that she herself had established. Three days was enough time for preparations to be made. She knew that Mia would want to gather a few special items for this.

"I'm really sorry this is all happening, Eislia." She couldn't

help but feel the need to say this. How many times has she apologized to her? The giantess shrugged her shoulders.

"It is no problem to me. I am more worried for you two. But... what is this place, the Undermire?"

"Oh yeah, ow!" Mia's fist slapped into Adriana's shoulder the pain spiking for just a second before she rubbed her arm to ease it. "It's, um." She glanced at her elven companion to ward her from another attack. "It's a place that is sort of an all-comers market. A place where anything is bought and sold. There are no oversights there and the powers-that-be leave it alone. So uh, yeah not the wisest place to go, especially for Mia and I."

"And...why is that?" Eislia's expression looked like she might have already known the answer.

"Well, we're good at making enemies." Adriana said with a flare of poorly-clung to confidence. "I mean, Mia and I made...waves at one time."

"Ah, yes that makes sense." Eislia said with a knowing nod. All that little jest got Eislia was a snort and jab at her ribs from Mia. The two of them did oddly seem to click into place together. Small relief in a sea of worries. The thing with Mia was how hard she was to read. Adriana felt as if she knew her better than anyone else, but she was still a hard read. The elf still had her own individual complexities, Adriana had to remember that. She could have chosen to be jealous, to be angry over this other coupling. But she didn't. She just...went along with all

of this. Adriana looked over to Mia as they walked along, her beautiful features set with purpose and concern.

Adriana reached over, and brushed her fingertips along her arm. "Hey Mia, it's going to be ok." She lied. "All we have to do is just...complete this insane job and we get the hell out of here."

"Oh yeah sure." Mia rolled her eyes and stepped ahead. Adriana jammed her hands into the pockets of her jacket as she watched her. "Easy as shit." She huffed. "But whatever, like I said, all this important shit ain't my field, Adri. I'm not a finger wiggler and I don't get magic, but I do get power. And yeah...this sounds like the kind of shit we don't want in the wrong hands." She paused and blinked, shook her head and groaned. "I sound like a fucking hero!" Adriana let out a huff as she was hit on the arm again. "Damn you Adri, we're supposed to just be lackeys, not fucking heroes! You owe me SO many fries and SO much sex for this!"

Adriana laughed and tried in vain to swat her hand away. "Of course, of course Mia! I will get you all of the fries, and I will make sure you are well-sexed." Mia laughed and looked back at Adriana as they all stepped up to a three story building. Mia took out from her jacket a small brass rod, and tapped it to the runic plate hidden on the wall. The only reason Adriana could spot it was that she was the one who put it there. This was one of the few safe houses of Mia's that she knew about. One of the ones her and Mia actually secured together.

A far cry from that shack of squalor that counted as her first

attempts at enchantment.

A soft 'click' sounded and Mia opened the door. They all stepped inside, Adriana drew in a breath and smiled as they walked down a short corridor and into a small, well furnished room. The air was slightly stale, but from what she could feel, the enchantments held. They kept the dust off things and any food in the safe house kept fresh. A hard task given how magic could get so easily eaten away over time. It felt comforting to be in cover as it were. It allowed her senses to take a rest and calm from the constant panic state they were in so far. Sometimes, it caused them friction, but right now Adriana was happy that Mia was so paranoid. She was grateful that Mia had so many hovels to hide in right now.

Adriana flopped down into a chair, not bothering to remove her coat and shoes, how rude. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Mia paced, she could tell she was pacing even if she wouldn't be able to hear the pad of her feet. She'd know. Eislia however, had moved to the kitchen. Adriana looked up and watched her check the fridge, shoulders dropped. "Yeah we're not stocked, Eislia."

"How are we supposed to plan something so serious-" She said as she closed the door. "-On empty stomachs?" Adriana laughed and stood.

"Alright, alright, why don't I get food and you two discuss things? I'm sure that you have much to go over." She rose and caught Mia's gaze. Adriana pulled out her spell book. "I have prepared any defensive measures I need, Mia. I'll be fine."

“Whatever, cunt. I was just gonna tell you to grab me some crisps.”

“Sure thing, Mia. Those um...ones with all the.” Adriana felt herself make a face.

“Word you’re looking for is ‘flavor’ Adri. Yeah, the hot ones.” Mia smirked at her like the cat with the canary. Adriana simply sighed and nodded her acknowledgment, turned and left.

There would be no mistaking the unique scents of the city: A mixture of pollutants and musk. Above it all, though, was the irrefutable scent of magic. Adriana hadn’t researched the world and its workings, of course. Such knowledge wasn’t readily available to those from the slums. But, she had analyzed what she could, and she listened and watched. It was clear that there was more magic now than there was before. Her evidence was anecdotal mostly, so that wasn’t as reliable as she’d like it to be. The older folks she spoke with did tell her that things were darker a few decades back, there was less of a ‘spark’ they’d say.

In those older times, magic had less of a grip in the world. Enchantments died out in mere days, any sustained spell was simply meal for the universe. Taken in a matter of moments. Even conjuring large swaths of energy were untenable in any realistic sense. Such wonders as the Sparkrail network and the fartalker net would be unthinkable when Adriana was a child. And yet, in the short span of a couple decades; magic

blooms and flourishes. Well, that's an overstatement, but the sentiment was still sound.

It was reasonable to assume that this...blooming was from a variety of factors. But, still the conclusion that the world had not exactly died was tempting to mull over. Odd, that hope could ring in her heart now: Her and Eislia; Mia and Adriana's newfound affection. Even this plan. They all held such tender hope in her heart. Amazing how the tides can turn so quickly. Regardless, the scent of magic hit her nostrils far more so than anything else as she stepped into the city's air.

This particular section of Forthiron was a place she hadn't visited in a decent while. Her and Mia, when they were starting out in their endeavors, made quite a few safe houses together. They knew that going to ground was very vital for their survival. As such, they made sure that no matter where they were in the city, they had a place to flee. The upside of things is the safety, the downside is that the houses were often always out of stock. Adriana smiled to herself as she stuck her hands in her pockets, watching as people strode past her. She used to feel so outside of it all, cloistered and isolated. Now though this was her city, her world; She had to protect it.

The thought that she'd be leaving it all behind in just a few days broke her heart.

Adriana's steps carried her around the corner and over to the dispensary: a small shop that provided basic sundries and supplies. There was a market a few blocks away, but she wasn't interested in crowds at the moment. She often made fun of Mia

for her suspiciousness, but right now being among a bunch of potential blades in the back would not be relaxing. Besides, Eislia could work magic with any ingredients.

Adriana realized in this moment, as she stepped up to the counter, that she had zero idea what was needed. Food was made with fats and proteins, right? That sounded like it made sense. She tried to think back to anything she knew about food; but her and Mia never really cooked. She thought "Eggs." She said with a nod. "And um...butter, and any kind of meat that might go with that? Oh, and that thing, um...the powder thing?" The shopkeeper blinked at her.

"Flour?" The person by the counter offered.

"Yes, that, please. Oh, and some crisps, the spicy ones and right...pepper and salt as well. That's it." Adriana said proudly. She waited as the supplies were selected and bagged, she glanced from one direction to the next, to ensure that no one was following her. Nothing nefarious for the time being, slight reprieves were welcome always. Her attention snapped back to the groceries as they were handed over, Adriana set the money on the counter and left.

She stepped away from the counter and down the street back to their safe house. A pigeon in flight, a mouse in the light, she really didn't want to feel so exposed; but it was unavoidable given the circumstances. The familiar clack of her shoe's soles mixed with the gentle murmur of people's idle conversations. It was distracting enough to keep her attention focused, oddly. Adriana's mind required a certain level of

occupation in order for it to focus . Studying spells or the layout of a heist was always easier for her to do when she had the window open and could listen to the sounds of the city. Oftentimes, she contemplated the purchase of one of those fancy music players, but she didn't have the money for such things. "Well, well, the scholar dances solo." She whipped around to see Vikaros, who stood as if a shark set in a sea of fish.

Certainly a different creature than most.

"Oh, um...were you stalking me?" Adriana had to be blunt; she couldn't help it. In response, Vikaros laughed.

Vikaros hummed as they looked up at the sky. "This one was simply admiring the air." They said with a smile. Adriana turned to face them. She would put her hands on her hips if they were not occupied holding the groceries.

"Ah, it is...bright there isn't it? Full of magic?" They drew closer.

"You can feel it can't you, Magi? The world sings with energy, always, every hour it gets stronger. And this one..." they tapped a finger on the edge of the bag of goods. "...then comes to this one with a proposal. The threads start to weave." Adriana suddenly became very aware of how close they were by now. Only the groceries stood between them. "The only thing that this one wonders is: what is the true intention? Is the magi here to let the world die, or nurse it along?" Their blue eyes filled Adriana with a dark yearning.

