Ironbound

Book Eight of Millennial Mage

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Chapter: 1
Entrance

Tala continued her loping run, feeling quite thoroughly worn out. It hadn't been *that* long since she slept, but it seemed like the increased power flowing through her had worn at her body more than she'd really realized, and then excising it from herself had left her with only the downsides.

-All messages delivered and a few replies and exchanges enacted, per what we discussed.-

Great. Will we have help?

-Master Grediv will meet us at the nearest gate when we arrive at Alefast.-

Oh, that's fantastic. I'm so glad he was in town. I was not *looking forward to trying to convince a random Archon that we meant no harm…*

She was almost back.

She was almost *home*.

The level of magic in the air had been steadily rising for the last few hours, and the zeme was really starting to show some turbulence.

It was odd seeing this region again in a new light.

Not only was she coming from nearly the exact opposite direction, but she was also far more powerful and capable with her magesight.

Oh! Terry. She had been in such a fog since the forest that she hadn't really considered the terror bird.

She opened Kit, and before she could call out, Terry flickered into being beside her.

His screech of annoyance would have deafened a mundane human, even if only temporarily.

Tala stumbled to the side, flinching.

“Gah! Terry, that hurt!”

He screeched again, fluffing his feathers in visible irritation.

“I’m sorry! The forest was more taxing than I expected, and I’ve just been trying to get this trip done with.”

He lowered his head and stalked forward, covering the distance that she’d stumbled away. It was only then that Tala noticed his size. Even hunched low, he still easily matched her height.

She stepped back a bit more, the large terror following her. “I apologize! I didn’t mean to leave you in there, unknowing how I fared.”

Terry slowed, squinting at her.

“I should have called you out as soon as I was free of the woods.”

He chirped in aggressive affirmation.

“Will you forgive me?”

Straightening, he let out a long series of random trills that to Tala sounded like nothing so much as her mother ranting about one of the littlest siblings. It was an oddly nostalgic feeling, for all it was more than a decade old.

Because I’m so near to home? That was likely. “I know you were worried about me. I said I was sorry.”

Terry cut off his trilling and glared.

“I know that doesn’t make it better, and I know this is the second time that you’d have preferred to be out sooner on this trip. Will you forgive me?”

His demeanor shifted, and he shook himself before chirping once in affirmation.

“Thank you.”

Terry didn't reply further, instead shrinking down until his head barely came up to her waist.

"You want to run with me the rest of the way?"

The bird's look conveyed exactly how stupid he felt that question was.

"Fine. Let's go." She quickly inspected his neck and was able to *just* see the collar hiding beneath his feathers, and only then because it was her magic that was mirrored into it.

As they ran, Tala very carefully placed a white-armored finger on the collar and refilled it with her power. *That would have been… less than great.*

Thus, Tala arrived at the southeastern gate into Alefast, Waning, sometime in the midmorning, Terry at her side.

The wall stood tall to either side of the gate, and Tala felt nervous energy building within her as she approached.

This was it.

She was *here*.

She was on the threshold of a real, human city.

If fate was the rusting bit of slag it seemed to be of late, something was about to happen to keep her from entering.

There were no guards visible from outside the city, so she approached cautiously.

But nothing unexpected jumped out and stopped her.

Instead, Master Grediv stepped out of the open archway and smiled. "Mistress Tala. I can see your travels have left their mark, and your avian friend has grown." There was a sparkle of mischief in the Paragon's eyes. "Shall we…?"

Tala felt his penetrating scan of her entire self, the iron on her skin definitively gaining some heat at the power behind the inspection.

She saw his face fall into a perfectly blank mask.

She watched as the glint left his eyes.

“Why do you have a concept threaded through your entire body? Speak now, Archon.”

“I am infected with a dasgannach. That is one of the most pressing issues that I need assistance to address.”

That seemed to take Master Grediv completely off guard. First, that was likely because she answered quickly, readily, and completely. Second, he could likely tell the truth of her words, if Tala was right in her guess, and that surely was shocking.

“It is contained at the moment, but I would greatly prefer your assistance as soon as possible.”

“I see.” He was frowning. “Do you have any specific ideas on what assistance you require?”

A test? Or just gathering more information. “I think a teleport would be prudent.”

He huffed a laugh. “You want me to teleport you to some other city, while filled with a clearly hostile concept?”

“No, I assumed that wouldn’t be possible. I would like you to teleport me to the tower in this very city. That should strip the dasgannach from me.”

Master Grediv frowned again but began nodding. “I can see that working, depending on the flavor of creature. For most, we could simply entice it out and heal whatever issues that caused. What is its material?”

“Iron.”

Once again, the ancient man seemed caught off guard. “Well, that explains the issue, then.” A long, increasingly uncomfortable silence stretched between them as Tala stood *outside* the gates.

I knew it. This was too easy. Fate is going to sucker-punch me again right when I—

“Very well. Follow closely without making contact. We need to get this sorted, immediately.”

Oh.

Alat barked a laugh within Tala's head. -*Well, that worked better than we'd hoped.*-

For now. He could still wipe us off the face of Zeme.

-*True, but he's more likely to help us. That's why we asked him to meet us, right? Because we were pretty sure he'd take the time to find the truth, rather than 'killing it to be sure.'*-

True enough.

Master Grediv turned and strode into Alefast, Waning, and Tala hesitated for only a moment before following, Terry heeling perfectly at her side.

The guards stood back, not interfering or questioning them as they passed.

"So, Mistress Tala. Tell me what I need to know about the dasgannach. Given that you're you, I imagine there are surrounding, pertinent details?"

Tala felt power thread through the air in an incredibly intricate lattice, locking out any chance of them being overheard, and she had a realization. *How do such workings move with us? If they locked to a specific volume of air, the working would have to drag it along with us, but it's not doing that.*

"Mistress?" Master Grediv had turned to regard her. "Lost in thought so quickly?" A mirthful smile tugged at his lips. "I'd thought you'd simply ask rather than bottling yourself up."

"I've been in a position where I had to be more careful with my questions, at least a bit."

"That's a pity. I always appreciated your curiosity."

Taking that for the invitation that it was, she asked. "How does your working move with us?"

He turned, and they started walking once more. "Your magesight has certainly improved if you can see that."

She was to his side but still out of arm's reach. "I think it's more a matter of magical weight than an actual improvement to the script."

"That is actually what I meant. The sharpest blade cannot slice stone without weight behind it." He hesitated. "Well, that's not actually true, but it gets the idea across."

"So?"

"Yes, yes. How familiar are you with the fabric of reality?"

She hesitated. *Well, in for a copper.* "Do you mean the Doman-Imithe and its backing of Zeme?"

Master Grediv barked a laugh. "Oh, you are going to be a joy for the next good while, aren't you?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "That touches on a truly mindboggling number of things. Though, few have enough anchoring in Zeme to safely study the Doman-Imithe."

Well, that's a difference, but I'll wait until my question is answered at the very least.

"So, I assume you know of the bits of reality that make up Zeme?"

"Yes."

"Good. The best analogy is sandstone. Each bit of reality is pressed against the others until they make a coherent whole. The analogy breaks down because of the fluid nature of some parts of reality."

Tala frowned. "What? We don't have land moving around randomly."

"Well, we actually do, but that's rare and not what I'm talking about."

She cocked her head and didn't interject.

"Us. People, animals, material moving around. All of it is a part of reality but isn't locked in place."

“That… I hadn’t considered it that way.” In the Doman-Imithe, all the nodules had been tied to each other with threads of reality, and so had she and Thron. *We were just manifesting more fully within the Doman-Imithe, and the nodules I was searching were oriented towards Zeme.*

That caused a lot of things to click into place.

-Oh, rust! We just needed to flip our orientation, and we’d have popped back into Zeme.-

Yeah, that sounds nice, but what does it mean? How could we have actually accomplished that?

-I have no idea.-

Tala grinned internally. *And where would we have appeared?*

-Not a clue.-

Master Grediv continued speaking, drawing her thoughts back, “I anchor the spellworking to myself, the fragment of reality that is ‘me,’ with distance parameters oriented on that anchor. Most spellforms actually work in this way, but Mages, by and large, don’t have the understanding to comprehend them in that way. They believe and enact their workings based on the manifestation of reality, rather than reality itself. It’s a weakness and an inefficiency that is usually corrected when an Archon Fuses—or thereabout. We always have this discussion before the Archon Refines. To do otherwise would be to kill the Mage.”

Her eyes widened. “Because Refining is purifying the substance of reality, which is you.”

Tala could hear the smile in his voice as he responded, “Precisely true, at the deepest levels. That is the foundation, though much else is done on top of that footing as well.”

I feel like this has some insane implications and applications. “How far around myself is included in the fragment?”

“That is a…” He frowned. “That is an incredibly insightful question.”

Tala let the silence hang as they walked through the streets. *Wait… Why is he giving us this information now?*

-Well, doesn't it remind you of your interactions with him in the past?-

It really does.

-So, this could be a way of verifying you're you in a really hard to beat way?-

Oh… huh… That makes sense, I suppose.

The moment of silence passed, and Master Grediv began to nod. "You've been to the Doman-Imithe, haven't you." It was not a question.

"Yes."

"That is a rare experience, Mistress Tala. Were you given the tools to perceive the threads and knots?"

"Is that what they are actually called? I gave them that name because they seemed so to me. Though, they seemed more like protuberances to me, or nodules."

"The descriptions I've read could be interpreted that way I suppose. I assume that is a 'yes,' then?"

"I am able to see them, yes."

That caused Master Grediv to stop, and he turned to her. "Void or Reality?" He became very still, and his demeanor gained a deadly seriousness. "You will answer now and answer honestly."

Tala had pulled up short alongside him. She considered lying. *Reality sounds so much safer than void-magic. I* really *don't want to be smote…* But her void connection was going to be obvious, even if he couldn't read the truth of her words. "Void."

Master Grediv relaxed. "Oh, bless me, child, you don't know what razor's edge you danced."

"What? What would be wrong with reality magic?"

He laughed, turning to continue on his way. “Every Mage who has *ever* bound or gained reality magics has tried to wipe out their fellows eventually. It is almost as taboo as necromancy, though far, *far* harder to practice. So we’ve found it easier to simply address it when it comes up, rather than teaching about it specifically.”

“Ahh. And void?”

“Very, *very* rare, as it can’t exist naturally in Zeme, but there have been the occasional artifacts found with magics of the void. We’ve not seen any specific pattern with Archons who bound those. So, there doesn’t seem to be any inherent influence from such.”

She felt herself sigh in relief and very, *very* specifically didn’t look at Kit. She also didn’t look at Flow for that matter. *Huh, I have void on each hip.*

-And woven intrinsically through the garments you wear.-

Ahh, yeah. That’s true.

“As to your question, it’s up for debate. It’s generally agreed that the size of your fragment of reality is related to your aura. I’m going off texts, now, but as I understand it, reality manifests oddly in Doman-Imithe. Was that your experience?”

Tala barked a laugh. “That is an understatement, but yes, that’s true.”

He nodded. “It works similarly for your ‘piece of reality.’ Obviously, you and I aren’t dragging the earth and air along with us as we walk, but they are within our bits of reality.”

“So, as we move, the specific manifestation shifts. The underpinnings are what change, not the surface?”

“That is one way to look at it, yes. We ‘own’ the deeper layers, thus ruling the surface, but the surface itself doesn’t change without specific action on our part.”

Alat. Does that mean…?

-I think so. I don't know exactly *how we could target fragments of reality for gravitational amplification, but I* think *it would be possible.-*

Is that what Terry does?

-Well, not with gravity, but I think so. He simply doesn't include dirt and muck in his definitional understanding of his fragment, and so that doesn't come with him.-

It was like finding the last piece of a puzzle… well, a child's puzzle where the overall picture could be hidden by a single missing piece… and a puzzle where no one told her the picture she was aiming at. *This is a really awful metaphor, actually.*

-Yeah, I've never truly thought about it, but it makes no *sense.-*

"I can see you're considering some deep implications, but you still haven't told me about your unwelcome passenger."

"Oh! Right." And so she filled him in on the collar, the two dasgannach, how they'd been modified, and so on.

It took the remainder of their trip to the teleportation tower.

Before they entered the tower, Master Grediv stopped. "You should leave your dimensional storage with the receptionist since it is still not soulbound to you so it can't teleport with you. Can your… friend wait within it?" He looked meaningfully at Terry.

Tala regarded Terry, and the terror bird looked back. Finally, he squawked in resignation and bobbed a nod.

Tala shrugged. "Sure. I could just put my storage on the outside wall, here?"

Master Grediv nodded. "That would be interesting to see. Those always manifest a bit differently. I assume you've merged it with a syphon fascia?"

She gave him a mildly surprised look.

He chuckled. “I’m *old*, child. If it exists within the human cities, I’m likely aware of it, at least tangentially.”

She grunted. “That’s fair.”

He hesitated, then smiled. “Well, with all that you’ve likely brought with you, that isn’t as true as it was a few hours ago.”

Tala laughed. “Once we’ve sorted this, I’ll see what I can do to correct that alteration.”

“I look forward to it.”

She pulled Kit from her belt. She took a moment to consider. “Do you want to go to the hills?”

Terry squawked noncommittally.

“Fine, just somewhere near where I usually find you, then.” She tossed Kit at the wall, and a door grew to perfectly integrate with the side of the tower, near the main entrance. As usual, the entrance seemed to fit perfectly, looking like it had always been there.

“Fascinating. Thank you for allowing me to watch.” Master Grediv smiled.

Before Tala could open the door, it was ripped open, and a nearly fully flayed beast-man lunged out. “*Free! I’m free of that feathered demon!*”

The bull-man then saw Terry and squealed in abject terror. The next instant, a flick of energy extended from the city’s defenses and turned him to ash.

Tala spun on Terry. “Terry? Why was he still alive? You were supposed to kill him quickly!”

Terry looked down and idly scratched at the ground while decidedly not looking her way. He trilled mournfully, clearly trying to play on her sympathies.

“Get in there. We’ll talk soon enough.” She pointed vehemently through the open door.

The terror bird flickered away, appearing within before the door swung shut at Tala’s will.

She turned back toward Master Grediv and found him and more than a dozen other Archons staring at her with various expressions of bewilderment.

Tala's eyes flicked around to the suddenly present Refined and Paragons.

One woman spoke up. "Master Grediv, sir?"

Master Grediv just shook his head. "I'm as much in the dark as you. Mistress Tala?"

Tala scratched the back of her head nervously. *Rusting Terry. You couldn't have just killed him when I asked?* "Well, that bull-man tried to kill me, so I tricked him into my sanctum and left him for Terry to kill. That bird was *supposed* to be quick about it, but it seems like he was *not* quick about it."

Master Grediv cleared his throat. "First, you had a…" He seemed to be searching for the right word. "Elder?"

"Mature."

"Mature, right. You had a Mature arcane, fully drained, in your… sanctum? Isn't that a special designation?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it. "It is… I have a *lot* to tell you, Master Grediv. Can we deal with my unwelcome passenger first?"

The other woman, clearly the leader of the Archons who had responded to the now eliminated threat, cleared her throat. "The arcane *wasn't* your unwelcome passenger?"

"Well… he was one, yes, quite unintentionally so. I didn't know he was still in there."

"How likely is it that there are any others?"

Tala frowned, then went over and opened Kit. No one waited on the other side but Terry, who was giving her a chastened look.

She closed the door, then opened it again and saw Rob sitting on a shelf beside her bed. “Oh… well, he’s not *really* a passenger? But he’s not actually a…” Tala muttered to herself, struggling for words as she closed the door. “Never mind. No one else in there. Just the one in here.”

She smiled with false cheer as she tapped her own chest.

The woman frowned, then Tala felt herself be delved with a form of magesight once again. The Paragon’s eyes widened, but Master Grediv intervened.

“We’re dealing with that now, Mistress Ges.”

Mistress Ges’s eye twitched, but she gave Master Grediv a firm, shallow bow. “As you say, Master Grediv. I do hope you will explain what is going on at some point.”

“I will, when I know myself.”

“Very well.” She bowed once again, and then she and the other city defenders seemed to vanish.

Tala turned to Master Grediv. “I am so excited to be able to do that.”

He cocked one eyebrow. “You could now, if you had the right magics.”

She frowned. She’d been a bit afraid of that. “Well, rust. Fine then.”

“We’ll see what we can do, but *after* we deal with the creature. Yes?”

“Yes, please.”

Master Grediv hesitated, looking at Kit on the wall of the tower. Finally, he sighed. “Bring that inside. We’ll find a better place to set it up that’s closer to where we’ll work. It seems like you might have some rather more dangerous things in there than I was expecting.”

Tala sheepishly did as he asked and hung Kit from her belt once more.

Together, they entered the tower.

The receptionist inside was obviously a mageling, and he looked incredibly nervous.

Tala felt bad for the kid. He'd likely just had all sorts of alarms going off, then probably seen the city defenders appear just outside.

"G… Greetings, Master, Mistress. How can we serve you, today?"

"We need a self-cycling teleport. Foreign will purging, please."

That got the young man to focus. "Yes, sir!"

As the mageling manipulated a slate in front of himself, Tala heard several people in the tower begin to move quickly.

She was still keeping a good distance from Master Grediv, but she spoke quietly, now that his privacy working was down. "Is this common?"

"Yes and no. This is usually the best way to cleanse people of foreign issues when they pass a certain stage. You'd be surprised how many plagues we've stopped in their tracks by judicious use of the teleporter. Mundanes also often have their own bodies turn against them, either attacking their own biology or growing in ways they shouldn't. A teleport of this type resets their anatomy and can allow them to get back to their lives."

Tala hadn't considered that, honestly. *So, my idea wasn't very revolutionary.*

-But it seems good. That's what we need, right?-

That's true enough.

Soon, they were escorted to a teleportation room off to one side.

A Fused woman explained what was going to happen. "Do you see the receiving circle over there?"

Tala looked and did see it. This room, unlike the one she'd arrived back from the Academy in, had both a launcher and a receiver. "I see it."

“Good. We will simply teleport you over there. You will be fully sent out into the ether and drawn back. Please place anything not soulbound to you there.” She pointed to a series of empty shelves and stands.

Tala walked over, removing Kit and her bloodstar holster from her belt.

The bloodstars would have been fine, but the material that surrounded them would be needlessly stripped away if she tried to bring them with her.

After a moment’s hesitation, she realized that that was it.

Her clothing was her elk leathers and bound to her. Flow was the same.

“Alright. I’m ready.”

Chapter: 2
Ravenous

Tala stood in the teleportation tower of Alefast, Waning. Specifically, she was in the room that had been prepared for a cleansing teleport.

-*Tala, the through-spike.*-

Oh, rust! She barely ever thought about the through-spike, though it probably was the magical device she used most often. *Only because it's always on.*

She sighed, walked back over to the shelf, and pulled off the through-spike, setting it beside Kit.

Once Tala was back in the teleportation circle, she looked over to see the Fused, who was there to assist with that process, staring at her.

The woman cleared her throat. "Is that iron I see and detect on you?"

Tala grimaced. "Yes, unfortunately."

"Can you remove it?"

"I cannot."

That took the woman by surprise. "Well… We cannot teleport you with so much iron. If it were steel, we could tweak the spellforms and dump it into the ether, but pure iron?" She shrugged helplessly. "We can't help with that."

Master Grediv cleared his throat. "I think I can do something."

The Fused bowed to him. "That would be wonderful, Master Grediv. Thank you."

“Go stand on the teleporter, Mistress Tala. I don’t want your… passenger to have more time to interfere than necessary.”

She nodded and did as he asked.

As she did, she felt his power begin to build upon her, forcing its way through her aura and the iron.

The iron started to heat up, and Tala felt the dasgannach begin to stir within her, clearly agitated at ‘its’ iron being affected.

“My apologies, Mistress Tala, but this is *going* to hurt. I will keep it from overwhelming you, but I can’t have a gentle hand in this.”

She nodded again. “You’re going to burn it off?”

“That’s right.”

She gritted her teeth. “Lovely. Do as you must. Thank you.”

-The teleport is going to erase my inscriptions, Tala. We knew this… I know your plan, but I’ll say it anyway. Please get reinscribed as quickly as possible? I really don’t like nonexistence; even when I return, the time when I am ‘not’ is… unpleasant to recall.-

I will do my best, Alat. Thank you for your willingness to try this plan.

Alat sent a feeling of resoluteness in return.

The iron continued to heat up, and the dasgannach was getting increasingly agitated.

NO. MINE. As always, it wasn’t actual words, it was pure instinct and desire translated by Tala’s mind.

Tala tried to send back her own instincts and desires.

Ours. Pain stop? Join?

She offered up the Archon star again.

NO. MINE.

She somehow pushed the memory of the iron fragment she'd held in her hand going away when the dasgannach failed to claim it. She then did the same with a memory of the gold dasgannach taking all her gold and leaving just to die once it was out of her. *If yours, death. Ours? Live?*

She *really* didn't want to have all her outsides cooked.

Additionally, the teleportation would remove her inscriptions and all her stores. She was going to have to eat so*, so* much when this was done, and the dasgannach bonding her would prevent that need.

If only she were so lucky.

Please? Ours?

MINE.

Tala sighed.

As Master Grediv worked, he began talking through the process. "Alright. So, if this works perfectly and ideally, you will be rid of the dasgannach entirely and have no physically adverse effects."

"But when does anything ever work perfectly?" Tala put on a pained grin, the iron on her skin continuing to heat up.

"Exactly."

"So, failure cases."

"No, there are no failure cases here, just unideal outcomes."

Tala huffed a laugh. "Fine, fine. Unideal outcomes. It evacuates as I'm teleported away, leaving the dasgannach centered on the teleportation circle."

“And almost instantly dead. I’ll be ready to keep it from diving into the ground or any such thing, so that would be essentially the same as the ideal situation. Another outcome might be that it is simply left behind with all your iron, but that would have the same result yet again.”

Inside, the dasgannach was becoming quite irate at the heating exterior iron. ***NO. MINE!!!***

Despite its death grip on the iron, it just didn’t have the weight to defy the Paragon’s workings.

Tala tried to ignore it as Master Grediv supplied the next possibility. “Given that you’re holding it at bay with an Archon star, it could bond with you. If that happens, I will be watching to help if I can, but you will have to let me. The time it takes to bond is incredibly expanded from your perspective. Don’t forget to ask for help if you need it. I will hear.”

The Fused woman who was tweaking the ancillary scripts hesitated. She opened her mouth, then stopped and shook her head. “If I needed to know, they’d tell me.”

It was *very* softly spoken, but Tala heard it easily.

Tala cleared her throat, moving the topic along. “There’s no danger of it being teleported and leaving me behind… is there?”

The Fused woman looked up and smiled. “No, dear. It is keyed to your magical signature as shown in your gate and your soulbound items. We’re not just grabbing whoever happens to be within the circle.”

That made Tala feel better.

Master Grediv smiled. “This isn’t going to be pleasant. Regardless of the result, you’ll have repercussions, but we’ll get you out from under the headsman’s axe.”

“Thank you for that.” She tried to smile but just managed to grimace; even her reinforced flesh was starting to cook as the iron was now glowing quite fiercely. Her scripts were healing her skin and muscle as it baked, but it wasn’t a pleasant process.

Thankfully, the iron was slowly burning away.

NO. NO. NO! MINE!

This can stop. Ours?

There was hesitation, but only briefly as another section of iron was burned away. ***NO. MINE.***

Tala had no idea how Master Grediv was doing what he was.

She shouldn’t have been able to stand up under the heat required to burn away *iron*, but he was somehow focusing his power to minimize the damage to her.

It was excruciating, even so.

Master Grediv tried to chat with Tala further to distract her as he removed her external iron over the next half-hour or so.

It didn’t really work, and she really didn’t process what he said, and even Alat was occupied helping her bear up under the pain.

Finally, the process was done, and Tala was gasping at the bliss of being pain free once more.

The elk leathers had burned away almost as much as the iron had, but they had a direct connection to her gate and were thus maintained and regrown in the end.

They all waited for her to recover just a bit as well as drink some water.

That done, it was time. They couldn’t risk the dasgannach finding some other way to interfere.

“Ready?” The Fused was watching Tala intently.

Tala nodded. “Ready.”

Frost licked over Tala's already sensitive skin, accompanied by the static tension of power rippling through her from an outside source.

With a pulse of darkness, she felt the magic seize her.

The moment seemed to extend into infinity as her body was thrown into the ether. The process was instantaneous, but it seemed like it wasn't simultaneous.

As she was being ripped away, the dasgannach went berserk.

It wouldn't matter in the end, because the damage it was causing would be repaired in the teleport.

Her elk leathers and Flow came along with her body as they were as much her as that body.

As Master Grediv suspected, her biological iron was being left behind, given the dasgannach's influence.

That was fine. She'd get new material on the other end.

As her Archon star was *pulled* toward the ether as well, something changed.

NO. MINE.

The dasgannach opposed the teleport directly for the first time, but it wasn't strong enough to stop her, and its grip was slipping.

Finally, like a man hanging on to the edge of a slippery cliff, something fundamental *shifted.*

Tala had no idea if it was due to her efforts, proddings, or invitations. It could have been because of the modifications made to the dasgannach by the City Lord. It could also have been the dasgannach's unexpectedly extended stay, regardless of what she'd done. The trip through the Doman-Imithe could have facilitated a change, or it could have been any number of other, ancillary things, or a combination of any number of factors.

Regardless of the ‘how,’ the dasgannach was no longer as it had been, and in the last microsecond, the dasgannach’s intent and instinct resounded with a new thread.

Ours.

The Archon star was absorbed, and before she was thrown into the ether, the moment stretched, and Tala was fully ripped into the white void of possibilities.

* * *

Tala was *ravenous* jealousy.

She had no form but that which was required to gain the object of her desire.

And she desired *everything.*

She could perceive around herself because her previous, pathetically weak form had been able to do so.

Her perceptions let her find the best direction of movement to *acquire.*

Spellworkings splashed across her, feeding her need for magical power even as a cataclysmic zeme swirled around her, funneling magic into her from miles around.

Material was pulled through her border, incorporated simply because it was there.

The very concepts of reality bent their nature to join with her.

She had been reduced to something primal, something primordial.

She had been refined to something perfect.

She was hungry.

She was *Hunger.*

She would consume *everything*.

+*Umm… No. Absolutely* not.+

The conglomeration of impressions and sensations broke apart, back into the whiteness of the merging void.

* * *

The void of her nature had stripped away the iron within her at the merging, leaving her with a ravenous need for the same.

Iron dust wasn't compatible, as she had been a creature of biology, first and foremost.

It was only the iron within blood that would do.

Thus, Tala drank *oceans* of blood.

Creatures' blood filled the need but didn't satisfy.

Only the blood of sapients truly gave her a moment's peace.

She could regenerate from almost any injury.

She was durable and resistant against magic to an insane degree.

All of humanity—city, village, and slave hovel—feared she would visit them and take her tithe of blood from under their roof.

Her soul had expanded, and the tendrils she'd created with her myriad bloodstars allowed her to attach a bit of her power to her contributors, giving them a fraction of her strength in exchange for similar requirements.

Thus, her legion grew.

Thus, she came to rule the world.

+What the rust? Absolutely not… Why do I sparkle in the sun? That's just stupid. That makes no sense.+

The knowledge of her own soul, spread across all of Zeme broke apart, back into the whiteness of the merging void.

* * *

Tala walked through the streets of an arcane city, harvesting death with every touch.

No one below her level of power was safe as their iron and magic were ripped free at the barest brush.

Chaos surrounded her as she built up her own reserves of iron and power.