"I don't know anything about some grand scheme of the world, Vikaros. I'm just here to get something back, and then I'll be out of your hair." She stepped back, the urge to get away screamed in every nerve of her body. "I know I'm a magi, I know everyone seems to think I need to have some special ambition, but I just want this deal done and over with."

"This one thinks the magi, the rogue scholar, has a plan; but half a plan. How will she escape? How will she get out? And where to, hmm?" They continued their approach. Adriana clutched the bag and steeled her spine.

"I don't think that's your business, is it?"

"But what if this one wants the same as the Magi, hmm? What if...it is all woven together in threads?" Vikaros smiled as they held a hand up. They opened it and inside was a small rune key. "Go here, this one is certain the song's tone will be pleasing."

"Ok, I don't think I could make something sound MORE like a trap, Vikaros. What makes you think I'll trust you?" At that, Vikaros simply smiled and dropped the key in the bag. Those lips were a hazard stripe's worth of things she should not do. Adriana sucked in a breath, then sighed.

"This one knows that any magi, but especially one as cunning as you, cannot resist a good mystery. This one trusts in that, not in any affection between the two." With that, they turned on their heel and walked off. They wove a hand though the air, the surrounding area cooled; small flicks of ice danced in the air, and they were gone.

Adriana let out a long sigh and shook her head. "Holy crap, I am fucked."

Adriana slipped into the safe house with barely a sound. She felt as if she was a thief who'd snuck onto hallowed ground. A wave of distress hit her, she felt guilt as she saw the two of them arguing.

"No, we just put some spice in there, it'll be hilarious trust me!"

"It seems a bit deceptive..." Eislia protested.

"Yeah, that's the point! Adriana's face will turn red, it's hilarious!" Mia countered.

"Ah, I see you two are gonna poison my food, huh?" Adriana asked as she set the groceries down on the table. "How mean, but expected of you, Mia." Her little stab queen grinned and came over to grab the snacks that were for her. She could never forget that for Mia. She returned to the chair she had claimed and plopped into it. Eislia smiled as she too came over to look through the bag. Before anyone could notice, Adriana had pocketed the key (she didn't need to be causing extra worries for now) and smirked at Mia.

"Hey, what do you expect of me?" She asked, pretending to inspect her nails. "I'm trying to keep your horizons broad, babe." Mia popped open the bag and tossed a morsel into her

mouth. She hummed with satisfaction.

“I swear, you keep acting out just so that you can get punished..” Adriana quipped back. Mia only snorted out a laugh, she barely spared a glance up from her nails at her. Smooth dark eyes that Adriana only caught a bit of. Eislia was already sorting the ingredients out, nodded to herself, and began to cook. The safe house, of course, had power and water. It was all part of blending in.

It was nice though, the calm that had settled over them. It felt natural to have all three of them sharing this space. Even Mia looked like she was at relative peace. A knife in a sheath at the best of times, though; always ready to be drawn.

Adriana came over to sit on the armrest of the chair Mia sat at. Her hand found her hair and twirled some silken locks around a finger. “Mia.” The elf—her elf—looked up at her with a quirked brow. The soft hum begged an answer to the summon. “You ok? There’s been...a lot, recently.”

“Oh baby, I’m iron.” Mia said with a grin.

“How long were you practicing that one, Mia?”

“Fuck off.” She said, her voice ever defiant. Her body language gave herself away though, as she leaned her head into Adriana’s touch. She couldn’t help but smile as she took her in. The mild scent of flowers mixed with apprehension and sweat; it made for a sweet perfume.

"I mean it Mia, all jests aside. You matter in all this." Mia's cheeks darkened and she tried to look away. Adriana's hand closed around a chunk of hair. Tightly, she forced Mia to meet her gaze and hold it. She needed her to hear this. "This is beyond bantering around, this is big and you're a part of it. I just...want to offer you a bit of kindness here, Mia." She squirmed under this kind of affection. Mia never got used to it, and to her credit, Adriana was bad at giving it. Mia let out a huff and shifted in her seat.

"I know, ok? I know. It's just...it's another Job. A big, and frankly insane one. All I have to do is focus on that and get it done." Adriana gazed into Mia's eyes as she said all of this, her heart ached as it always did. "And make sure you don't do anything stupid, that's my main goal here." Adriana snorted out a laugh.

"Me? Oh, that's funny, miss berserker."

"Hey!" Mia broke off the gaze and Adriana let go of her hair, the moment had passed and it would be best if they settled into their usual ways. "It's all calculated chaos, you just can't see it, girl."

"Well, you are an artist with a blade, so I guess can't argue that."

Adriana caught Eislia's movements out of the corner of her eye and looked up. She had two plates piled with food; some kind of fried something. She set them down with a smile. "If we are going to talk of dire things, we might as well do it on a

full stomach.”

“I can’t argue that.” Adriana said as she sat at the table, smiling to herself. They all sat down, together, shared this meal, and their hearts. Plans and schemes would wait for after. This time, what little there was, was for them.

Undermire

The night was spent in the safe house, anxiety bled into merriment as Mia led the night's festivities. It was enchanting to see her wear the hat of an entertainer. Adriana got a glimpse of her many facets and felt honored each time they were revealed. She danced and even sang, almost as if she knew this might be the last time they all had together for a while. Mia was usually steel and glass; cold and sharp. Always prepared for a job.

Mia's steel was showing its wear.

The fact that Adriana had just asked her to walk through all the hells for her wild 'magic bullshit' spoke volumes of Mia's commitment. She worried that this was all just guilt though, what if Mia was just caught up in the need to prove herself to Adriana? An uncomfortable thought, but she couldn't dwell on it. Adriana trusted Mia to be Mia; to do as her heart demanded of her.

Morning hit early, with a harder hand than most dawns. Adriana groaned and rolled onto her side ‘rise and shine’ her mind screamed at her. She heard Mia make a whiny kind of moan, the creak of the floorboards sounding her arrival upon them. By the time Adriana pushed herself up to a sitting position, the shower had started up.

“You look sore, Adriana.” Eislia’s voice came from behind her. A hand laid on her back and she sighed. It was a kind of muscle fatigue that Adriana didn’t even know she had. She sat up and flexed her back.

“I think the stress might be getting to me, yeah.” As she tried to roll her shoulders, Eislia shifted and sat behind her. Those hands were so warm, so tender. The touch quenched a thirst Adriana had known too well. She couldn’t help but let out a groan as Eislia’s hands did their magic. The week had been stressful. The time had felt packed and dense. For the past year, her life had been a mire of repeated, strict, schedule. Now though, it was utter chaos.

She welcomed it though. Now that she had such wonderful, beautiful, painful chaos in her life she never wanted to let it go. Adriana had always needed Mia; she just did. The two of them had known this for years. They simply refused to admit it. That was absolute and true. Eislia though, was different. She worked a spot into Adriana’s heart with such alacrity it stunned her. It was clear though that both of them were as important to her. Odd that her heart could be won over so easily. Adriana had always assumed it was a fortress with how grey she felt most times.

She leaned forward and moaned as the hands worked over her sore muscles. “Do you have much pain?” Eislia asked. “I have overheard a few people in my wanderings here. Apparently magi can be strained.” Adriana felt her shrug. “It um...worked differently back home.”

“Yeah, I would assume Founders don’t suffer from nerve damage when they use magic, hmm?” Adriana had her chin rested in her hands, she smiled. “Um, not much. It’s never too bad for me. I think what you are feeling in my back is just stress from um...all of this.” She held up her hand. “And don’t even bother apologizing, I don’t regret a thing about meeting you, Eislia.” She knew she was blushing, Adriana knew this with all her heart. Eislia; a massive warrior with fantastic abilities, blushing due to her words. She felt her own cheeks redden and bit.

Adriana looked up just as Mia came out, wrapped in a towel and her hands on her hips. She scoffed. “Ok you two, stop having your version of sex. We got work to do!”

She felt her smile grow at seeing her. Adriana pushed off of the bed and walked over to Mia. Without hesitation she reached for her hands; without hesitation, Mia took them. “So. We do this little shopping trip, then we make sure Dr. Farrow is ok right?”

“Yeah, and I got a plan for that.”

“Well, spill it.” Adriana ate up this quip. Mia just smirked.

“For once: Don’t worry Just let me handle this ok? I might hate the old bitch, but Farrow’s been good to us, I’ll make sure she’s ok.” Adriana smiled and shook her head, even freshly woken and messy-hair, Mia was a vision. She drew in a breath, took in Mia’s scent, and let it out slowly.

“Ok, shopping time.”

The Undermire was not so much under the actual city as it was affixed to it.

And under it.

Located along the Eastern and Southern edges of the outer ring, clung to the very outer walls of the city like a cancer. The close knit network of alleys, tunnels, and massive fixtures make for a dense web. A knotted mass of illicit trade. This is where many substances are smuggled in and out of the city as well. A very dangerous place, to put it mildly.

Adriana walked along the precarious walkway that led to one of the entrances. It happened to be a very non-distinctive hatch affixed to the side of a building’s exterior. The drop from the sheer outer walls to the ground below was more than considerable. Adriana sucked in a breath and looked out over the horizon, it was shrouded in clouds and mist at this time of the day. She tried not to look down.

Mia seemed to be taking her sweet time opening it.

“Unclench your asshole, hun.” Mia grinned as she stepped aside. The hatch swung open. “They changed the codes a few times, but I got it to work.” Adriana stepped up and nodded to her.

“Ugh is that um...shop still there? Or wait, when was the last time you’ve been here, Mia?” The elf only shrugged.

“Since like, a bit over a year ago? It was when you and I were doing that thing.” She winked. “You know? That thing-thing?”

“Yes, I am well aware of ‘the thing’, Mia.” Adriana sighed.

“Anyway, I still have contacts though, Adri. I keep tabs on this shit stain.” She flashed her fangs “Just like all the other shit holes in this city.”

“Anything that produced you, couldn’t be entirely shit, Mia.” Adriana smirked as she walked past the stunned elf. Whenever she got the upper hand on Mia, it was pure bliss. She stepped ahead, down into a narrow stairway. It winded and twisted in ways that would confuse anyone else. For Adriana it was like tracing a finger over old scars; familiar. She held her hand on one edge of the far-too-close wall, her steps muffled by dust and old, old wood. The journey took a long time, each creak of the stairs a warning of failure. But even under the three of theirs weight, they held. Eventually, the stairway opened up into a massive, underground space. It was easily a hundred feet down, and the staircase spiraled to the bottom. The air hit them first: a heady mix of spices, smoke, and sweat. She

couldn't imagine how very voluminous the bouquet of scents would be for Mia, her enhanced senses could be a curse if Adriana were being honest. It'd certainly drive her mad.

The stair spiral extended down into the massed marketplace, as if a spider's leg reaching for the web. It was one of Adriana's preferred points of entry as it afforded them a great view of where everything was. Adriana took in a breath once they hit street level, or rather what counted as such here. She looked around. There was already a thick throng of people who milled about on their tasks. She instantly checked for her companions. Mia was right beside her with Eislia flanked on the other side. "Alright so, Eislia, we are going to be very careful and not do anything stupid. Ok? Like that's the main goal here: No stupid."

"It would help me tremendously if I knew what exactly such 'stupid' actions were?" A fair point, to Adriana's mind. She was confident in letting Mia take the lead on this. Such details and intricacies of society were more her expertise.

"Ok, ok thunderpants. Look, the basics are this: Don't talk to anyone you don't know, don't be intimidating and don't start shit. Just...be silent and follow us. Oh." She turned around to face Eislia, not so dramatically as to cause a scene, just enough to make a point. "And do NOT wander off. Sounds good?" Adriana noticed the shadow of a grin on Eislia's lips.

"Am I mistaken? Is this you showing concern for me, Mia?"

"Oh shut up, lunk head." She snorted and fell back into step

beside Adriana.

The small market square they were in opened into a large lane; more akin to a massive street way filled with booths and shops of various sizes and makes than a normal market. A patchwork of commerce. It was a mixture of familiar and alien. There were parts of the overall row that looked as familiar as the last time she'd seen them. But other sections, booths, banners; all new. That was how this place operated: new flesh grown on old bones, ever shifting and changing.

A wonderful tapestry all things considered.

Adriana had scanned each face as she walked by, an old habit. One that she knew Mia was doing as well. She stopped at a booth to inspect one of the goods. She was being followed. Her excitement spiked. Chemical reactions surged through her veins—mingled with her blood—excited her skin. She drew in a breath. Electricity reignited in her being for a split second.

“Damn, you are back down here, aren’t you!?” She turned quickly, Mia had taken up position nearby, a flank that the two of them had performed by instinct. However, this time their instincts were so very wrong. It was Dr. Farrow. Tall arched horns sold her height to be far more than it was. She was a short woman, smaller than Mia. Her presence was monumental though. She stood with her arms crossed over her chest, narrowed eyes stared up at Adriana. “Shit, kids....I thought you didn’t need this...wait why’s Mia here? With you...willingly?” She was clearly confused. Being kept out of the loop will do that.

The good doctor was in a typical outfit for them: dark slacks with a shirt floppily tucked into the waistline. She had on a stark white lab coat, which Adriana had never seen her without, and had a satchel balanced on her shoulder. Her face was marked with years, yet she was oddly fetching. Adriana really didn't want to think back on the crush she used to have, so she just mumbled and shook her head. "Just shopping" came out in a tumble of syllables.

Her gaze flicked between Mia and Adriana, she could feel it on her, and eventually journeyed up to the eyes of Eislia. Adriana made a face and stepped over. "Ah, yes, she's um...a new friend. We're showing her around."

"Right...Right. Since when have you and Mia made friends?" She snorted and waved her hand. "Eh, not my business. Good to see you two back tolerating each other."

"My name is Eislia, by the way, it's nice to meet you—"

"Um, this is Dr. Farrow. She's a saw-bones and local hard ass." Mia said with a smug grin. "We somehow put up with her."

"Because I patch you two up whenever you do something dumbassed." She countered. Eislia bowed at the waist and offered a slight smile. "Good to meet you, Eislia. Where are you from? They don't really make 'em that big down here."

"Ah, I'm um...new in this city. I came in on the caravans." That seemed to convince Farrow, or at least enough for her to

be placated. She nodded and put her hands on her hips.

“Well, these two treating you well? They can be dipshits, but just put up with them and....well there’s not much else there.” She laughed, Adriana sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Yes. Mia and Adriana are good folks. I have received much help from them. So, I suppose I need to extend a thanks to you as well. For helping them so much.” She bowed again, it seemed that Eislia knew exactly when to be formal. That might be useful.

“So, might as well ask it then: What are you two doing down here? And why are you showing a new guest around THIS place!?”

Adriana shifted from one foot to the next, she rubbed her neck. “Ah well, we’re just um...we have a mission coming up. One that’s a bit dangerous. And we’re um...looking to get some magical protection.” She hesitated a bit, and found that she had locked eyes with Farrow. She looked up and bore into her. A pressure, a thousand pounds of weight, sat on her head. The truth festered on her tongue. Adriana felt herself guide Dr. Farrow away from the crowd, down to an isolated alleyway. “We have a problem, and Mia and I...look, don’t come to the manor in two days. Things will be bad, just...please.” Dr. Farrow looked up at Adriana with a querying expression. She seemed to be chewing on her lip.

“Adriana, kiddo, what are you asking me exactly?” Her gaze never moved from Adriana; a hawk sizing up prey. Adriana

sighed and rubbed the back of her head.

“I’m asking you to skip work for the next few days. Things are going to go...bad at the manor and both Mia and I...” She paused. “We...we don’t want to see you hurt.”

“And by telling me this, all eyes will be right on me once the smoke clears. And what are you two THINKING!?” She whapped Adriana on the arm. It hurt, but not as much as Mia can muster (why is she thinking of that elf so much!? It’s nice, but damn her for taking the brain space.) Adriana rubbed her arm and sighed.

“I’m sorry...this is a shit position to put you in but...well...look things are-”

“Bad. Yes. You keep saying that.” Dr. Farrow groaned and guided them all aside, out of the thoroughfare and down to another alley, far more secluded. “Spill the beans, you little shits.” She had her hands on her hips as she bore her dark gaze into both of them. Her thin tail lashed about, her irritation clear as day.

“There is a cask that I found that apparently Lord Eversei wanted. It is...” She leaned forward, her voice dropped to a whisper. “It’s from the Ultimacy. It’s a weapon, or rather...a spell. One that can kill the Founders. Eislia came here to find it, protect it, and make sure it never falls into the wrong hands. Wrong hands like, I don’t know-”

“-Lord Eversei.” She finished the thought with a muted voice.

Dr. Farrow was, by all rights, unflappable. After this news, she looked genuinely shaken. Farrow bit her lip, her tail tracing worried circles in the air. She paced, she sighed and grunted. Finally, after a series of curses, Dr. Farrow let her shoulders drop. "Fine, but you know that I won't be able to even stay here, right? The fallout's going to swallow anyone who is attached to the family, right? Are you ready for that level of Fallout, Adriana? Mia?" She looked at both of them, Adriana could see Mia shrink back out the corner of her eye.

"Yeah, we're ready for that. And we're ready to help you get out, Doctor."

"Fucking....Alright, alright, what's the plan?" Mia stepped up as Farrow asked that and handed her a small cylinder.

"Coded info, I made it last night. We got a meeting time and place prepped, just follow that, and we'll be ok." She winked at her. "We were gonna find you anyway before this all went down; you being here? That's just luck."