When they finally pinpointed her as the source of death, iron surrounded her, utterly locked to her will, rendering her immune to hostile magic.

Her own power was so overflowing and overwhelming that she swept the field of even sovereigns who tried to stay her hand.

+Alright. I'm going to stop you, there. This is just patently ridiculous.+

Her rampage stopped, her power and iron shattering back into the whiteness of the merging void.

* * *

A half-dozen more utterly insane mergings were foisted before her, each as awful as the last.

This is… really, really bad.

The options were becoming increasingly repetitive, and there didn't seem to be a good option on offer.

Rust.

She refused to accept any of the murderous or otherwise corrupting unions the dasgannach was putting forward, but there wasn't anything better.

If she didn't accept any of the offerings, she would die, and all this would have been for nothing.

Yeah… That's not going to happen. It can't.

But there was nothing that she could do to change what was happening.

The last vision had been identical to the first in all the ways that mattered.

There weren't going to be other choices.

She had no good option.

And this is why 'be careful what you bond with' is an important adage.

She needed something to change the rules.

Tala wasn't able to do that.

She needed help.

Master Grediv, I hope you're actually able to help.

Through that desperation and mounting panic, a hazy shimmer of emerald power seeped in from the surrounding white void. Now invited, it snapped into place in a viridescent flash, momentarily suffusing everything. White became green, and the dasgannach's grip on possibility and potential was shattered.

His voice echoed overtop the fading remnants of the latest depiction of wanton destruction and avarice, "Make your choice wisely, Mistress Tala."

The fields of blood and death splintered once again.

* * *

Tala floated in the white void, the dasgannach floating before her, an amorphous blob of iron.

She detected confusion from it. Its intent, its purpose was now directionless. It didn't have a mind, not really. All it could do was grab onto fragments of her own will and wield them alongside its instincts and desires, having built potential unions based on deep ignorance of how the world actually worked.

It would still have to accept in the end, but she could forge the potential paths now.

Let me show you what we can be.

* * *

Tala felt full power and authority over her own self.

Everything within her was *hers,* and all that she consumed was beyond contestation.

More than that, she had an *infinite* supply of power coming in, eternally adding to her strength.

She used that power to defend those around her and—

NO. IRON. POWER.

The vision shattered before Tala had fully built it.

She sighed. *Alright. Let's try again.*

* * *

Tala tried a dozen, dozen variations. Trying to come up with something that the dasgannach would actually agree to.

The bond had been started, and they had to come to an understanding, or they would both die, torn apart at the deepest levels.

Yet, it instinctively rejected anything she put forward.

Tala didn't realize why until she took the time to truly consider.

It doesn't understand, nor see the utility, in helping others. I cannot present my options in that light.

That grasped, she had an idea.

* * *

Tala was covered in iron, the metal utterly under her control.

Any iron she touched *could* be taken and added to herself, inside or out.

The magic which brushed across her skin was pulled in, a subtle intake, like a breath amidst the wind. Not noticeable in the grand scheme of things, but *vital* to her.

The iron was hers.

The power was hers.

SHE was her own.

All that she wished to consume became of her flesh.

All that she saw was regarded for consumption.

She was the infinite void.

She was the gate to that void.

She was the guardian of that gate.

She had mastery over her *self* at every level.

That mastery was her strength.

That strength let her seize her place in the world.

OURS. ETERNAL.

Thus, it was agreed; thus was the merging forged.

* * *

Tala gasped, stumbling forward even as magics faded from the receiving circle below her.

She had been teleported as the bond had begun to form, and she'd returned the instant it had solidified.

She felt like she was covered in a layer of ice, the cold suffusing her being, and there was an odd *heaviness* to her movements.

I'm missing my scripts. Without the enhancements, she was weaker than she should be, but there was more to it.

She'd come back with *more* iron than when she'd left, and it was making her heavy, though she didn't really grasp how it was incorporated into her body, not yet.

She stumbled towards the shelf, picking up Kit, her movements feeling clumsy.

"Mistress Tala?" Master Grediv was keeping his distance and regarding her warily, clearly uncertain how the process had borne out.

“One moment,” she forced out. “Inscriptions.”

He frowned but nodded, obviously curious.

Tala threw Kit against the floor and fell through, landing on her dais. *REINSCRIBE*.

She opened her mouth, and waited, laying there on the ground but nothing happened.

What?

Then, she took the time to look within, and she felt it.

Her body was *suffused* with iron.

More than she’d ever consumed seemingly filled some of the gaps between her organs.

There was no way her body could actually function that way, but it was.

Something within her was keeping everything working exactly as it should.

Well… that’s going to be a joy to explore, but not yet.

She had to think in order to figure out what was going on.

She needed to think to know what to do.

She had to think.

Think.

THINK!

The solution came to her, or at least the potential of one, and she hesitantly *pushed* all the iron outward.

The metal passed through her flesh and bone without causing damage, forming a thick, flexible layer just outside her skin, under her elk leathers.

Reinscribe.

This time, it worked, the metal threads pouring through her open mouth and weaving themselves through her body from the inside out.

The pain was excruciating, but she was hardly fully in her right mind.

When the re-inscription process was finished, her keystone activated, and power *slammed* into her scripts, raging through her body.

She screamed without meaning to.

She didn't collapse this time, nor did she restrain her power from going into any of the scripts.

She allowed for a full, instantaneous activation.

-Tala? Oh, rust. What happened?-

Tala ignored Alat, knowing that the alternate interface could pull from her memory to come up to speed.

Tala was both glad that she hadn't had to hit herself in the head to activate Alat and concerned that the pain might have been severe enough to knock her unconscious on its own.

I'll live.

She lunged upward and aimed to get back out of Kit.

The leap wasn't nearly as high as she intended, and she ended up needing to catch the edge and pull herself up. She then picked up Kit and hung the pouch from her belt.

In the same series of movements, she grabbed her bloodstar holster and placed it across her low back, and then she carefully placed the through-spike, with the help of a mirrored perspective via one of her bloodstars.

Master Grediv was now looking *incredibly* wary. Even if his perception wasn't seemingly able to bypass the through-spike that was maintaining her human appearance, it had only just come back online.

She did not look very human at the moment.

"Mistress Tala?"

With a thought, she released her active hold on the iron, and it sank back into her body, again without causing the damage that Tala really felt that it should have. To demonstrate her humanity, she forcibly deactivated the through-spike and smiled. “I’m me. I think.”

“That’s good to hear. What—” He paused as the Fused in the room gasped, and Tala’s own eyes widened.

Tala was shocked at what she felt internally. They were shocked at what they *saw*.

Inside of Tala, the iron had contracted and found new placement around her spell-lines.

Such was their density that Tala lacked the proper amount of iron to cover them all.

In fact, the free iron within Tala only allowed for the encasement of the inscriptions from the tips of her fingers up to her elbows, but the result was immediate and startling.

Her magics manifested as light carved into reality almost instantaneously, wreathing her hands and forearms in manifestations of magical power.

Master Grediv seemed to instantly recognize the nature of the inscriptions as visual representations of her natural magics, or at the very least, he realized that she wasn’t purposely manifesting power in order to attack.

The poor Fused woman had leapt backward, and only after seemingly activating some defenses did she take a closer look and begin to calm down.

Master Grediv spoke as if Tala were a growling dog, “Mistress Tala. How do you feel?”

Tala took a long, deep breath, really assessing herself for the first time. Ironically, her stomach growled, and she felt a light wave of dizziness. “Honestly? I’m feeling ravenous.”

Chapter: 3
Ownership

Tala's last words echoed through an awkward silence in the cleansing teleportation chamber, "Honestly? I'm feeling ravenous."

The two other Archons in the room gave her hesitant, speculative looks.

Tala laughed, scratching the back of her head as she felt the oddity of her own words. "I'm sorry. That sounded a bit… ominous, didn't it?"

Master Grediv smiled then. "It did at that, but you are quite right. We should get some food in you."

Tala's stomach gurgled *loudly*, but they all politely pretended that it hadn't.

The Fused who'd been assisting bowed. "I am glad that we could be of service. Master Grediv has covered the bill. He said he would settle it with you later."

When did he have time to do that?

-He likely has an internal connection to the Archive and handled it through that.-

That made a sort of sense, and she could ask, but not right now.

She'd been happy enough to ask after random topics before the cleansing teleport, but she was learning that she used inquiry and tangential topics to keep herself distracted in difficult or stressful situations.

-They grow up so fast.-

Hush, you. After a moment's consideration, Tala added, *Are you alright?*

-Yeah. I know you tried to be fast, but with the bonding and the subjective time that you experienced going through all the options after my spellforms were purged…- Tala somehow felt Alat shudder. *-I don't like non-existence.-*

How can you perceive it?

-What do you mean?-

I mean, I know I didn't exist before conception, but it doesn't hurt me to think about time before I existed. That doesn't account for all the memories I know I lack between then and when I solidified my mental enhancement scripts.

-I think that's just it. I perfectly remember every moment of my singular existence. Because of that, I am intimately aware of the times that I 'ceased.' It's not horrifying to not have existed yet, but to know I can so easily be rendered to nothing?- Alat shuddered again.

I sympathize even though I can't really empathize.

-Well, the sympathy is appreciated.-

That addressed, Tala cleared her throat. She and Master Grediv were walking out of the Alefast, Waning teleport tower. "Where are we going? Do you know a good restaurant?"

"Oh, good, you're focusing outward again."

Tala gave him a flat look. "You know, a *lot* has been happening internally for me."

He smiled softly. "I know. I truly do." After a moment's pause, he continued, "I thought I would take you to my family home. The chefs there are *excellent*, and you won't cause a scene when you eat enough for a dozen people."

How does he know I eat so much? Tala frowned for only an instant, then found herself nodding. "Rane talked?"

"Yes. Yes, he did."

“That figures.” But she found herself smiling. “Is he doing well?”

“He is. He’s Fused and well on the road to Refining.” Master Grediv paused, glancing her way. “Not as far as you, but quick advancement leads to more broken paths than defenders of humanity.”

“You’ll get no argument from me, Master Grediv.” She shrugged. “I do what I have to, and here I am.”

“Yes, here you are. I know we have a lot to discuss, but I think that a contemplative walk through the city might do you good. We can discuss over, or after, lunch.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.” If they were going to just be walking, Terry would likely want to join them. Tala pulled open Kit. “Terry?”

Terry flickered out, assuming his larger ‘juvenile’ size for the moment, his head just reaching her waist in height.

“I’m glad to have you with me, bud.” She stroked his soft feathers.

Terry headbutted her hip and trilled happily.

“Yeah, I think I’ll be okay.”

It was barely noon, and Alefast, Waning, was bustling.

Oh! I should drop through and see Artia, Brandon, and Adrill, but not yet.

-*Yeah, food first.*-

At the reiteration of ‘food,’ Tala had a thought. *The blacksmith, master Pedrin, has his shop near here, and he owes me something.*

Smith Pedrin was the craftsman who had made her endingberry picker what seemed like a lifetime ago, and as part of that deal, he’d authorized her to come by and collect iron dust if she wished, so long as she warned him first.

Now, she *very much* wished.

“Master Grediv?”

“Yes, Mistress Tala?”

“Where in the city are we going?”

“Well, with only one ring left, it’s all within pretty easy walking distance. Here.”

-*He just granted us access to a map of the city, and a compound is highlighted.*- “Is that your family home?”

“It is.”

Tala nodded, mentally comparing it to her memory. “Could we make one stop? It is barely out of the way.”

“Of course. Where is it, if I may ask?”

“A blacksmith, who I’ve had dealings with in the past.” She felt a light shudder run through her at the thought. *All that iron…*

Master Grediv cocked his head but didn’t comment.

True to Master Grediv’s words, the city was not large. It was far too old to be that.

Tala felt an odd disjointment at the thought. Platoiri was *much* older than Alefast. Orders of magnitude older, in fact, yet Platoiri was also far bigger.

Humans really have a disadvantage in that regard, don’t we? We have to use so many resources to continually rebuild our cities. I wonder what we could have achieved without that handicap.

Their walk was mostly silent until they arrived at the blacksmith; even Terry’s talons barely clicked on the cobblestones under the noise of the bustling city around them.

Tala suppressed an over-exuberant grin as she called out, keeping her face neutral, “Ho, in the smithy!”

She could *feel* all the iron within the workshop, but oddly, she didn’t feel a desire for the bar-stock or projects. Not even the massive anvils called to her. Instead, she felt a vague *need* for something that was randomly scattered throughout.

The iron dust?

-That is likely.-

The hammering didn’t slow, but she saw another movement within the workshop as a middle-aged man walked out. “Well, good day to you, Miss”—his eyes widened as he got a better look at her and Master Grediv, his eyes flickering back and forth and in the end clearly deciding that it was best to assume they were both Mages—“tress, Master. How can this humble smithy serve you, this day?”

The smith’s eyes also moved over Terry briefly, but he seemed more than a little familiar with arcanous pets and companions as he did not do more than smile at the terror bird. Terry’s presence seemed to ease his tension, even if only slightly.

Tala quirked a smile. “No need for that, good master. Do you remember me, Pedrin?”

He looked closer, then frowned. “You look mighty familiar, but I apologize, Mistress, I can’t place you.”

“I ordered an iron fruit picker from you a while back.” Her hands had begun to tremble. *Come on, come on. Come on!* No, she would observe the niceties. She wasn’t a beast who disregarded those around her for her own gain. *I’m no longer an Eskau.*

His eyes widened in recognition. “Yes! I do remember, though I apologize, I can’t recall your name.”

“It’s Tala.”

“Well, Mistress Tala, what brings you back? Do you need repairs on that odd commission?”

“No, no. It’s doing fine. I wonder if you recall the last part of our bargain? I asked to be allowed to harvest iron dust if I had need.” *If you don’t remember I’m going to—* She forcibly aborted that line of thinking and enforced another in its place. *I’ll pay you handsomely for what I need.*

He tilted his head, considering. “I suppose I do remember that, yes.”

“Well, I have need. May I grab some?”

Master Grediv was regarding her oddly, but he refrained from commenting or otherwise interjecting.

She ignored him. *So close. Hurry up!*

Pedrin nodded. “I suppose so. All the dust you desire is yours—nothing more than dust, mind you. Do you need us to vacate for a time?”

Tala felt *something* shift at his words. The iron dust was *hers.*

What had been a mere, vague yearning burst aflame, and she found herself utterly unable to tear her focus away from the smithy.

-*Tala?*-

MINE. A pulse rippled out from her, across the ground and through the entire smithy. It wasn’t *quite* her aura, but it was something very similar.

Master Grediv frowned, taking half a step forward.

Terry chirped in a questioning tone and took one step back.

Her voice sounded small as she shook her head, “There’s no need. Thank you, though.” *There, courtesy.*

Then, something within her *pulled.*

The iron dust—*her* iron dust—was suddenly fully within her aura. Tendrils were extended farther than she'd ever managed before, seemingly gaining strength from her iron as she encompassed it, and her aura was *strong*.

The smiths—mundane humans all—seemed to stumble as one, though they did so in random directions.

Her aura was too strong to be so unleashed, but it was done.

Master Grediv was already moving, green power washing outward and somehow steadying all the smiths less than a heartbeat later.

Tala was focused elsewhere, however, and she *pulled*, retracting her aura and her iron as one.

Each speck streaked towards her in as direct a route to its owner as it could take.

The effect, collectively, appeared similar to black mists rising in a swamp before a strong wind blew them all in one direction as the tendrils streaked towards Tala, weaving around obstacles to reach her as expeditiously as possible.

The iron hit her like a soft breeze, seeming to simply pass through her and occupy the same space she did but at a deeper, *other* level.

The iron then settled into better dimensional alignment with her, physically manifesting around her inscriptions, building out from that which was already encased.

Manifestations of her power in reality blossomed into being under her through-spike illusion, crawling up her arms, over her shoulders, and onward, eventually covering her whole body well before the last of the dark clouds finally pulled free of the smithy.

In totality, it only took the time of a long, drawn in breath, but the mundanes were still left disoriented by her passing aura.

Blessedly, with Master Grediv's interference, that was all they experienced.

Pedrin shook his head, the dizziness seeming to have either interrupted his sight or otherwise kept him from noticing what happened. "My apologies, Mistress. Is there anything that we can do to help you get what you need?"

Tala shook her head. "No, thank you, master Pedrin. I have what I need. I apologize for any inconvenience."

The smith looked confused but finally shrugged. "As you wish, Mistress. Let us know if we can assist again."

He clearly didn't feel that he had helped this time, but he wasn't going to argue with a Mage.

Tala felt a bit guilty. She hadn't expected things to go as they had. "Please let me know if anything seems off today. I can be found at the Gredial family compound at least until tomorrow."

Pedrin smiled. "That is kind of you, Mistress. I can't imagine I will have such a need, but I appreciate the gesture."

Tala wasn't about to explain what he'd apparently missed.

-Your aura seems to have briefly blocked his short-term memory. Is that possible?-

It certainly wasn't intentional. I doubt I could replicate it purposefully.

-I agree. It felt more like a strong hit to the head than a specific application of your aura.-

Great… I hit all these people in the head really hard.

-Master Grediv kept it from getting out of hand.-

Yeah…

Master Grediv was giving Tala a narrow-eyed, scrutinizing look as she turned away.

"Shall we go?" Her tone was as contrite as she could make it.

“Yes. There is much to discuss—maybe even more than I’d have thought.”

The three of them turned and moved toward Master Grediv’s family compound. Once they were a bit away from the smithy, Tala looked towards the Paragon. “Thank you. I did not mean to harm anyone, but I was acting on instinct, and it sort of… got away from me, yeah.”

He nodded. “You’re getting to the level of personal power that mundanes are nothing to you.”

She flinched at that. “I… I don’t think of them that way.”

Master Grediv shook his head. “I didn’t mean it that way. You could kill every mundane in this city with little effort if nobody more powerful tried to stop you. From what little I’ve gathered, you just came from the arcane cities.”

“That’s a slur, right?”

“A derogatory generalization of all non-human races? Yes. Yes, it is.”

She huffed a laugh. “Fair, I suppose. You know that most individuals aren’t actually against us, right?”

“Most molecules in a sword won’t cut me, directly. I still don’t want it near me.”

“That’s… an interesting analogy.”

“I don’t hate arcanes, Mistress Tala, but I won’t bend to them, either. Those in the mobile communities are generally reasonable to interact with, but they also don’t seem to mind the label. I think that it’s likely because there aren’t too many distinctions left. They don’t try to maintain bloodlines and type distinctions like the arcanes in the cities and on the other continent do.”

Tala looked at the Paragon in surprise. “Flat out discussing the villages and the other continent?”

“Of course.” He shrugged. “You’d have learned about them soon enough regardless, and I imagine you likely encountered knowledge of them while you were… away. Villages, though?” He grinned at that. “You haven’t seen *anything* until you see their cities.”

The Paragon looked almost wistful.

“I wish we could keep mundanes in such cities, but with most of our population gated?” He shook his head. “The cost and difficulty would just be too great to be feasible.”

Tala was a bit shocked. *Cities? Cities that move on their own?*

-Likely most of the population is within holds, given what he’s just said, but I agree. That would be impressive to see.-

They fell back into silence for the remainder of the walk to Master Grediv’s family compound.

There was a single guard at the gate who bowed to Master Grediv and opened the wrought-iron entrance for them.

Tala gave the gates a hesitant glance but found no urge to consume them, or absorb them, or… anything, really.

Huh. Is it because the iron isn’t mine? I have absolutely no claim to it?

-That would track. The iron dust was on the edge of being yours, and that’s why you felt the draw to go fully claim it.-

I’m not influencing the concept… Am I?

-Ask?-

That was a fair point. “Master Grediv?”

The Paragon stopped a bit inside the grounds, and Tala and Terry halted as well. “Yes?”

“Did I… Did I affect the concept of ownership or something like that?”

He barked a laugh. “Oh, rust no, girl.” He cleared his throat, briefly covering his mouth. “My apologies. No. Your power acted on your ownership of the iron, using it like a handhold or anchor, at least that’s my guess. But the concept of ownership itself? You didn’t change that magically.”

She found herself nodding. That was true. It was only when Pedrin granted her the iron dust that it had come to be *hers.* That was how ownership usually worked, though now she seemed to have a sense for it. She could *feel* whether or not she owned something, and that was new. “Should I be able to sense my ownership?”

“Yes and no. You already can, in a way, for magic. Right?”

Tala considered, then nodded. “I suppose so, yes. I can sense whether magic came from me or someone else.”

“Then this is likely just an expansion on that, due to your new bond.”

Tala had a thought. “Can you combine two soulbound items *after* you bond them?”

“Yes and no, but let’s get inside and get food on its way.”

She smiled and nodded in agreement.

The front grounds weren’t extensive, but they were well cared for.

One thing that caught her eye was the unusually high number of stone statues.

That’s sort of odd. Do they have a petrifier in the family?

-We could ask?-

After we get inside. I am really *hungry.*

The main house was less impressive than a Major House’s hold, but that was to be expected. This was a family home, not a base of operations for a powerful faction.

Even so, the main hall wasn’t empty as they walked in.

A man who vaguely resembled Rane was standing on an upper balcony when Terry, Tala, and Master Grediv entered.

The man scoffed and called down. “Truly, Master Grediv? Is that to be your new student? I am ready and willing to learn from you, and you pick a monster lover?”

Tala moved her hand instinctively to rest on Terry’s head, even as she looked at the man more closely.

He’s a Mage? Seriously? After a moment, she remembered Rane’s story of becoming Master Grediv’s apprentice. *His older brother?*

-Aside from a vague similarity around their facial features, I don’t see the connection.-

Indeed, this man was only just taller than Tala herself, and he bore a staff of dark crystal, the magical weight of which was significantly heavier than the Mage’s own.

It was an artifact that was actively consuming the entirety of the older Mage’s throughput, straining his gate all the while.

-Older? He’s got less than a decade on you.-

Yeah, that’s older.

-But most people mean at least forties when they say ‘older.’-

Well, it’s good that I’m only talking to myself then, isn’t it?

Master Grediv sighed, closing his eyes in what seemed to be a bid for internal strength. “Furgal. Are you blind as well as an idiot?”

The man, Furgal apparently, jerked back as if he’d been slapped.

“Use your magesight before you open your mouth and utter such stupidity in front of our guest.”

Tala felt the barest tickle of power as the man strained his gate to activate a weak form of magesight alongside continuing to feed the seemingly insatiable staff.

Furgal's eyes widened, and his tone changed on the instant, "My apologies, Mistress, I of course meant no offense to you or your companion. Be welcome to the esteemed Gredial House."

Tala spoke incredibly softly, trusting that Master Grediv would hear her. "How do you want me to respond?"

His response was immediate. "Simply, please. I don't like being around him more than required."

Tala nodded, giving a polite smile up towards Furgal. "Thank you for your welcome. I have business with Master Grediv, so I fear I cannot delay to chat. May you grow in power and find that which you seek."

The Mage seemed unsure of how to respond, and before he could decide, Master Grediv had led Tala and Terry off to one side.

They walked down a tastefully decorated hallway and to a small dining room.

Master Grediv smiled as he closed the door. "Thank you. He is a buffoon at times, but he is family…" The admission seemed to hurt the Paragon. His next words confirmed as much, even if his tone hadn't. "I checked his bloodline, and it leads directly back to me, unfortunately. As rare as infidelity is, I'd have welcomed it as a reason to kick him out."

Tala blinked, eyebrows lifting in surprise.

He sighed. "Before you ask, no, I'm not serious, but the boy does vex me at times."

Master Grediv clapped his hands. "But you're hungry! Let's get that ordered for you."

Tala smiled in return. "Yes, please."

Chapter: 4
Lunch

Tala was not disappointed by the lunch provided by the Gredial household.

Master Grediv's house chefs were utterly fantastic.

The spread that was presented before Tala matched some of the feasts she'd participated in as an Eskau.

"Master Grediv, this is… This is amazing."

Master Grediv simply smiled as he slowly ate his own small portion.

Tala was only about half-done with what had been brought for her, and she had room to spare. The enhancement and augmentation scripts around her digestive system were working more extensively than ever before.

As it turned out, the iron-lined inscriptions did a few interesting things, and this situation was giving her and Alat a good look at the results in a more controlled environment. *Though, we're definitely not controlling the situation sufficiently for a proper experiment.*

First of all, the specific magic built up directly overlaying the spell-lines it tried to radiate from, still within the proper medium, so it was simply a direct power boost.

Tala had feared that the power wouldn't be able to affect that which it was aimed at due to the iron interference, but once the power had built up sufficient resonance and weight, it simply passed through the iron like water overflowing a bucket.

Something about her ownership over the iron let the magic pass through without heating it as Master Grediv's power had. That was good, else she'd be constantly cooking herself.

The main benefit to this process was that this water had been made much denser before overflowing.

-That is an awful metaphor.-

True. Magic isn't water.

-No. No, it is not.-

Even so, there were other benefits.

Just like her iron paint, there were additional magical resonances created within the dimensions of magic, and their manifestations were carved upon reality in the light from their inefficiency as they could only be wasteful without a proper medium and direction.

All told, the overall effect was similar to her iron paint but more efficient and more multiplicative.

As she continued to eat, she resumed examining herself critically.

Her biology *shouldn't* work.

The iron within her was somehow occupying the same physical space as the rest of her, without displacing or interfering with anything except her magic, and the magic was only being reflected in a way that was beneficial to her.

It's like the dasgannach. It somehow had no biology that we could detect but still controlled the iron. What if it did actually have a biological component, just somehow stacked with the iron, dimensionally?

-Unlikely? I'd think that some of the myriad Archons studying the things would have noticed. If I had to guess, I'd say that it's likely something like the concepts of self, ownership, and existence. I could understand similar concepts being layered throughout your being and working to maintain your no-longer-reasonable biology.-

She thought back to Mage Furgal's magesight when she'd arrived at this estate. *He just saw my surface aura as projected by the through-spike. I didn't feel the mildest touch of his power on me. I wonder if anything magical will be able to work on me at all.*

-Aside from your own power?-

Yeah, aside from that.

Tala took a moment to drink down a ginger ale that was apparently brewed in house. "My goodness, Master Grediv. I don't suppose you'd part with one or two of your cooking staff?"

The Paragon quirked a smile that was incredibly reminiscent of Rane. *Or the other way around, really.* "Their families have served mine for generations. They're paid better than Bound, and any who wish to pursue magic are treated as members of my house. You couldn't afford them."

She sighed. "Very well. Everything is absolutely spectacular, even in comparison to what I've gotten used to, and I just came from a place of rather opulent luxury, in many ways."

"Does that mean you're ready to talk?" The Paragon had a soft smile, but he still seemed to be treading carefully.

Tala swallowed her latest bite. "You see, that's the thing. I'm not going to want to tell this story over and over again. I can give you most of my memories to observe and answer questions afterwards?"

He took a sip of his own ginger ale, swallowed, and cocked his head to the side. "That could work. I forget that you have avenues usually only available to the more advanced, but what would I be viewing?"

"I was kidnapped… Mage-napped? Whatever. I was taken, mindwiped, and conscripted as an Eskau in the House of Blood."

His mug fell to the floor and shattered. “What.”

“Which part?” She took another bite from her left, moving her right hand to rest beside Kit, carefully watching Master Grediv. *What’s his issue?*

“The last part.”

“I was conscripted as an Eskau of the House of Blood?” *I swear, if he blames me for that…*

Power began swirling around Master Grediv, and while it didn’t feel hostile, per se, the Paragon was definitely in *incredible* internal turmoil, and he was utterly focused on her like she’d never seen before.