"Thought you didn't believe in luck, Mia?" Dr. Farrow pressed. The elf simply shrugged in response.

"What can I say? Everyone's wrong sometimes." Adriana sighed and stepped in.

"Alright, ok, so...that's the story and we have a plan. As long as you follow it, you'll be ok. We actually, we actually care, Doctor. If you can believe that. I'm not doing this for personal gain, I'm doing this because it is more dire than you imagine.

The best thing you can do is finish whatever you were doing here and go home. Only then will you look at that.” She pointed to the cylinder. “And probably destroy it afterwards. The important thing is to-”

“Oh shut up, this ain’t my first surgery you nerdlinger.” Dr. Farrow interrupted her, pocketed the rod and walked off, her tail jittering around angrily.

“Well, that could’ve gone worse.” Mia remarked casually.

Maria’s Magical Mercantile was a shop located in a small section of a winded, twisted path of alleys. It catered to those of the magical variety, mostly alchemists down here, with a large selection of goods available for purchase. Most of it in actual currency. Some of the more rare and hard-to-acquire products might require some bartering to get one’s hands on. Adriana hadn’t ever dabbled in the latter, mostly the former. Mia was one to always be suspicious of transactions that did not involve cash and Adriana had to admit: that was a wise policy.

Adriana just hoped that the wards they required would be something she could buy with currency and not favor.

Her and Mia had as easy a time as they always had when navigating the tight confines. Eislia, on the other hand, had to duck and dodge just to make her way through the alleys. She handled it with her usual grace though, and soon all three of

them found themselves in front of a rickety door composed of multiple bright colours. It stood out from the surrounding grime easily, one could say. It stood out like a sore thumb others might add. "This place still looks tacky as fuck." Mias might be prone to disclose.

"Yes, well, it's where we need to be. Now, are we all clear on the plan?"

"Yeah yeah, Eislia and I shut up and look intimidating. Got it." Mia looked up at Eislia. "Ok, do the face I showed you." Eislia frowned, or tried to bare her teeth? It was hard to say, she mostly looked constipated. Adriana tapped a finger on her own chin.

"...Maybe, just stand there with your arms crossed?" She did as directed. Adriana and Mia both nodded in satisfaction. "There. Perfect, just do that and I'll do the talking, yes?" Adriana turned back to the door and held her hand over it. She knocked. There was a long pause before the door swung open, just a fraction. A pale face stared back at them.

"They tell me you're good. Come in." The figure stepped aside and opened the door further. Adriana glanced at her two companions before entering the room. Immediately, she was greeted with the pungent odor of Ambrosial herbs; sickly sweet and oddly cloying. She caught the sound of Mia breathing it in, her enhanced senses probably reading far more tones than Adriana could. The air, though, danced with magic. As always, this establishment was the real deal. The Mire was swarming with scammers; people willing to trick those who

lacked any eye for magic. The Mercantile though, was perfect for the true finger wiggler. Her gaze browsed over the items on the shelves, each was dancing with a thread of enchantment. Powerful stuff. Eventually the proprietor shuffled her feet. "The Magi in furs, and the severed one, welcome." She heard Mia mutter a 'fuck off' in response.

Samira was an elf. One with more refined features, and sleek form. They stood taller than Adriana and Mia, but of course shorter than Eislia. Black hair hung in stringy lines which then wavered into curls. They had on a Honey-toned vest, with a white shirt underneath. Their slacks matched their hair in shade and they had on a pair of sharp-toed boots. Certainly a striking figure that seemed to perch at a different time period. As if lost to the centuries of progress in fashion. All the elves Adriana had met (but Mia) seemed this way; distant and carbon-cold. Unlike her vibrant partner. She was life and blood and warmth.

"Who is this?" She asked.

"This is a friend, we can vouch for her." Adriana said, Samira just scoffed.

"Acceptable for me. So, what do you need?" They asked as they walked over to the counter. Adriana approached as well. She carefully laid her hands on the counter and smirked at Samira.

"I need a spell nullifier. The kind that will stop anything dead in its tracks." She looked at Adriana with a lifted brow.

“Those sorts of materials are expensive, Adriana.” They crossed their arms over their chest and regarded Adriana more closely. “Are you certain you can afford it?”

She reached into her jacket. Years of frugal savings set on the table in a small pouch. “I can and I understand.” She said, her voice a whisper above the crackle of candles that lit the room. “The only thing I need reassurance on, is that I need this done today. I have time limits and that’s my only actual demand.” Adriana’s voice took on an edge; a blade refined. She wasn’t an expert at conversation, or even socializing at all, but she was good with magic. She knew what it took to weave a spell or enchantment. The past year’s seclusion gave her time to learn even more. Obviously, she could not create such a ward herself (The materials and techniques eluded her.) However, she did know exactly what went into making them.

“Today? That I can do.” They held up their hand. “But later in the day, as I have no spell templates for such things prepared. I’ll have to cast it from silver and Gone Steel, that takes time to refine.” Adriana nodded to the response, her fingers rubbed against her thumb, pressed until she felt pain’s protest.

“I can do that. We’re not in the Mire for long, but we can stay down here a few more hours.” Adriana caught Mia’s sigh. It was light and soft, but likely their shopkeeper overheard it.

“They say you’re good, and trustworthy.” They cocked their head. “And as long as the severed one doesn’t touch it, the ward will be fine.” The point was made with a look in Mia’s direction.

Mia nearly leapt over the counter, but by some grace of the Founders, she relented. "Yeah. I'll be good, cunt. Besides, Adriana's the finger-wiggler. All this shit's above me, you know that." The comment was left aside, and so it fell to Adriana to take it. She leaned closer to the merchant.

"She is a trusted ally and skilled combatant. I don't care if she is 'severed' from her ancestors. I would appreciate it if you did not try to incite her, understand?" Samira looked at Adriana's molten gaze that seemed to burn away any defiance. Their dark eyes flicked to the bag of money, then back to her.

"I understand. It will be done by sunset. Return then."

Adriana let out a breath to try and cool her temper, something in her seemed to writhe and press for release. The other elf acted almost as if she could see it; some horrid coiling snake ready to lash out. They instinctively shrunk back from her. Adriana turned away quickly and glanced over her shoulder.

"Acceptable."

As they stepped out into the tight confines of the alley, Mia walked ahead, grumbled to herself, and hit the side of a building. Adriana came up to her and guided her from the wall. "Hmm...I want to ask, but..." Eislia started.

"It's just a thing, big girl." Mia said. She had her arms wrapped around herself as they walked along. "It's not a big deal, it's just the whole like...elves can communicate with their ancestral lines, and I can't cause I never knew mine. So I'm

cut off from certain things...and like, I'm also considered a bad luck charm." She shrugged. "So, whatever." Eislia walked behind both of them, an aegis and a comfort. Adriana sighed.

"It's not important. Not to you and it never was." Adriana finally spoke. "I think you are amazing Mia, and clearly whoever decided to leave you behind made some stupid choices."

"Adriana. I miss the bitching at each other." Mia said as she waved a hand. "Can we just go back to that?"

"Sure. Cunt."

Mia sighed. "Much better."

It turns out that generally, time was not on their side, today it was. For the past few days time has been a vice upon Adriana's life. So much as happened and so few moments to digest it. Today however, she apparently had a plethora of it. Therefore, her and Mia chose to kill the day in the most productive way when finding oneself in a dangerous, illicit place.

Get drunk in a bar.

Not just any bar, THE bar. The Sunken Cost was the most popular dive in a town full of dives. It was the lowest of the low, the seediest of the seedy. In retrospect, it was probably a bad idea. The problem was that Mia and Adriana, despite

their caution, were creatures raised in chaos. Sometimes, such discordance beckoned them.

A step inside this establishment and Adriana was hit with a wave of scents. Even her feeble senses couldn't ignore the assault. Body odor, cheap beer and the stink of various herbs being burnt dominated her olfactory nerves. She let out a soft cough, but her mind was more focused on keeping her attention close to Eislia. She knew that her friend had been to a few places of business in the city, she was vaguely aware that Mia took her to a bar. This was, a world apart though from any place on the surface. Mia walked ahead and quickly had a space for them at the bar—no one would be dumb enough to cross her—and ushered them over.

"Three double shots of your best whiskey; and I mean best, if you water it down, I bleed you." She said with a cocky grin. The barkeep followed the orders, took a bottle off the top shelf and poured it for them. Adriana sat in the middle with Eislia and Mia flanking. She looked down at her drink and then to Mia.

"How much time do you really think we can kill here, Mia?"

"Oh Founders, Adri!" She sighed. "We have a few drinks, we see what they have for food and before you know it, it'll be over with." She grinned even more as she turned around to survey the rest of the bar. "Or...we cause a little trouble..."