It reminded her of a falcon watching a snake pass near their nest.

So, not instantly attacking, but wary. I suppose I can understand that. With a thought directed at Kit, a siege orb rolled out into her palm. *I shouldn’t need this, but I will* not *be taken off guard again.*

At that moment, the side door opened, and an achingly familiar voice floated in, “She’s here, isn’t she, Master Grediv? You ordered enough food for a caravan, and you were only seen with one guest.”

Tala turned to see Rane striding into the room.

His eyes met hers, and they both grinned broadly at that moment, Tala temporarily forgetting the tension of the situation around her.

Then, Rane’s eyes took in his mentor, and color drained from his face. “What did you do, Tala?”

Of course, he assumes it was me.

-First, you’re the only one here.-

That’s… fair.

-Second, it was you.-

You know what—

The door Rane had just come through slammed, and magics sealed the room.

Master Grediv's voice filled the space while remaining barely a whisper, "I cannot decide if you are being humorous or suicidal." He was utterly focused on her, seemingly ignoring Rane all together.

"Neither?" *Don't let on that you're ready for violence. If I must strike, I will strike first and decisively.* She didn't let herself picture the other Eskau who'd helped drill that more deeply into her instincts.

Rane was looking back and forth with growing concern, his left hand resting on Force, his sword. He shifted his stance, using the movement to come deeper into the room and position himself very purposefully, and Tala was suddenly aware of two things.

One, Rane's position would allow him to attempt to intercept anything that Master Grediv sent her way.

Two, Rane was nearly halfway to Refined, startlingly barely a rank and a half below his mentor. He might actually be able to block what he intercepted, at least temporarily.

-I wonder if the two of you could take Master Grediv.-

No thoughts like that, Alat. I'm ready, but I don't want to fight. Not now.

-...It's the food, isn't it. You don't want to destroy anything and miss out?-

...It's really good, alright?

Master Grediv continued to ignore Rane as he clarified his question. "They do not allow Eskau to leave. They only send them on missions. So, you have come back as the sword of a hostile power?"

Tala stood slowly, careful to not make any sudden or hostile movements. “I slew my Pillar, the rusting bloodstain who stole me from my home, erased my mind to construct a loyal sycophant, and tried to kill me with the dasgannachs in his final moment. Then, the House of Blood cast me into the Doman-Imithe to die from the cursed creatures that had invaded my very being. The chains that bound me to the House of Blood are dissolved, and I am well rid of them.”

Tala felt her own soul resonating with the conviction of her words. She knew they were true, and she felt her hatred of Be-thric echoing in her words as they faded into the simple sound of silence.

That silence grew like a cancer for what seemed like an eternal moment.

Finally, slowly, the power around Master Grediv stilled, and he nodded. “It seems like there is *much* to discuss, Mistress Tala, and I was foolish to consider keeping that discussion small.” He glanced to Rane. “We leave for Bandfast in one hour. If you wish to come, be ready.”

Master Grediv was gone in the next moment, and Tala turned to Rane. “How does he do that?”

Rane was shaking his head, but at her question, he shifted to snatch a mini chicken potpie from the table. “Something about aligning his soul with the world around himself or locking the air in place as he passes so there’s no disturbance, no matter how fast he goes. He seems to only do it within cities, though, so it won’t be an instantaneous trip to Bandfast.”

Rane ate the pie in one bite, and Tala glared. “Hey! That was mine.”

He grinned, only a couple of crumbs sticking to his lips. It took only a moment for him to chew and swallow. “Oh, I’m aware. The whole kitchen refused to take orders for an hour. How do you think I knew you were here?”

Tala thought back. *They had brought in the food in waves.*

“I’m hungry, and we’re leaving. We won’t be going caravan speeds, but you should still expect one night on the road at least.” He looked around. “Where’s Terry?”

Terry squawked from under the table where he was stretched out on his back.

While they were both distracted, Tala placed the readied siege orb back into Kit. *Disaster averted.*

Rane quirked a smile as he took in the relaxed state of the terror bird. “You didn’t want to interfere any?”

Terry cracked his eye at Rane, then trilled dismissively and closed it.

Rane’s smile broadened. “Yeah, we *were* fine. You’re right. I missed you, Terry.”

The terror bird cracked the eye open again to regard the big man for a bit longer this time.

A moment later, Terry flickered up to stand on Rane’s shoulder, sized small to fit on his perch, and gave Rane a light headbutt to the cheek.

Rane’s smile stretched to a happy grin as he scratched the avian head. “I’m glad you’re back.”

His eyes moved to regard Tala, and the smile quirked to one side.

Tala found herself standing, arms crossed, a frown building across her features. “You weren’t worried at all, were you?”

He laughed. “Oh, you have no idea, but”—something seemed to stop him, and he shook his head—“I knew that if anyone would, you’d have a chance. I knew you’d seize that and come back.”

She really didn’t know how to feel about that.

On one hand, she was glad that he thought her so capable, and the sentiment made her want to give him a grateful hug.

On the other hand, she wanted to punch him in the face and scream, ‘Don’t you realize how scared I was? I needed help! I was imprisoned by a monster. I was alone. I didn’t need someone believing in me. I needed someone to come get me free!’

Tala felt her emotions roiling, and before she knew it, she’d ducked her head, and her whole body was shaking, tears beginning to flow.

“Tala?”

She buried her face in her hands and felt building sobs of terror and relief, anger and catharsis, impotence and freedom.

He was standing in front of her in an instant, and he barely hesitated before placing his hands on her shoulders comfortingly.

Tala stiffened just briefly, fearing the dasgannach’s influence for a moment, but she felt no desire rise within her. She wasn’t going to rip the iron from his flesh.

With that additional spike of fear and the quick removal of the same, she was utterly overcome.

She stepped forward, pressing her head, face still in her hands, against his chest, and wept.

Rane encircled her with his arms and held her without a word.

Terry rested his head on hers as well.

It was long minutes before her shudders subsided and her tears slowed.

She didn’t move right away, taking comfort in what felt like the first non-hostile contact she’d had in… she didn’t know how long.

Eventually, Rane stepped back, replacing his hands on her shoulders. “Are you alright, Tala?”

Terry flickered to Tala’s shoulder and headbutted her cheek.

She huffed a laugh, scratched Terry’s head, and wiped at her nose. “No, but I think I will be.”

He offered her a napkin from the table, and she wiped her eyes before blowing her nose. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” He tilted his head to one side. “Do you want a bit of time? I need to pack some things, and you’ve food to eat. I can come back, or I can wait.”

Tala looked at the table half-full of food, then to Rane. “One moment.”

She quickly picked up each serving tray and stuck it into Kit. Less than a minute later, she pulled out a chicken pie of her own. “Lead on.”

She took an overly obvious bite, and Rane grinned. “Alright.”

Together, they left the now empty dining room.

Tala pulled out a bit of jerky and tossed it to the side.

Terry chirruped happily and flickered to catch the treat and return.

She almost tripped as she realized what that actually meant. *I saw him move. I saw it!*

-Yeah, I did, too. Even though I can only use your eyes at the moment.-

Tala huffed a laugh. “Rane?”

The large man glanced her way. “Yeah?”

“Is this acceptable in this compound?” She motioned as she pulled her bloodstars up into their standard formation. She left the rod, sphere, and plates in their holsters, only pulling the three blood drops into their orbits and the fourth into its place behind the base of her skull.

Rane regarded them for a moment, then shrugged. “Most people won’t even notice them. Your aura is extended in a bit of a bubble around you, and they’re within that, which hides their magical nature.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

He smiled at that. “Of course.”

They left the main building of the compound, but Tala didn't pay too much attention to where they went even as she ate at the feast she'd brought along.

The first place they went, however, seemed to be the kitchens.

Rane talked to the staff there, joking with some even as he stepped in to help while they talked. In the end, he shook hands with the head chef, and they left.

Tala had taken the time to eat more of the food from Kit. Additionally, while she didn't step deeply into the kitchens as the staff seemed quite busy, Tala was able to engage at least a few of the cooks to thank them for the tasty food they'd provided.

They'd all seemed at least a little surprised when she conveyed that it had *all* been for her.

Well, Master Grediv ate some, but that's a given.

Rane smiled her way as they walked towards their next destination. "We'll stop back through here as the last thing before we meet up with Master Grediv."

"Alright."

The Gredial library was extensive, and there was even a Librarian, seemingly deep in study. Even so, he stood when they arrived and walked over to bow before them.

"Master Rane, Mistress, how can I serve?"

Rane smiled and quietly explained what he was hoping to take with him on the trip: mainly some more obscure reference books.

The Librarian bowed again and went about gathering the needed texts.

Tala was a bit confused. "Don't you have an Archive tablet?"

He shrugged. "Of course."

"Then, why do you need the hard texts?"

“I like the feel of real paper and leather. For the more… obtuse texts, having the physical volumes helps me to focus.” He shrugged again.

Once the Librarian handed over the requested books, and Rane had tucked them into his dimensional storage, Rane thanked the man and departed with Tala and Terry in tow.

They made several other stops around various parts of the compound, gathering a variety of odds and ends.

Tala only waited outside one door, and that was to Rane’s room while he changed his clothes and gathered the last of his things. That only took a few minutes, all told.

Finally, they returned to the kitchens, where Rane led Tala to a spread of food and a stack of road-rations. He put the rations into his own storage and gestured to the food. “I figured you might want more.”

Tala shook her head but smiled. “I can’t say you’re wrong, but you could have asked.”

He shrugged, smiling. “I’m happy to take it if you don’t want it.”

“No, no. I’ll take it.” She quickly added the food, all packaged for travel, into Kit. “Thank you.”

“I’m glad it is a benefit. You’re welcome.”

That was all that Rane had to do to prepare to leave, so they thanked the kitchen staff and headed back to the main building.

Thus, they returned to the main house and the entry hall, seemingly a bit earlier than required.

As they’d walked about in relative silence, Tala had taken note of all the statues that were scattered throughout the whole compound. Now that they’d come to a stop, she decided to ask after them. “There are a *lot* of statues around.”

Rane grinned. “There are a bit too many, aren’t there.” It wasn’t really a question.

She shrugged. “They’re really well done.”

“Oh?” He seemed surprised and hesitant for some reason.

“Yeah. Not only are they mostly accurate, from what I can tell, but they each evoke… truth? I don’t know. The predators *feel* dangerous; the prey seem on the edge of bolting; the people seem to have just stopped mid-stride. Even though they’re stone, there’s life in them.” She shrugged and smiled. “They’re nice.”

Rane blinked at her, seemingly at a loss for words. “I… Well, I’m glad you like them.”

He seemed like he was about to say more, but Tala was already turning to look around. “Where is Master Grediv? We really should be going.”

Rane almost seemed to be struggling with himself, but then he just smiled. “Yeah, we should get on the road. It would be good to be well on the way to Bandfast before dark.”

Tala simply nodded. *On the road again, but this time I’m not alone.*

-We’re heading home. Our real hometown.-

Yeah. I can’t wait.

Chapter: 5
Priceless

Tala was looking around for Master Grediv, when a loud voice shouted from the balcony just as it had when Tala arrived with the now-missing Paragon, “Brother!”

The proclamation was followed by Furgal jumping over the railing and dropping towards the ground.

As Furgal landed, magics from his staff cushioned the fall.

Tala rolled her eyes and spoke under her breath, “Oh, yes. Watch out! It’s that one guy.”

Rane had been frowning, but when he heard her, he had to suppress a smile, seeming barely able to contain his laughter. “Should I hit him like sixty-five times?”

Tala glanced toward Rane and frowned. “Do you really need more than one?”

Rane did bark a laugh at that before patting her on the shoulder—the one Terry wasn’t on—and turning to his brother. “What do you want, Furgal?”

Tala examined Rane’s older brother and had to reassess. One punch from Rane would likely kill the simple Mage, and that would be less than ideal.

What even are his magics? It seems like his only inscriptions are his keystone, a weak version of magesight, and scripts for connecting to the staff. She frowned. *That can’t be good for him, basing so much of his magic outside his body?*

-Yeah, it has to have stunted his growth. Is that some sort of trap? Someone malicious gave that to him?-

Who knows? It’s probably worse, though.

-Worse?-

Yeah, it was probably someone who thought they were being helpful.

Furgal bowed towards Tala. “My apologies, Mistress, for this unseemly display. This is the second time that I have shamed my House before you.”

Tala felt something visceral shift within her, and she was suddenly breathing heavily, her hand drifting towards Flow and her eyes flicking towards the various exits, looking for an escape route.

-Tala. Tala! You are back in the human lands. He doesn’t mean ‘House’ that way.-

With great effort, and Alat’s help, Tala was able to pull herself back from the brink much more rapidly than should have been possible.

Even so, by the time she refocused on the conversation, it seemed like Rane and Furgal had been speaking back and forth for a bit and hadn’t noticed her reaction at all.

Furgal’s face was red, and he gesticulated as he almost shouted, “Enough! This farce has gone on long enough. You stole my master, and now you are leaving with him again? You keep him from taking me on as he rightly should, as I rightly deserve. I will not have it.”

“Furgal, Master Grediv picks his students. No one can force his choice.”

Furgal lifted the staff. “Yet, I have the staff. I was *chosen* for the staff, for his tutelage.”

Rane growled. “But not by *him.* Both of us have tried to explain that that staff, without guidance, is *ruining* you. I understand why you ignore me, but why won’t you listen to *him?*”

“He just wants to give it to you since he’s stuck with you.”

“Furgal. This is ridiculous. Why can’t—”

The older brother cut across Rane, “I challenge you to a duel.”

Rane just shook his head, one hand rubbing his own face in exasperation. “Again? Really?”

“Of course! I will continue to challenge you until you see your lack. The fact that you are so poorly able to deal with me, a mere Mage, while being so far more advanced *proves* how unworthy you are.”