"Mia, the days of causing trouble are behind us. We need to focus just a bit." Adriana cautioned. "We were wild before,

but we also had no real direction.”

“Hey, you were my direction, babe.”

“Nice come on line, use it often?” Mia simply scoffed at that and returned her gaze to the crowd, it was a pressed throng of bodies. Usual for a day like this. When everyone had nothing, nothing mattered. Drinking and dancing a life away is just as viable as toil. Adriana sighed and took a drink, the burn helped to distract her enough from her anxiety. The city was broken, festering and unjust. But it was life, it was hope.

It was better than nothing.

That’s what she was fighting for. That’s what all of this was for. As she watched the various people dancing and mingling; living. She remembered what she was doing all of this for. Not just Mia, in the grand scheme of things, but for this entire sad place.

Forthiron was worth existing. That had to matter.

“This is the second such place I have been so far.” Adriana looked over as Eislia spoke. Her heart squeezed in her chest as she saw her smile. Those deep red eyes, that innocent bearing on her entire being. It was hard not to feel enchanted by such a strange and lovely creature. Adriana reached out to pat her arm.

“Well, I’m glad you’re able to see the bright sides of this city. I love that Mia and I have been able to at least try and show

you a few special places here.” It touched Adriana that she did have this chance. For years, her and Mia hated this place. It was a corpse, a cesspool of refuse and woe. A place to fester and regret every choice you’ve made. But having Eislia here it was like waking up and seeing a new world. She saw all the wonders that Forthiron held; pearls buried in slime. A part of her felt new again, filled with hope.

Eislia smiled and nodded in response, she gulped down her drink. “I do not think I know what a home is, not fully, but Adriana.” She looked down, her face soft and sweet, handsome and perfect. “You, Mia, you have shown me what one was. I can know it, even if I have never known such things.” She couldn’t help but melt under such kind words. For a good few moments, Adriana was at a loss for words.

“I...thank you Eislia.”

After the trio had gone back to the shop to pick up the ward, they decided to call it a day and retreat from the Under Mire. It was far too risky to stay too long. Either they would have come across an old foe, or piss off the wrong person all anew, either way it was not a good option for them. Once they were back at their home, Adriana bid the two of them goodbye and left for her little rendezvous, she still hadn’t worked up the courage to explain it, simply made the excuse that she had to acquire a few more supplies. And that is why she found herself walking down the lonely night streets of her familiar neighborhood, heading towards the appointed location.

She had no idea what Vikaros was playing at. Nor did she understand what exactly was going on. She didn't know enough about the magi to get a read on them. The only thing that Adriana was sure of was that Vikaros could be semi-trusted. Trusted to not sell her out, that is. There was something about Vikaros that told her they were not nearly as loyal to their family as they might seem. That was something she could use.

Nervous strides guided her to the appointed building. The address was etched on the runic key. She stood in front of the iron door, it looked like an old shop, perhaps abandoned, perhaps captured for other uses. This had to have been one of Vikaros' safe houses, there was no way this was something not owned and curated by them. Why do all the handlers have such offerings? They seem to earn everything and acquire so many resources. She couldn't help but think of how many safe houses, cars, and other accessories that Mia had access to. Then again, perhaps that's simply the rewards of ambition. Adriana hadn't really bothered to climb any ranks for a long time. Her hands never wore themselves down with effort.

Maybe she should feel irritated at herself.

Adriana was going to knock at the door, then she remembered the key. She chastised herself as she took it out and unlocked the door with a tap. The magics lacing the key shimmered, then faded. A limited use clause? Interesting, but clever. She stepped inside to a surprisingly well furnished single room den. Two chairs stood in the middle of the room, surveying the fireplace. Ambers crackled in it, the room cast in a golden

glow. Vikaros sat in one chair, silent. "Alright, no more clever games." Adriana said as she charged in and sat down. She made sure to sit as intimidatingly as possible. "What is this about? I have much to do." She crossed one leg over the other. It was at that point she noticed that Vikaros had not turned to face her.

"The lineage of such a Magi..." They finally tore their gaze from the dying fire and looked at Adriana. "Is it here? Do the roots burrow into Forthiron?" It was always a fun sort of game to interpret what they meant. Vikaros was a puzzle that Adriana wasn't against solving. The feelings she had were far too tangled now, and circumstances far too dire. Her charge disintegrated on the wave of Vikaros' calm. Her fire doused for now.

"As far as I know, yes. I'm from here. I have no lineage though, that's sort of a key to being an orphan." She casually shrugged. "What's this about, anyway?"

"You sing a song of betrayal and danger. One of longing and leaving. This city is not the place of this one's birth. This one is from another, and...and if the Magi, the clever magi needs a means of leaving...This one can offer it on a condition." Adriana was not expecting that. Well, she wasn't sure what she had been anticipating but it wasn't this. She sat up a bit.

"Wait...you're telling me, you want to come with us? You want out." She scoffed. "That's bullshit, if you wanted to leave, why not before now?" They only looked at her, the soft eyes held pain in them Adriana had known all too well. She nearly

reached up to touch her own missing eye. "Fine...so this is a chance for you? Ok well what can you offer?"

"A Caravan, a chain of carts and coaches, linking the cities. This one has the means to gain passage. This one has a face that is trusted. All this one needs is for The Clever Magi to cause her chaos, and take this one away..." Adriana considered that for a while, she wondered what Mia would say. Eislia? She knew would be ok with it. She was stoic beyond measure at times.

Ribbons of gold danced across worried features as Adriana thought. Amber bathed the room, soothed Adriana's tired senses. She closed her eye and took in a breath, waited and then spoke: "Alright, I've been bad at saying no, and you are helping us...so fine, where do we meet?"

With a location in hand, and a new facet to this odd diamond that is her life exposed, Adriana broke off from the meeting place and returned home. She needed rest, craved it and yearned for it. She needed Mia and Eislia, she needed to remind herself why she was doing this.

She steeled herself for the storm to come. She prepared her mind as her steps carried her to familiar grounds. The cobblestones greeted her eagerly. Adriana was scared of what might happen, but resolved to see it through.

What kind of chaotic fury had her life become? What force had shattered her carefully-built fortress into rubble? The thing that unbinds all plans, and undoes all hearts.

Damn it all to hell.

And so, She Rises

The next sunrise was to be Adriana's last in Forthiron.

Adriana woke early, far earlier than she has ever woken before. That is, if all of the all-nighters she pulled when studying didn't count. This was different. It was the last time and thus, special to her own mind. The previous day, she, Mia and Eislia had gone about packing their belongings. Adriana had agonized over the bones of her life, the sharp remnants. As she sorted each object out she couldn't help but think of what each one held; each moment crystallized in her endless mind.

Many of the clothes that she had bought through the years. Necessities, of course he packed into a trunk: Spellbooks, valuable inks and vellums, a box of carefully-sorted crystals, each with a particular magical use. The rhythm and ritual of magic was very materially demanding. Whatever this new life held, she knew they would need to be prepared. Hells, she didn't even know if Terostav's magic was the same as Forthiron's. For all she knew, each city had its own pulse, its

own breath and life to it. Aside from the tight-lipped trader caravans, who knew?

Mia had people ensure that their belongings ended up where they needed to. It was at that point that Adriana had to reveal her little contact. It wasn't that Mia was upset, it was that she looked so damn smug about it. Like she was right about all her little teases of her relationship with Vikaros. Adriana simply assumed it was relief though. They did have a way out and that was the key.

Now, all that mattered was the plan actually going off.

Everyone was accounted for, everything was as well. Adriana just had to go through with this. She rubbed her thumb against her fingertips as she slung her coat over her shoulders. She looked back at the empty apartment she'd called home for a long time. It was a year of pain, suffering, and seclusion. But it was also a time of small joys. Ones that were entirely of her own forging. It was hard to say she regretted anything, not with all that she had gained. Not with all she had come to cherish and love from this period of her life. She sighed, and one last time, stepped foot outside her door.

Mia waited for her, her smile bore no mirth or mockery. Only a small sadness that Adriana craved to touch. She approached her friend-and-enemy, her sole vexation, and laid a hand on her cheek. "You ready, babe?" It was the softest she'd spoken to Adriana in a long time. The words were honey stings, sweet and sharp. Adriana felt words betray her and she only nodded in confirmation.

The two of them stepped out into the street. Eislia waved as she set down the last of the boxes they opted to leave behind. It was fitting; the neighborhood had given Adriana so much, it was the least she could do to give away everything else. She hoped that these small objects, these little pieces of her life, touched others in the same way they touched her. The coffee maker that she could never figure out, a small scroll kit, an old magic book she had no more need for. All of these things could help the right person at the right time. Phantom hands reaching across time.

She smiled and returned the wave. As her and Mia walked up, Eislia put her hands on her hips. She was wearing the clothes she came here with. Her black cloak, that massive sword strapped behind her. All of it still gave her the feeling of a dark knight from ancient, long-dead times. The breeze played with her wild hair and the sunlight hit her features perfectly. She was still, and forever will be, a vision. "Well, I gather this wraps things up nicely?"

"A bittersweet goodbye." Adriana said as she took one last look at the red-bricked apartment complex. "But...yes, I think this is about it. We should get going." Adriana sucked in a breath and let it out. Mia nodded at her.

"You know what? I'm just gonna say it: Fuck this place." Mia rolled onto the balls of her feet. "Fuck this city for doing to us what it did." She turned to face Adriana. "Today, we're gonna stab back at it, and take our lives for ourselves. Come on bitches, let's raise some hell!"

Mia and Eislia were out on the other side of the city. They had to secure some last minute details and coordinate. This gave Adriana one last chance to do her final task. She walked down familiar streets and well-trodden paths. A route that she had indulged in twice a day for nearly a year. She thought back to when Marcus took a look at her and decided to hire the wiry, reclusive magi. The little office had served as a focus, a haven, a life line in a time when she so very desperately needed it.

The letters in her coat pocket were tucked away carefully, each one written the night before when she was at her most heartfelt. She wanted everyone to know exactly how she felt, but most of all Marcus and Hana. The two of them had been the closest thing she's had to a friend for this time in her life. The two of them, at the very least, deserved a bit of explanation of why she was going to vanish into thin air.

She approached the door, the familiar portal into the normal. Adriana smiled as she laid her hand on the faded stained wood. She unlocked the door and let herself in. Adriana felt the cold steel of the key in her hand, she set it on the key rack by the door, for the last time in her life. She felt a sting of regret hit her heart. Adriana walked to each of her co-workers desks and dropped off a letter, then she turned to her own desk.

It was a wonderful fantasy, one that was a joy to live in for the past year. This desk brought her so much joy, although more of an academic sort than most would like. She adored pouring over documents, dusting off some long-forgotten

relic Marcus had dragged up. Or hell, even parsing an obscure legal document. All of it was a simple joy for her mind.

“Adriana. Where have you been!?” A voice came from behind her, Hana. She turned to face xem and forced a grin. She searched her mind for a cover story, then let out a sigh. “Hana...I’m sorry, but I can’t be specific. I’m in a spot of trouble and....well, I need to leave. I know I’m leaving you guys in the lurch but.” Her words felt sour on her tongue, but she pressed on. “It can’t be avoided.”

Hana waved xem hand to dismiss the confession. “Adri, it’s ok. I think we all sort of...expected you were a bit more different. I mean, we assumed...you know?” Adriana sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. She made sure to grab a few things from her desk, then looked and xem.

“Thanks Hana. I just wanted to say well...I mean my feelings are in the letter, but: Thanks. For letting me feel normal for a bit. I won’t forget any of you or this place very easily.” Hana smiled and bowed as Adriana turned to leave.

“I won’t forget you either, Adriana Cosmili.” The smile that curled on Adriana’s lips was hidden by her turning away from xem. Her collar was pulled up and she hunched down, her feelings laid bare, but too painful to admit to, she took her leave.

Cold air stung her cheeks; a kiss that she will always remember. Adriana never hated this city, not truly. She was born here and raised on these very streets. The bones of Forthiron, she called home. She dearly loved what it was, what it could be. The people of the city. She tried to think of them as she walked along the familiar path to the Spark Rail station. Hesitation bubbled up from deep within, a fathomless doubt hit her. But she had to do this. She had to defy her Lord and do this insane, impossible mission, she had to go through with this everything depended on it.

No big deal, easy work.

Eislia and Mia were waiting at the rendezvous point. Adriana felt like an idiot calling it a 'rendezvous point' as if they were some soldiers or secret agents. In any other case, she might siphon some idea of amusement from that. Joviality would not come, as this task was far too dire. Founders above, she and her idiot friends were really robbing from Lord Nummari.

Mia was dressed in what looked like her best 'outing' gear. She had on her usual jacket and her hair was tied back in a usual ponytail. But this time instead of her usual outfit, she had on a darker pair of tights, with a complimenting top. It looked halfway between armor and sports gear, something she likely had custom made, only to bring out for tasks that demanded it. Adriana felt horrifically naked in light of her.

Which would be strange were it not the usual case.

She was always so little compared to Mia.

Mia walked up and adjusted her tie, Adriana had to draw in a breath and watched Mia's smile unfurl at her approach. "Hey there sexy, you all squared up with things?" Adriana nodded in response.

"Nothing was overtly stated. No information that could hurt them, but...I did let my co-workers know I'll be gone. Thanks for talking me into it, Mia." Mia smiled and placed a hand on Adriana's lower back.

"Yeah well, it's better if people aren't left asking questions." She sighed, adjusting Adriana's collar again. Her hands, gloved and ready for intent, still held that softness. Adriana took one of those hands and pressed it to her cheek, closed her eye and smiled. "Hey sweet cheeks, I know I'm all pragmatics, but I CAN do the emotions game, you know?"

"I know, Mia." She opened her eye and looked at Eislia. She looked about as impassive and stoic as she usually did. It brought Adriana a mote of relief to see the sword slung over her back. A blade that will cut through her enemies, instead of directed at her. She was a queen of dark anger; a warrior

of shadows and ill-intent. Eislia was also her lover though; a kind soul with more love in her heart than Adriana could understand. "You've always been good at many, many games. But maybe after this...maybe you and I won't have to do that anymore? Whatever lies ahead of us, perhaps we can uh, make something new?" She weakly smiled again as she looked back to Mia. "Maybe something more honest?" Mia laughed, her tone shrill and mirthful a mingling of two tones.

"Yeah, honest? I am not sure about that exactly...But..." She shrugged as she stuffed her hands in her pockets. "If I can believe we're going after some fucking god killing....weapon thing, I guess I can believe you and I are able to go straight. Make a proper go of things."

"Whoa, I said nothing about 'straight', Mia. There's nothing straight about me." Adriana's voice wreathed in mirth.

"Yeah...I wasn't buying it even as I said it." Adriana grinned. "Maybe uh...we can look into something else?" Mia smiled and patted Adirana's stomach.

"One monumental choice at a time, beanpole. Ok so let's go over the plan. Step-by-step." Their hands were held, and parted. Adriana looked down in surprise, she didn't even notice they were holding hands again. Her cheeks warmed and the muscles tugged into a smile. She stepped back from

Mia just as she did, the dance they did so often. I nodded to Mia to continue.

“Alright.” Mia cleared her throat. “Eislia, you and I are going to basically...well, be stupid. I know I tell you to not be stupid all the time, but we’re going to. We stroll right into the estate and we start some chaos. Knock out whatever security we can, hit them hard, and hit them fast. Now...hopefully, Vikaros comes through and brings in their reinforcements. In all that chaos...Adri here is getting in through the servant entrance, steals the rods and meets us down in the sewers. We take that all the way to the edge of the outer ring and meet up with the caravan. I’ve used some contacts to confirm all of the details that Adri’s little music fan promised and well...it all checks out. It’s on us to make it work though.” Mia stopped and surveyed them. “Clear?”

“For as vexing as most rituals in this city can be...” Eislia shrugged. “A mission briefing is a refreshing change, honestly.” She rolled her shoulders and smirked. “As long as my parameters are clear.”

“Remember that night we met?” Mia asked with the devil in her eyes. “Just do more of that.”

“Noted. Well then, shall we be off?” Eislia said as she tucked her thumbs into her belt. Mia nodded. Adriana felt her heart

swelling, she threw her arms around both of them and hugged them close. This plan could go off without a hitch; it could go smooth as silk.

Or it could not.

This might be the last day she saw either of them. Adriana, naturally, hoped that it wasn't the case. But she wanted to be realistic about this. She was more than happy to cut aside the bullshit and embrace a cold reality. Even though it was a hard one. Her and Mia had survived this far by doing as such. They both locked their emotional needs away for some phantom greater good. But, that only brought them stagnation, it was Adriana's sentimentality that got her into all of this. Her feelings and damned heart that had her break from the role of stoic and distant watcher to lover again. Adriana, as she held them close, as she took in their scent, promised to herself that they would be safe. They would get away, come hell or high water.

"Alright." Mia pushed away from the hug. Adriana watched Mia compose herself; draw in a breath and let it out slowly. "Eislia and I are off. You." She jabbed a finger at Adriana's chest, the force of it knocked some breath out. "You. You don't do anything stupid. Well, stupider than what we're doing now. You get the thingy, you get into the sewer and you stick to the plan, got it!?"