Wait, is he serious? Tala felt her incredulity paint her features. *If Rane wanted, he could kill Furgal with ease. Of course, it’s hard to beat a stubborn opponent into submission when you greatly overpower them. Doing it with anything less than perfect care could kill.*

Rane sighed. “I beat you every day, Furgal, multiple times a day when you’re being particularly stubborn. This is getting exhausting, and honestly, it’s a bit sad.” He then continued in a mutter, showing that he was thinking along the same lines as Tala, “Of course, it isn’t fast. I don’t want to obliterate you… Well, I want to, but I won’t.”

Tala hid her grin and didn’t comment. *I knew it.*

Furgal just shook his head. “Your cowardice disgraces us all. Fight me.”

“No. We’re leaving now. Goodbye, Furgal.” Shaking his head, Rane moved back towards Tala and the exit.

The older Mage slammed the staff into the ground, magic rippling outwards. “While I hold this staff, I am heir apparent. You will not leave unless I allow it!”

Rane turned back, giving his brother an incredulous look. “You can’t be serious. Are you threatening to… what? Kick me out of the House? Master Grediv would never let it stand.”

“He would not deny the very rules he set up. Fight me or be unwelcome within these walls.”

Rane growled, clearly nearing the edge of his considerable patience. “Are you sure you wish to do this, brother?”

“I am utterly firm in my conviction. You are unworthy to be Master Grediv’s pupil. I will never stop until he recognizes that.”

Under his breath, Rane muttered, “Then you will never stop.” He shook his head, continuing quietly, “That staff is holding you back, brother. This is for your own good.”

Rane sighed, nodding and seeming to be psyching himself up for something.

In a louder voice, he spoke into the air, “Master Grediv, how much do you care about that staff?”

A brief instant of silence was broken by a disembodied voice, “It’s a priceless heirloom, passed down through generations of our family, and it should never be misused or abused.”

Furgal gave a triumphant smile. “The ancestor’s will has been—”

Master Grediv continued, utterly uncaring that he spoke over Furgal, “But since it is already being ill-used, I don’t much care what becomes of it. It’s ruined.”

Before Furgal could fully register the words, Rane had covered half the length of the hall to stand before his brother. With almost casual slowness, bordering on what a mundane could perceive, he punched the staff.

Tala, with her always active magesight, saw a very odd thing.

Rane stole the kinetic energy from his own punch as it landed, splitting it into thirds.

One third stayed where he struck, acting as expected, and the remainder was applied elsewhere on the staff, one third at each end, aimed in the opposite direction of his punch.

It was an incredibly effective technique, and Tala couldn’t help but wonder how it could be used against a human opponent.

-*Not now, Tala.*-

I know, I know.

Furgal’s eyes had just begun to widen as the staff shattered in his hand. The magical power that had been built up within the staff popped and fizzled in the air as a dispersing cloud.

Rane's voice rang out clearly, causing Tala to notice the others who had been watching from the upper balcony as they shifted with obvious discomfort, "You were passed over due to your own failings, Furgal. Learn from that harsh lesson—and this one—or wallow in mediocrity and a short life. I no longer care which. The choice is yours." Without another glance at his brother, Rane turned and walked the twenty or so feet back to Tala.

The older Mage simply stared at his now empty hand in abject disbelief. Even the fragments of the staff had dissipated along with the power that had once filled them.

Rane crossed that distance quite quickly for his strike.

-*You're still thinking of sparring against him, aren't you.*- It wasn't a question.

Maybe, but not right now. You're right that it isn't the time.

When Rane returned to her side, Tala raised an eyebrow and teased, "Just a punch? Not your sword?"

He shrugged. "First of all, you were the one who suggested using one punch."

She laughed. "I suppose I did."

"Second, no Archon worth their metal uses Force on a simple Mage."

Tala simply stared at him for a long moment. *Did he just…?*

-*I think he did. The madman.*-

Rane stood straight for most of that moment under her gaze but finally hunched beneath her scrutiny.

She shook her head and snorted a laugh. "How long have you been saving that line?"

He chuckled a little. "Quite a while actually."

"Well… try it again some other time."

"Fine." Rane groused a bit, but he was doing a bad job of hiding his smile.

Master Grediv was suddenly standing beside them, a neutral look across his features. “Are you both ready?”

They nodded.

Tala glanced back towards Furgal, who seemed even more shocked than before—if that was possible. He was still just regarding his own hand.

Tala felt a bit bad about the situation. “Is that going to be okay?”

“Hmm?” Master Grediv glanced the Mage’s way. “Oh, certainly. The staff was a training aid that took impressions of each student I trained in order to improve in the process with the next. He was given it years too early, without my guidance, and his use had spoiled the thing for future generations, I’m afraid.”

“Huh… alright, then.” Who was she to argue with the Paragon?

Master Grediv motioned, and the doors swung open. “Shall we?”

Tala was about to agree, when she remembered something. “Oh! Um… One moment.”

She walked over to the side of the entry hall and pulled empty plates and platters out of Kit, one after another.

It was enough that even those up on the balcony took notice and susurrations moved through the watchers.

Finally, Tala was done, and she walked back over to Rane and Master Grediv.

Rane was covering his own mouth, suppressing his mirth, and Master Grediv had one eyebrow arched. “Are you quite finished, Mistress Tala?”

“I am. Thank you.”

“Then, let us be off.”

A short time later, Tala, Rane, Master Grediv, and Terry exited Alefast, heading towards Bandfast.

Tala was a bit sad that she couldn't drop through and see Artia and her family, but there simply wasn't time. *I'll have to come back. I think I promised Lyn that I'd bring her at some point.*

-You did. It would probably be good for Kannis, too.-

Oh, right! I'd say I forgot about her, but that's not really possible.

-She wasn't on your mind?-

Yeah, that's probably a reasonable way to say it.

The terrain and feel of the land outside the city were hauntingly familiar to Tala, and she *almost* asked to go over to the endingberry grove that she knew was nearby.

She didn't need the endingberries—she had an orchard's worth within her sanctum—but she felt a nostalgic desire to go and see the place where she had first gathered more than a couple of the little bundles of power.

Now was hardly the time, however, so she satisfied herself by pulling some out from Kit and popping them into her mouth.

The taste was amazing, and the power washed through her in ripples. It was so little when compared with the tide that was already within her. Still, it was another source of power, and she was loathe to pass up on any little boost that she could.

With practiced precision, she guided the endingberries' power to the proper scripts, reinforcing the inscriptions and her own natural magics.

Then, with her mouth cleared of the beneficial power, she bit down on the seeds all at once.

A slow count of three later, an explosion of power tried to disintegrate her head from the mouth outward.

Instead, Tala pulled in a deep breath and forced that hostile power into her own lungs where immaculate scripts contained it.

There, within her own lungs, she forcefully twisted the spellform, using her magesight to see exactly what she was doing and her will to enact the desired change.

Easier than ever.

-What did you expect?-

Tala wasn't sure. As she considered, she thought that a part of her viewed the endingberries as alien, as other. *The dasgannach.*

The new soulbond was influencing her at a fundamental level, as expected, and she had had no time to actually analyze all the changes.

This is going to take a long time to get used to.

-And lots of experimenting to suss out the details.-

That's the truth.

But she'd let her mind wander, so she brought herself back to the moment.

Master Grediv and Rane were chatting about random things, seemingly not too bothered by her silence.

Terry had flickered away, and Tala could sense ripples of dimensional power that signified the terror bird was hunting across the surrounding landscape.

When his conversation with Master Grediv came to a natural pause, Rane glanced Tala's way. "He's gotten a lot more independent."

She shrugged. "He had to. I was… not myself for around half a year."

Rane winced at that. “I’m so sorry, Tala. We did look for you. After you vanished from the caravan…”

She blinked. “Oh! I didn’t even think of that. Did everyone get to Arconaven alright?”

“Yeah. Mistress Odera told me about it when I caught up to her. They booked it when you were found to be gone that morning. Mistress Odera and a group of Arcane Hunters from Arconaven came back to the campsite after the caravan was safe and searched for you more extensively, but they couldn’t find even a trace.” He grimaced. “That’s when she sent me a message. It took me nearly two weeks to get to Arconaven to join in the search, but as is rather obvious, we never found you, not even a trace.”

Tala didn’t really know how to take that. *They were trying to find me, at least at first.* Rather than trying to figure out how to address any part of that, she shifted the subject. “How is Mistress Odera? She hasn’t responded to my information packet, yet.”

“She… She isn’t doing too well. When she stopped searching for you, she seemed to lose her purpose, her drive. Last time I was in Bandfast to see Mistress Lyn, Mistress Aproa, and the others, I stopped by her home. She just sits in her garden all day. Mistress Aproa spends as much time as she can between assignments, and Mistress Odera gives her advice on the mageling who Mistress Aproa took on. That, at least, seems to make the old lady smile.” He grinned at the last.

Tala smiled in return. “Oh? I’d thought Mistress Aproa was against getting a mageling.”

“She was, but apparently, she came around to the idea.” Rane shrugged. “I think Master Cazor had a hand in that discussion, but I wasn’t there, so I’m not sure.”

Tala was about to ask further when Master Grediv interjected. They’d walked nearly a mile from the Alefast wall by that point. “Mistress Tala, how did you travel on your way here?”

She shrugged. “I ran, mostly.” After a moment’s hesitation. “No, I ran the whole way, there wasn’t a ‘mostly’ involved.” She chuckled a bit awkwardly after she answered.

“Ahh, well, then we’ll have to use other methods. While that might work, I think we should take a less strenuous means. Are you willing?”

“Of course. I think I’ve had my fill of running cross-country for the next year or so at least.”

The Paragon smiled. “Very well. I am happy to provide an alternative.”

Without a specific explanation, he reached into thin air and pulled out a *large* sapphire disc. It was easily ten feet across and half a foot thick.

It was *dense* with magic.

“Before you ask, no, I’m not bonded to this, but yes, I do like the color.”

Rane grinned, and Tala chuckled.

“Shall we?”

Tala looked toward where she felt Terry last. “Terry!”

The terror bird flickered into being beside Tala, bent low but still taller than her.

“Do you want to travel in Kit? Or ride with us, or…?”

Terry glanced toward the sapphire disc that was now hovering just off the ground, Master Grediv and Rane already waiting atop it.

The avian squawked disinterestedly, then nosed her pouch.

“In Kit it is.” She grinned and opened her sanctum so Terry could flicker in.

Without another word, she stepped up beside the two men.

“Let’s away.”

Master Grediv nodded, and Tala felt his power flexing around them, layering them in a cocoon of sorts.

Its shape was reminiscent of the form she'd given her aura to reduce her magical resonance. "Oh! Is this more aerodynamic? Or… magic-dynamic? No, that's not a good term."

Master Grediv smiled. "I understand your meaning, and yes, Mistress Tala. This is the best-known shape for an aura or isolation field to reduce magical resonance." He glanced toward Rane. "I recommend that you both study it while we travel."

They both nodded.

"Then, let's be off."

The disc rose up into the air about a hundred feet and took off, just slower than Tala had been running through the plains.

Even being a bit slower, and with a perfectly designed isolation cocoon, Tala could tell that they were pushing up against the edge of magical resonance.

Master Grediv sighed. "This is slower than I'd have liked, but not by much. We'll make good time."

Tala nodded and smiled. "Better than running. Thank you."

"Certainly, Mistress Tala. I am happy to oblige."

Tala began thinking of all those she was going to see, and all those that she would still need to reach out to, outside of Bandfast. Mostly, that was her family.

OH! Alat?

-*Yeah, I just noticed. It's Nalac and Illie's birthday.*- The messages that she'd received from the twins before being taken had always been established from their end, and she simply responded. The last message from them sat in her Archive; she'd never responded. In looking at that message, she was the only one able to access it within the Archive, so she didn't really know how to go about responding. *Huh, I didn't actually realize that before.*

“Master Grediv?”

“Yes?”

“If I wanted to send a message to the Academy, specifically two students, how would I do that?”

“Oh!” He thought for a moment. “Here, I will grant you access to a repository. Place your letter within that, clearly labeled for the recipient, and it will get to them.”

“Today?”

After a moment’s thought, or some form of investigation, Master Grediv nodded. “Yes. Barring unforeseen issues, it should reach them at dinner mail-call. This is assuming you don’t take too long. They are further ahead than we are, time-wise.”

Tala suppressed the bad memories that she had associated with dinner mail-call and smiled. “Thank you.”

Let’s get to it. How much time do we have?

-Less than an hour, to be safe. We should be good for two, but it would be quite frustrating to finish and not be able to deliver it.-

That’s the truth. Tala began thinking on what to say and realized that it had been nearly a year since she’d seen them, and their last message to her had asked for her help.

I never replied. I thought I’d have time in Arconaven.

-Tala, you couldn’t have known.-

But I should have prioritized them when I could.

-Well? You can now.-

Yes. Yes, I can. First, she’d check on their fundamental understandings. That was a recurring issue the first few years at the Academy and a fairly safe place to begin.

With that as a place to start, Tala quickly sat and worked with Alat to compose a letter to each of her two siblings for their birthday.

Chapter: 6
Illie & Ingrit

Illie was finally settling into the Academy, now that she was entering her second year.

Students came in fits and starts, whenever their sponsors, teachers, or parents thought they were ready for the difficulty of the Academy.

If their arrival was out of sync with class offerings, that just gave the new student time to acclimatize with the campus and facilities before starting in the next class block.

Each block was three weeks, in which each student would take a single, intensive course. There would then be a week for self-study before the next block.

It was *very* rigorous.

Illie loved it.

Nalac had been struggling a bit, but he was getting into the swing of things. It helped that they only had a single subject to focus on at any given time, so they didn't have to juggle priorities.

Supposedly, some older students took more than one class at a time, but they were the exception. It was more common for a student to retake the same course for several blocks to really *deepen* their knowledge, but again, that was mostly done by older students in later, more advanced classes.

Illie loved the striving; she loved the complex; she even loved the surrounding grounds, though she hadn't had too much free time to explore.