Adriana nodded dumbly in confirmation. Before the two could step away, she took out her spellbook. Her fingers traced over the words, words she knew intimately. "Mia, wait." from the pages, she plucked out a mote of energy, held it in her fingers and flicked it over to Mia. The connection was instant and strong, a sort of rough link between them. "We've used this before, but I've been perfecting it. Try it out." Mia made a face, magic always sat so poorly with her. The irony was that Mia was so naturally attuned to it. She didn't have the knack, Adriana knew that with all her heart. However, Mia has a sort of natural magical attunement. It was hard to put into words, but enchantments stuck to her easily. Magic wanted to be with Mia. Hands reaching out from across the ages, yearning for purchase. She had always assumed it was just her magic, but that was silly thinking. Mia took a moment, her face wrinkled in consternation, and Adriana heard.

Yeah ok, I got you Adri. The voice was Mia's, but it rang in her own brain and not her ears. Like she was nestled in the very folds of her gray matter. There was a pause, and then: 'breasts...did you imagine them?' Images could not be transferred, but Adriana never had the heart to tell Mia that.

Adriana smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know, Mia. The range is limited, but it's better than nothing. Also." She pointed at her. "I can't do this all day." Mia took a second and sharply nodded.

“Good, cause I don’t think any of us want to take all day to be dumbasses.” Mia reached into her jacket and took out a flask. “Well then, here’s to it going well. Come on, muscles, get in on this.” She smirked. “Take a sip.” She offered the flask to Eislia first, then took a nip of her own. She handed the flask to Adriana.

“Wow, when was the last time we did this before a mission, Mia?”

“About a hundred years ago. Give or take.” She quipped back as Adriana took it. The whiskey burned in that way only expensive stuff did. Adriana held in the cough, but her eye watered as she handed it back to Mia. She never could handle her booze as well as her partner. Mia only smirked at the display. She walked away from her and smacked Eislia on the rear.

“Ok big girl, let’s raise some hell!”

Adriana’s heart beat like it was trying to pulverize her ribs. Her throat burned from her breaths, rapid and hot. She liked to think she was in decent shape, even took pride in it. Hells, she delighted when Mia ran her hands over her toned, trim body.

This was less a matter of body and more a matter of mind. She was working herself up into a rabid frenzy of panic. As she crept up to the rear of the manor, her skin felt like sandpaper. Alive and sensitive; at the same time dead and unfeeling.

She hid behind a bush, took mental note of her facilities and broke off to dash for the door. Just as she reached it, she felt a buzz in her guts. Mia was excited; the connection told Adriana as such. The crash and dull thump of an explosion explained the source of said excitement. Mia and Eislia had started their little attack.

Her heart continued its betrayal as she placed a hand on the door handle, she didn't have time for subterfuge now, she simply overloaded the lock with a burst of energy. Her vision brightened for a moment as it channeled through her a bright, loud pop cracked her ears and she kicked the door open. Two guards seemed to be in the middle of rushing away from her, most likely towards the chaos in the main hall. They wheeled around in the direction of the loud noise of a door being kicked in. They were, naturally, too late. Adriana traced a line in space through both of them, leading up from her hand, down to a grounded object; the pipes that ran under the floorboards. With a snap of her fingers, she let the bolt of electricity loose. One of them nearly got to her, to his credit. However, magic is always faster than flesh and as the lightning rendered theirs, Adriana let out a breath. Her skin tingled, she flicked off the excess energy. Sparks danced from her fingertips; sought reactive surfaces and dissipated into nothing.

She broke off into a jog down the hallway. Adriana had no idea where the vaults were. Even when she was higher up in the food chain of this organization, she was never trusted to tend to the highly valuable items in them. However she was a magi (a damned good one at that) so she was able to track things. In fact, one of the more common jobs she received was to track down certain items for the Family. Hells, all this began because she was sent to find one. It was a simple matter to cast a net out, send feelings of arcane fingers to probe and search.

The world changed for Adriana; she saw gossamer threads of energy. She saw hard, sharp lines cut through the insides of the walls (the power lines that connected all through the manor). Most importantly, she saw a series of bright lights, stars in the night but plucked from the heavens and placed in this building. It looked like they were arranged in a semi-circle, one floor above her.

The vault must be there.

More shouts, more muffled explosions, the tension in the manor seemed to increase. She ducked into a corner and pulled the shadows over her as more and more footsteps stomped past her. Mia and Eislia were doing a great job, she worried though. That was until the entire building was shaken with a not-so-muffled explosion. She had to press her palms to the wall to steady herself.

Vikaros and the cavalry had arrived. Adriana rushed off upstairs to the vault, time was running short. If Lord Eversei showed up, there would be even more hell to pay. As she rounded the corner though, Adriana was greeted with a worse option: Her daughter.

Lady Thalana, Scion of the Nummari, was a gorgeous woman. She stood tall, with long dark hair and pale skin. Thalana was a being of such pure creation that even Adriana found herself dwarfed in magical power. She was a gust standing before a maelstrom, a coin in light of a fortune. Adriana's fingers twitched and she did her best to maintain a calm demeanor.

Lady Thalana's blazing eyes widened as she smiled at Adriana. "Ah, well I knew someone was coming for the vaults, but I never hoped it'd be you, Adriana. My darling little rat." She took a step towards her and Adriana caught the scent of ozone. "I'm going to enjoy this. It was fun to lie to Mother and get you shit canned, it'll be even more fun to pull you apart atom-by-atom."

Adriana glanced down at the ground, her magical-sight still active. While Thalana was a beacon; an iridescent sun. There were small, skittering sparks, the ones Adriana cast off earlier. She clenched her hand shut and pulled at it, all of it. "Yeah well, you'll find I've learned a few tricks since we last met, m'lady." with a surge of her ever-dwindling reserves of energy, she called to the lightning. The sparks surged through the arc-

system. Sparks turned to an explosion of energy, jolting from the ground and towards her hands, of which Lady Thalana was in between that.

The bolt struck her back, lanced through her torso and shot out her left shoulder. Even if it had arced across her heart, it would take much more than a parlor trick to take down a scion of her caliber. The good news was that she was taken off balance, she staggered forward. Adriana took advantage of this slice of fortune, she stepped forward and slugged her in the gut.

Not the most arcane or intricate means of doing it, but she'd knocked the wind out of her. Lady Thalana doubled over and in that second of a stunned state, Adriana wrapped an arm around her throat. Mia had taught her many holds and other such martial tricks. While she wasn't an expert, she could get someone in a chokehold if they weren't struggling. It didn't take long to knock her out, and in the seconds she was unconscious, Adriana was able to hog tie her with some rope she had in magical storage. By the time she tightened the final knot, Thalana had awoken.

"What's this!?" She growled. Adriana knelt down in front of her, rested her hands on her knees and tilted her head.

"Me being a bit sentimental, and probably stupid. But hey, I

know from experience it takes you a bit of time to get out of these knots, so have fun.” She patted her on the (very) pretty head, turned on her heel and paced to the vault.

The vault was around the corner, she could feel it. The door was enchanted, likely the floors, walls, and ceiling were as well. A perfect precious entombment. With time, she could easily break into it, but time was not on her side. Adriana paced a bit, she needed to get in, how? As she fumed and furiously pondered this over, she caught a buzzing in her head. Mia was scared, her skin began to tingle as she could practically feel all of the magic that was being flung around down there. She sucked in a breath, ‘fuck it’, as they say.

Adriana placed her hand on the magical lock. It was a lot like last time, only more so. All she had to do was overload the thing. She drew into herself and after a moment, pushed all of it out. Every little mote of magic, she pushed into the lock. It resisted, the combination of enchantments was potent. This wasn’t like overcoming the passive dulling of Gonesteel, this was working through a number of active magical threads. Her will was bare flesh trying to wriggle through a web of barbed wire. The resistance burned her nerves, she grit her teeth and pushed back, white hot stars danced in her eyes. She felt the resistance lighten, barely. Then, as if from a great distance, she heard the lock release.

“Finally!” she shouted as she leaned against the wall. For

a few moments, everything hurt, then it mostly receded. Adriana flexed her hands and groaned. That was far more sophisticated than she had assumed it was. And here she was with no first aid kit to treat it. Lucky, she wasn't fully burned out, but any lesser magi probably would have been killed trying to brute force that lock. Or, maybe Adriana was just feeding her ego a bit. She walked inside and continued to flex her hands, the pain slowly working out from muscle movement. The rods sat affixed to a small rack at the wall of the vault. She ran her fingertips over the surface, and quickly removed them. Whatever kind of weapon these could make, that would come later. For now, she and her companions had to escape. She tucked them into her jacket and left.

The main hall of the Nummari estate was a crackled shard of its former self. Already, several enhancements were laid bare, torn asunder by the sheer level of magic being released in it. The rest of the hall was in just as bad shape. Adriana stepped into the area just as Eislia laid low a few guards. They stood in defiance and bravery, to their credit. They became meat, all the same. Eislia was fierce, a blur of black cloth and singing steel. Hands grabbed her by the belt and yanked her into cover. Adriana let out a gasp, and in a flash was face to face with Mia. She looked a bit worse for wear, but largely unhurt. Mia smirked at her. "Glad you could make it, babe. We good?"