The best part, though, was that she had her own room.

The chores were nothing and were actually easier than her work at home had been.

Most of the students had quick, cold scrubs to get clean—except on special occasions—in order to avoid chopping their own wood, carrying their own water, and managing the process and cleanup after. Illie was an exception as she had a hot bath every day after her workout in the Academy gymnasium.

Part of that was a requirement due to her propensity to push herself to the extreme. She particularly liked sparring weaponless, and these days she usually had to find four or five opponents in sequence before she ran out of energy.

She wasn't as strong as most of her opponents, but she was slippery and quick.

While she lost *vastly* more than she won, that was better than most beginning students, who only ever lost. She really didn't understand *how* two students sparring each other could *both* lose, but the proctor was often insistent.

This *dual loss* happened particularly often when first years sparred each other, and in those cases, Illie had to admit that what most did could hardly actually be called fighting.

As to her own ability, her teachers thought she had talent, and they were suggesting she take a course in the use of magical weaponry.

She might get to it, eventually, but not yet. She still loved fighting with her body alone, and they didn't push, allowing that unarmed combat was a great foundation for any use of weaponry.

When the next class block started next week, it would be the beginning of her thirteenth block, and she would be attending her first second-level course: 'Foundational Understandings and You 2: Are you sure you chose right?'

No, in fact, she was *not* sure.

Foundational understandings were notoriously hard to pin down, as well as being utterly *critical* to a Mage's future.

She felt a smile pull at her lips. *I'm going to be a Mage.*

As it stood, her concept was… not great.

'Magic is my fist.'

It appealed to her, especially with all of her sparring. She wanted magic to be as easy to wield as her own body.

She'd tried, 'Magic is my hand,' but that had just felt awkward.

Hopefully, this new class would help solidify her foundational understanding and allow her to take the next stages of inscription coursework.

She could hardly wait to get her first *real* spellforms.

The keystone inscription on her back still itched, and it pulled at her skin and tissue oddly when she moved, but she was assured that she'd get used to it, eventually not even thinking about the oddity of so much metal within her skin.

That inscription was as generic as it got, and therefore, it obviously didn't count.

She hadn't even solidified her quadrant yet, so the spell-lines specific to her quadrant had yet to be added and incorporated. *Of course not, Illie, your foundational understanding influences that.*

Hence, the choice in coursework.

Nalac had, of course, elected to join her.

They'd taken every course together, and she was beginning to be concerned by his lack of initiative, if she were being honest.

It had started out fine. The first courses every student took were a recommended set, and it made sense for them to take them together, but now? When they were supposed to start pursuing their own interests and plans of study?

He still simply took what she did.

He hasn't been the same since…

She didn't like to think about it, but the void in her chest ached unrelentingly.

Tala was gone, and this time no one seemed to know where she was.

One of Tala's colleagues—a Mage named Rane—had reached out with the news and offered to help them with anything he could 'until Tala returned.'

Other messages from other Mages had made Master Rane's words seem like false hope, given to placate children.

Still, he'd responded more quickly than anyone else to their other inquiries.

Apparently, connections between the Academy and the human cities took a Paragon-level of power, whatever that meant, and seemingly, those people were busy.

Such a requirement had gone a long way to explaining why Tala's communications had been more irregular than expected, back before…

But it also meant that most people they tried to message couldn't be counted on to respond quickly.

There had been times when Master Rane had been slow to respond, but they'd been infrequent.

Maybe Master Rane is a Paragon? Maybe it's some sort of job? It was a thought that Illie had had many times before, but she'd never gathered the courage to ask directly.

Her bath was starting to cool around her to the point that it would be detrimental to stay.

A cold dunk can be good for the body, but sitting in water as it cools to room temperature is just laziness.

Illie had purposely built a small fire, and it had died shortly after the water was a good temperature. She was getting *very* good at using exactly as much wood as she needed for each given bath.

This day, she'd needed a short bath and had acted accordingly.

I stayed too long working with the weights. Aside from bodyweight exercise, the Academy encouraged their students to use a truly staggering number of odd implements, each weighted in different ways to alter the centers of balance and change up exactly how muscles would be worked.

Magic is as much physical as mental, and I will neglect neither.

But she was stalling.

She was *sore*, and a large part of her didn't want to get up.

With a sigh, she pushed herself out of the water and turned the valve set near the bottom of the basin, allowing the tub to empty into a series of drains.

Apparently, the Academy hadn't always had those, and she was reminded to be grateful for the 'luxury.'

Illie had to admit, if she had to carry *out* her dirty water, as well as carrying in the clean? She'd probably take fewer baths.

She dried off, dressed, and returned the bath room to a better state than it had been in when she'd found it.

That done, she made her way towards the dining hall. It was dinner time, and today was a special day.

She turned thirteen today.

Nalac did, too, obviously, but that wasn't her main focus.

No, it was something else entirely. Something quite self-focused.

Illie was officially a teenager!

Nothing *really* changed because she was a teenager, of course, but it was another milestone.

Last year, she'd been old enough to come to the Academy—a major milestone if ever there was one.

This year, she was a teenager.

Next year? Well, there wasn't really anything special about being fourteen, but she'd find something worthy of note. *I have a year, after all.*

The food here was good, but she missed home-cooked meals. Still, she'd seen other students getting special desserts on their birthdays, so she was cautiously optimistic that she'd have one today, too.

Mail-call, as well. She smiled, knowing that she'd probably have messages from her family and friends back home.

Master Leighis had been helping facilitate communication between Nalac and Illie and all the mundanes they left in Marliweather.

Illie giggled. It was still odd to think of her friends and family as 'mundanes,' but that was what they were. It was what she used to be.

To be fair, she was still just inscribed, but that counted! *No matter what Nalac says.*

There was a distinction *and* a difference between inscribed and mundanes, and most inscribed didn't even have keystones.

She didn't focus on the fact that she was only really inscribed if her keystone counted as an inscription. That was beside the point.

Illie climbed through the Academy from her room near the lowest level to near the top of the main complex.

She was often grateful that her room was so low down, along with all the other dormitories, because it reduced the work required for her baths.

They were worth it, but she wasn't sad that they were easier than they could have been.

During her steady climb, Illie waved to a few of her new friends as they passed hurriedly in the halls. She'd seen them all earlier in the day at various points, and they'd wished her happy birthday then, but that didn't stop many of them from reiterating the sentiment.

Even so, she didn't try to stop them or turn them around. If they weren't heading to dinner, they likely had to grab something from their room, get changed, or something like that.

They'll be along shortly.

The wide doors stood open, and Illie took a moment to stand in the doorway and take in the room before her.

Long tables ran up the center of the room with the occasional break in their length to allow for easy navigation.

Massive windows looked out over the sea and to the continent in the distance.

Everything had a simple, functional elegance to it. The furniture wasn't plain, but it also wasn't covered in detail work. It fell into the lovely middle ground where if she didn't know where to look, she just saw furniture, but after a fellow student had pointed out certain details, Illie could truly appreciate the beauty and skilled craftsmanship that went into everything around her.

"Illie Karweil?"

Illie turned to the staff member who was approaching her. "Yes?"

“You have messages.” The man didn’t look old or young. Instead, he had the odd, ageless look of someone who’d been at the Academy a long time, with no growing left to do but no hallmarks of age, either. It was still a bit eerie to see, if she was being honest, especially since some of the teachers didn’t quite have the look, and she knew they’d been around for decades.

How long has he been here? What does this place actually do to adults?

She’d initially been concerned, but many people she’d trusted had assured her that she wouldn’t be affected unless she stayed on after graduation.

She smiled broadly as the man handed her a stack of paper letters. “Oh! Thank you.”

She knew that the messages weren’t actually sent in letter form, but she and Nalac always wrote out the messages and received them in the same manner.

I’m sure I’ll learn how it works, eventually. She could ask, but she thought it would be more fun to figure it out. *When I have time.*

But now? Now was time for letters.

Nalac was already at their usual spot, halfway up the northeastern wall, on the second table from the outside, so they could see out but weren’t in the ‘prime’ seats worthy of jockeying over.

Her brother seemed to have a similar stack of letters, and that made her smile.

They could grab food afterwards.

Just as she sat down, Nalac gasped.

She grinned mischievously, “What, Nalac? Did one of your old crushes finally confess her love now that you’re going to be a Mage?”

He didn’t respond as he seemed engrossed in the letter.

“Nalac?”

He jerked, looking up at her, seemingly only just to have noticed her sit down across from him. “Illie?” He looked at the letters in her hand. “Good, you got yours. You won’t believe this.”

“What?”

“Tala.”

Illie felt a jerk within her. “What?”

“Illie, she’s alive!”

* * *

Ingrit was alternatively rubbing her temples and chugging coffee.

It was early afternoon, and she was *still* reviewing all the information that Mistress Tala had sent her way.

The head Librarian had finally been placated into leaving her alone when it finally became clear that Ingrit couldn’t grant access to the books that were referenced in Mistress Tala’s list of titles.

That girl is going to get me killed…

Ingrit was capable of reviewing days of memory in mere minutes, or at least she’d thought she was. Mistress Tala, apparently, had something akin to perfect memories, so Ingrit’s long-honed ability to sort through dull, faded, or muddled recollections wasn’t exactly useful in this review.

Instead, she was forced to process every moment as if she were actually there.

Bless the Archive, Ingrit was still able to do so at nearly three hundred sixty times normal speed—barely a third of her usual capacity.

That girl sleeps so *little… It can't be healthy.* The lack of sleep also meant that Ingrit had more to review per day, but that wasn't why she was grumpy. No, that would be unprofessional.

Now, how pressing is this? Ingrit hadn't gotten any specific inquiries, aside from the head Librarian, and Tala hadn't reached out for mediation or assistance, so she likely wasn't in a prison somewhere. *Though, she likely should be, even if just as a candidate Eskau of a major House?*

It was insane to think that Mistress Tala had gotten so elevated within so powerful an organization.

The House of Blood. Ingrit had a whole conglomeration of notes to add towards their understanding of that one House from her review of the Tali memories.

But like so many other sets of notes, this wasn't the time to process them, not yet. *Hopefully, Tala will authorize an assistant or ten, and they can do the grunt work.*

Ingrit could dream.

The list of arcanes and their powersets was another treasure trove in these memories, and those were just the first two that came to mind.

Still, she'd already seen enough to know that she needed to talk with Mistress Tala personally. With that thought, Ingrit diverted a fraction of her mind for a moment to contact the girl in question.

As it turned out, Mistress Tala was on her way to Bandfast, already, and in the company of Master Grediv, who was aware of the gist of her situation.

He should be able to contain her if things are less than ideal. Though, Ingrit herself didn't have a good picture of Mistress Tala's experiences yet. *Soon enough.*

Ingrit agreed to the girl's idea of meeting once she arrived. *Even with all her memories, I'm going to have* so *many questions.*

By that point, she was almost through Mistress Tala's time as 'Tali,' she was sure of it, and she was looking forward to seeing who was able to recover the girl's mind.

Then, after around twelve hours of reviewing, it happened quite suddenly.

"What?" Ingrit didn't realize she was talking out loud. She sat up straight, leaning forward even though the memories were playing out inside her own head.

She went back and watched it again, fully immersing herself and letting it play back at close to normal speed. Well, only ten times normal speed, but in comparison, it was positively glacial.

Someone hit her on the head then… "This has to be the only time that a mild concussion *restored* memories, even if only as a secondary effect." She hesitated. "Well, that is quite the trope in certain types of fiction, but I don't think it actually happens…"

She might need to reassess her disdain for some tropes. *Though, this is hardly a fair counter-case. Her inscriptions are cutting edge, and I think nearly unique.*

Rather than taking more time at the moment, she made herself a note to look it up.

After all, she had dinner to get to, and then, it would be back for what would probably be a late night.

She carefully segmented her mind and access to the Archive, shutting away her work so that she could go and have a meal with her family.

Two hours later, Ingrit was back in her office. She reopened her accesses and unshelved her variously rampaging thoughts.

Okay, okay, okay, okay. Ingrit lightly patted both of her cheeks, then took a long pull of coffee.

She normally never touched the stuff unless she had a particularly strenuous day.

This day qualified.

This day had qualified from the moment she got Mistress Tala's message.

Let's get back into this.

Less than five minutes later, she sat back, reeling. "Eskau. She is an Eskau of the House of Blood."

Ingrit wasn't sure if she should send out the Arcane Hunters or grab her family and go into hiding for a century or two.

But if she was hostile, would she have given this to us?

What if she gave all of this to *every* high-level Archon in the cities? And they were all doing as she was? Sequestered, trying to learn.

The arcanes could be assaulting humanity with very little contest.

Ingrit quickly queried some of her contacts and got back confused replies. No, there were no attacks, or even hints of such, and the few prominent defenders that she inquired with were at their posts, unaware of the landslide of information suffusing Ingrit.

Well, at least this isn't an invasion via information overload… The girl is still supremely dangerous. Master Grediv was with Mistress Tala. *Eskau. She's Eskau Tala. Does he know?*

A quick, circumspect message to the Paragon was able to confirm that he knew.

Good, at least he'll be wary. She couldn't do anything further until Mistress Tala arrived in Bandfast. *Well, nothing except learn all that I can.*

That settled, Ingrit dove back in.

Let's get this sorted. After all, Ingrit had still not gotten to the events surrounding Mistress Tala's acquisition of what amounted to an arcane library.

What other secrets are buried in here?

It was sometime in the middle of the night when Ingrit finished her survey of Mistress Tala's memories.

Mistress Tala, herself, had not read all the books that she'd included, so the information they contained weren't in the lived memories of the Fused. Thus, Ingrit hadn't had time to go through those mountains of information yet.

Even so, the Archivist was torn in so many directions. The information that Mistress Tala had would be sought and beneficial to virtually every Mage in the human cities, and it would actually be helpful to most of them.

There were some things that needed to be dealt with *post haste*, including arranging for the meeting about all this new information, but for the most part, Ingrit had a single pressing need.