“Yeah.” a smile threatened to tug at the edges of her mouth.
“We’re good.”

“Good, so why are you here and not in the sewers!?” Mia’s smile turned to a frown.

“Hey, I had to make sure you both got out!” She looked up over the former table they were using for cover. “Besides, you look like you need the help.” As she watched the chaotic scene unfold, she spotted Vikaros, she could see them holding off a few other magic with ease. Shards flicked through the air, cutting flesh and cloth alike. She smiled. It looks like they paid attention to Adriana’s lessons better than she thought.

“Founders, Adriana, you exist to make my life shitty and complicated don’t you!?” Mia jabbed a finger at her just to prove a point. Adriana smacked her hand away playfully.

“Yeah, I know, but let’s talk about that later?” Adriana nodded to the side exit where she came from. “Get Eislia, and let’s get goi- ” her words were cut off as she was hit with a wave of sheer force. The whole room seemed to explode into white light and Adriana felt incredible pain in her left hand. She cried out but her words were swallowed by roaring agony.

Lord Nummari had arrived.

“Fuck me, fuck, fuck fuck fuck, Adri, we are GOING!” Mia’s words barely filtered into her brain as Adriana slowly snapped into realization: She was being dragged by her armpits. She looked up to see what she was being dragged away from. Lord Nummari was a beacon of arcane energy. Waves of pulsing heat washed from her, incinerating all in its path. Eislia’s heavy footsteps sounded alongside Mia’s, they were in full retreat. Finally, Adriana found her feet under her. She struggled from Mia’s grasp and stood her ground. They were at the threshold between the main hall and the side corridors that threaded through the manor.

“Go! I’ll catch up!” Adriana yelled, her throat felt hoarse and raw from the heat. She pulled in her energies and held her hands up, just as a fierce blast of heat threatened to engulf them all. She parted the stream of fire as if water and glanced over her shoulder to see Vikaros, Eislia and Mia darting down the first corridor. They just had to get out of the manor and to the entrance of the sewers. Not hard right?

“You pathetic whelp! I took you in, Adriana!” Lord Nummari’s voice thundered in her skull. She was weaving some kind of spell to ensnare her mind; ‘Give up’ , it was repeating over and over. Adriana grit her teeth and resisted the pull the voice offered.

“I’m really sorry m’lord! But what can I say? I’ve always been a shit disturber, haven’t I!?” Adriana twisted the attack and

curved the direction of the spell around it, she sent it back to Nummari who simply dissipated the flames. Even though her hands burned in pain, even though her nerves felt like they were unraveling, Adriana channeled her magic. She gripped her hands together and forced the faltering threads of magic still within her to obey. Wind began to whip up, first as a gust, then it surged into a tempest. Even Lord Nummari looked surprised as Adriana conjured a whirlwind in the middle of the great hall. Windows shattered, wood furniture splintered as she pulled it all around her. It wasn't enough to cause any damage to her assailant, but it was enough to get her some space. Adriana did the only smart thing she could do right in this moment: She ran like the devil.

The day was falling into night as Adriana burst from the servant's door to the sprawling backfield of the Nummari estate. Mia and the rest were just ahead, she could see her lover's smile as she dashed to her. She was just about to get there, when something sharp and painfully powerful struck her side.

Mia watched as Adriana reeled from the blow, the lance (or whatever it was) the glowing magic thing tore into her side. That fucking Redeemer was there; the one that tried to hound them that night at Adri's work. Adriana rolled with the blow and brought up a spell to bear. Even if she was probably

wracked with the force of the strike, lost a lot of blood, and had already done enough magic to do a lesser magi in, Adriana still stood. Mia felt a spark of pride. That was her Adriana: a consummate badass.

Her hand passed through the Arbiter's head and with a silent scream, she fell to the ground. Mia really didn't want to figure out what spell Adriana used to accomplish that. She dreaded the post-fight explanation too. But, it did the trick and Adriana won. Without a thought to the contrary, Mia rushed over to Adriana, they fell into a familiar back-to-back stance.

The four of them gathered together just as a group of Arbiters surrounded them. How did they get here!? How did they know this was going down? Mia grit her teeth, this was all going sideways and fast. Then again, her former boss was always so very prepared. Maybe she anticipated this? Who knows it wasn't important now. "How's the wound, Adri?" Mia did her best to hide the fear in her voice.

"Fine I-I'll survive."

"Good, then we just gotta cut our way through the rest of these assfucks." Mia snorted, but just as they were about to face the last three Redeemers, ten more marched closer, circled them and prepared to end it. Mia sucked in a breath. "Alright, well...a bit more cutting than we thought...but I got plenty to dish out, babe!"

“Mia, no...we can’t.” Adriana sighed. “I managed to bring the roof down on Lord Nummari, but I doubt that’s going to stop her for long. And this...we’ve never fought Arbiters before! This is way above us! This...this is a fight I don’t think we’re walking away from.” Something about hearing her say those words was a stab in Mia’s guts, she let out a breath. Her lungs ached and her brain burned. The fact that they had come this far, only for the fucking jackbooted assholes to do them in. Rage boiled her blood and gripped her heart. She snorted fire and ash.

“Then we fucking make them bleed buckets for every drop they take, right Adri!? We make them hurt so hard, they’ll remember it for years to come!” The battle cry felt like it did its job, but her fire and fury died when she felt Adriana’s hand on her back.

“No, no Mia. It won’t happen this way.” Mia felt something cold slip into her hand. She looked down to see the rods, her heart lurched. Without thinking about it, she slipped them in her jacket pockets. Something about Adriana’s look beckoned her to do so.

“Adri, what the fuck are you doi-“ words were ripped from lips as Adriana cast a spell, magical winds shrouded her. She watched as the Arbiters opened fire, but her, Eislia, and Vikaros were pulled away too quickly. It all happened in a split second; there was a whirl of shape and colour as she was hurled through the air. She watched helplessly as Adriana’s form shrunk away. She tumbled and rolled, trying to lock her gaze on Ariana again. Her, Eislia, and Vikaros were now at the

edge of the property, the sewer entrance was just around the corner. And then, safety. But Mia's gaze was fixed back to the danger. Back to Adriana. She watched her weaving the wind spell—the clever fucker—and mouth three agonizing words. 'I love you'. Maybe she just imagined that part, she wasn't sure. All the same, she watched her partner do something very stupid.

Mia tried to shout, she tried to struggle and scream, but every syllable was choked in her panic-ridden brain. She tried to call Adriana's name as she watched her overwhelmed by the Arbiters.

And then, the impossible happened.

Adriana was always special, Mia knew this. And not just special for the fact of Mia's love for her. No, she was special deep down. Something that Mia could always feel, always knew. She never could put her finger on it. Nor find the words to speak it into being. But Adriana was different. Some spark was buried deep in that sad frame. A brilliance entombed in her smile. That gold eye hid some divinity that was completely shunted off from its owner.

Today, she saw exactly what lay inside Adriana; Fire and flame.

Adriana floated above all of them—brilliant, luminescent. Large wings of pure light sprouted from her back, her eyes (both of them) blazed with a light that Mia couldn't even find the utterances for. Words betrayed its beauty. Blasts of heat and pressure cascaded from her form, incinerating all of the

combatants that surrounded her. All their enemies were dust in an instant. Even from across the yard, she could feel the extreme heat as it was released from whatever magic Adriana used.

The air was stolen first, Mia's lungs burned and her eyes seared. Mia gasped and shielded her eyes, crouched down to try and weather this firestorm. For a moment, she could only think of the stories she heard of the ancient arcane weapons. Bombs that could obliterate entire blocks in a moment. Or even worse.

The figure—Adriana—looked down at Mia, still shielded by the wind, she didn't hear a voice. She felt it. Deep in her bowels her guts and bile, reverberation through her bones and fragile fats.

“Mia. I've asked a great deal of you. Now, I'm going to ask you to do one last task; the hardest thing I could ever beg of you...” Mia wanted to protest, she wanted to scream and cry out for her; but, she couldn't. Her words and thoughts were muddled with the storm of magic before her. The vision of Adriana raising further up into the air lacerated her guts to pulp. Mia tried to swallow, tried to catch her breath but she was paralyzed. Adriana turned to face Lord Nummari just as she emerged from the Manor's walls. The heat started to increase again, pulses of magic flames wreathed Adriana as she faced down the most powerful magi either of them had known. “Live.” She said,

Mia's world turned into a forge's heart.

CITIES

END



About the Author

Rita is a nerd who loves to explore grim and gritty tales with happy endings. She watched *Alien* and it changed her on a molecular level. She then became obsessed with horror of all kinds. She loves to write, draw, and is obsessed with certain videogames that shall go unmentioned.

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