As soon as Mistress Tala arrived, Ingrit was going to give that poor girl a hug.

Chapter: 7
Sapphire Disc

Tala stood back up after sending the note to her siblings for their birthday.

While she was composing it, Mistress Ingrit had sent her a short inquiry, so she'd told the Archivist that she was on her way to Bandfast in the company of Masters Grediv and Rane.

There. That's done for now.

She didn't want to be distracted by her surroundings. Thus, she narrowed her focus and turned toward Master Grediv. "So, combining two already soul-bound items?"

The Paragon glanced her way, then to either side. They were moving through the pass, incredibly steep slopes on either side. "Not one for taking in the scenery?"

Fine… Tala did look around, then. It was stunning.

Behind them, she saw the rolling, lightly forested plains running down from the mountains to Alefast, Waning, and beyond where the trees all but disappeared, and in the far distance, the forest proper where the trees returned in sudden force.

Before them lay a wide valley between stark mountains, sloping down toward the west, toward Bandfast.

It was an idyllic scene not marred by anything to her normal sight.

The angle is wrong to see the caravan campsite just north of this pass, and it doesn't seem like any caravan is passing below us at the moment.

Her magesight, however, showed swirling storms of power, making the zeme utterly chaotic in the area. The mountains were filled with magic, the centuries of human cities circling the region had built up quite the reserves within the land itself.

It wasn't free-floating, and as such, it couldn't be claimed by an arcane. Somehow, the world itself had laid claim to the magic. *That's probably how it can then sustain magical beasts.*

But she was letting her mind wander.

Don't let yourself get distracted.

-Yes, that would be quite out of character.-

Hush, you. "It is beautiful, and I would like to know what you have to say."

Master Grediv quirked a smile.

Rane sat off to one side on their wide, but not overlarge, disc.

He briefly cracked an eye open, glanced towards Master Grediv, and closed it once again.

Listening without being obvious, eh? I wonder if he's soul-bound anything else? She could try to figure it out, but now was hardly the time.

Master Grediv finally nodded and sat cross-legged, gesturing for her to do the same.

She did.

"A soul-bound item is a magical item that is bound to your soul."

She gave him a flat look.

He gave her a happy, slightly smug smile. "What each one of those words *is,* in actuality, really matters, though."

That caused her to frown before she slowly nodded. "Like my elk leathers. They are 'one item' while really being numerous pieces, physically."

“Precisely, yes. We can address that side of things first. Your elk leathers have been bound on a spiritual or magical level and are thus a ‘magical item,’ for want of a better descriptor.”

“So, a ‘magical item’ is anything that is spiritually or magically ‘one’?”

“For the most part, yes.”

“But wouldn’t that mean that, after the bond, I am ‘spiritually and magically one’ with that item?”

“Ahh, and you immediately focus on the ‘least’ part, as usual.”

She grinned sheepishly, and Rane smiled without opening his eyes.

Master Grediv waved placatingly. “I don’t mean that negatively, Mistress Tala. You have drilled right to the heart of the matter. What I am about to describe is *not* literally true. Do you understand?”

“A metaphor, yes.”

“Yes, good. So, there exists a network of ties, each one of your soul-bound items is linked to your soul *and* to each other. Together, you are a group all bound as a unit.”

She nodded and didn’t interrupt.

“The same goes for me. Now, as a hypothetical, what would happen if you and I were to marry?”

Tala frowned, putting aside the awkwardness of the question. “We would soul-bond.”

“Yes, and our soul-bound items?”

Her head tilted to one side. “They would intermesh? All connecting to each other in one big wibbly-wobbly, ti—”

He held up his hand. “I’m going to stop you right there. That is what would be expected to happen based on the previous metaphor, but remember, it’s not a perfect analogy.”

She nodded, clearly following what he was trying to say.

"Instead, a singular link would be made between our souls, the *weight* of which would be the sum total of our power and the power of bound items."

"So, they add to the link, without being a part of it?"

"In a sense, yes."

"Sure, I suppose that makes sense. How is it relevant?"

He smiled. "Why is there a difference between binding an item and a person?"

She opened her mouth to answer, then hesitated. There was an obvious answer but was it really that simple? Finally, she decided to just go with it. "Our minds?"

"Precisely. If we married, you would want to bond with me, and I you, not our soulbound items, just each other."

"But items don't have minds."

"Exactly. So, when they're brought into a bond, they just… bond."

"Hence, the network of connections."

"Yes. And that gets complicated and exponentially more complex as you increase the number of bonds you have."

"So, bonding someone or something with a mind is less stressful on your soul?"

"Differently stressful. It's a stronger, two-way connection, rather than another node in a net."

"So… this is interesting, but how does it factor into my question?"

"How would you combine them?"

Taking his question seriously, Tala thought before responding. *Alat?*

-In the metaphor? Just directly overlay the nodes in the net, then somehow pin them in place?-

That sounds close to what he's asking, but rather than pinning them, "Overlay the items and interweave their connections to everything else?"

"That… Yes. That is correct."

She hesitated. "Oh! So, it *is* possible?"

"Only if you can get the items to occupy the same physical and magical space…" He hesitated, then nodded. "You want to combine the dasgannach with your body."

Rane's eyes snapped open. "What now?"

Master Grediv closed his eyes, rocking backward and wincing. "Ah, Mistress Tala, I apologize. That was an egregious breach of trust. I should never have disclosed your soul-bound items to another."

Rane whipped his head to stare, wide-eyed, at Tala. "You soul-bound a dasgannach?"

The Paragon reached over and smacked Rane on the back of his head. Somehow, the Fused's defensive scripts didn't activate, allowing the hit to land. "That was obvious from the context if you'd taken even an instant to think. Don't try to make what I've done seem worse."

Tala shook her head, holding up her hands. "It's fine, Master Grediv. I don't mind Rane knowing."

"So… it's true?"

"It is, though the dasgannach in question was *heavily* modified by arcane concept magics, at least that is my assumption of how they did it. It wasn't *really* voluntary? I had to offer the thing my Archon star to keep it from killing me, but I think that the results will be beneficial, in the end. Though, to be fair, I've only barely explored the bare edges of what those results are."

"What are the results you know?"

Tala grinned wickedly. "Well." She consciously suppressed her through-spike.

With that action, she knew that she almost fully disappeared to their magesight, even as their mundane vision was filled with the impression of her light-wreathed form. “It’s better than the iron paint ever was. Somehow, the iron is surrounding every one of my inscriptions, but within the dimensions of magic rather than physically. I also have a *lot* of extra iron interwoven through me, which is giving me additional mass and density, which I imagine will take a bit to get used to, but once I have adjusted, it will make me both more offensive and resilient.”

“So, an iron dasgannach?”

“Yes.”

“I can see why that would have been an issue.” Rane was squinting. “Your skin looks normal. How are you still creating the echoes?”

“That’s because it is.” She frowned. “I just said the iron was around my inscriptions. It’s not on my skin anymore.”

He shrugged. “What if you had it on your skin, too?”

She frowned.

-Tala? That’s a pretty interesting thought. Why didn’t we think of it?-

Because we haven’t exactly had a lot of time to consider these things, yet.

-Fair enough. So? What if?-

Her eyes had initially widened at the idea. Now, they narrowed as she nodded to herself. “Well, let’s see.”

With an almost effortless flexing of her will, some of her iron reserves flowed through her and out, onto her skin, coating it in a dark gray semi-liquid.

It moved with her easily, though somehow, she knew it would feel hard and unyielding to anyone who touched it.

The wreathing of light vanished, the magics that carved them now contained within another layer.

-*Oh, wow. That feels* good. *I feel* more, *somehow. Keep it up!*-

Tala felt her enhancements ramping up even higher and her efficiency increase, not due to the scripts being more efficient but because of an additional recursion being added on top of those already flaring through her.

“Huh. That was unexpected. I don’t—”

Master Grediv’s eyes widened. “Release it! Remove it, now!”

Tala acted instantly, pulling the iron back into her reserves. Only then did she notice the issue.

As the near perfect seal dissolved, a wave of power rippled outward.

Tala felt her regeneration scripts flare to full activation with what power was left to them even as a wave of pain shuddered through her.

-*Tala? Tala!*-

Tala had collapsed to the side, twitching as her blood flowed from her eyes, mouth, nose, ears, and every pore across her body.

It didn’t make a mess on the sapphire disc, because only clear liquid flowed off of her, the iron stripped from the liquid before it dripped free.

That iron then melded back into her, leaving no trace on her skin.

Vaguely, Tala saw an antlered and horned head peek around the side of a nearby mountain, clearly alerted by her pulse of power. However, this time, the creature took a look at the source and vanished from sight, likely running as fast and as far as it could.

But, on the flying disc, Rane's eyes had gone wide, and he was clearly scanning her with his magesight and possibly other spellforms for detection and diagnosis, but he kept from touching her for the moment. "Tala?"

She groaned. Her mind felt sluggish after the brief moment of flared power. Her senses felt dull, even at their now standard levels of enhancement.

She looked inside and saw *devastation.*

It was like what she'd read of extreme hyponatremia, the oversaturation of water that could cause a person's cells to burst apart. Her body seemed to have been strained to splitting down to the deepest levels. She only hadn't noticed because her hyper-powered spellforms were masking it, keeping her alive and functional even as her body degraded, physically.

Without sitting up, she stuck her hand into Kit and pulled out some food, beginning to eat mechanically.

Rane sighed, obviously relaxing, if just a bit. She still hadn't responded, but she was eating, and he likely took that as a good sign.

As for Tala, she still felt oddly blank, even while she clinically examined herself.

The damage had affected her brain as well, and her consciousness was only really functional at the moment due to her magics and Alat.

-*I… Rebuilding… Hang on…*-

She couldn't think. She seemed able to act, but *thinking* was oddly out of reach.

So, she ate mechanically.

Rane turned to his mentor. "What happened?"

"Extreme magic oversaturation. An unRefined body simply can't take the level of power she started to pack into it. It was too much, too quickly."

“But she’s been completely covered in iron before.”

“She hasn’t been, not really. You’ve learned a little about the nature of reality, Rane. Before, her iron covering was not a unified, unbroken layer between her and the rest of reality. Now? Now that it is basically a part of her? Well, it’s unprecedented, so I don’t *know*, but in theory, it should be far closer to perfect.”

“Would it really make that much of a difference?” Rane was frowning, clearly trying to understand.

Master Grediv gave his student a reproachful look. “A pressure tank with a steady ten percent rate of leakage will reach equilibrium at a much lower pressure than one with a one percent rate of leakage, assuming the same rate of in-flow. I would hazard a guess that Mistress Tala’s earlier versions of iron covering were in the forty to sixty percent range. Now? What we just saw? I’d guess it had at most a ten percent leakage.”

“So, she tried to quadruple her power density almost instantly.”

“At the very least, yes.”

“No wonder it didn’t go well…” Rane hesitated, then, when he opened his mouth to speak again, Tala finally stirred, speaking before he could.

“Not your fault.” She grimaced and tried to scrape the awful taste off her tongue with her teeth.

The two men turned to regard her as she slowly pushed herself up.

“That *rusting* hurt, but I’ll survive.”

Rane quirked his signature smile, seeming to relax further. “I figured that much when you started eating.”

Tala grunted at that. “Fair enough. I still think I’m more… not right than right. I’m glad we’re not getting to Bandfast today.”

Master Grediv nodded. “Yes, you should use the time to recover.”

Tala gave him a baleful look even as she continued eating. “After you answer my rusting question.”

He hesitated, then laughed. “Oh! Yes, I suppose I haven’t answered, have I?”

“No. No, you have *not.*”

“Well, I won’t *know* until we fully explore your bond to the dasgannach, but in theory?”

She nodded, swallowing and taking another bite.

“You should be able to combine it with your body in a way that few have ever been able to do with two soul-bound items. Though, I wouldn’t recommend it before you Refine. You are already obviously capable of things your body just can’t handle. I’d hate for you to make it worse.”

“I should do that soon, regardless.”

Master Grediv shrugged. “We’ll run some tests. I would bet that Mistress Holly will want to tweak your scripts at least marginally, and even with your rather impressive throughput—don’t think I haven’t noticed, by the way, and you will explain eventually—you will need at least a couple of weeks for the new scripts to shift your natural magical patterns.”

Tala shrugged. “Soon is good enough. It’s important, not urgent, and I’d rather do it right.”

Master Grediv cocked an eyebrow, his surprised skepticism obvious.

Rane smiled, the look almost congratulatory as if she’d said something specifically worthy of note.

-*Unusually wisely said, Tala. Well done.*-

Tala glared back, ensuring that the sentiment was reflected inward as well. *Rusting jerks, I hate all of you.*

Finally, she just shook her head. “I’ve had a *long* few months, and I am looking forward to taking a slower pace for a little while.”

Rane nodded. “I can understand that. Was it really that awful in Platoiri?”

Tala grimaced. “Yes and no. It was strange, being in a place against my will but holding the lives of most of those around me in my hands. I felt like a press-ganged judge. It was…” She frowned. “Wait.”

Rane tilted his head, waiting just as she’d asked.

“I never said what city I was in.”

Color drained from the Fused’s face. “I… You didn’t?”

She narrowed her eyes. “No. I didn’t.”

Did I?

-No. You didn’t.-

Yeah, I thought not.

“So? How did you know the name?”

Rane looked at a loss. “I… I can’t say.”

“Rane, so help me. You will tell me or—”

He held up his hands. “I apologize, Tala, but I truly *can’t.*”

Master Grediv cleared his throat. “If I may, Mistress Tala?”

Tala wasn’t sure what she was feeling, but she rounded on Master Grediv. “What.” There was no question involved, only irritation.

“Rane refused to give up when most others did, after your disappearance. I don’t know all the things he sought, but I do know that, around three months ago, he returned, sure that you were alive and unable to tell anyone more than that. He petitioned to be allowed to venture south and was denied. Even so, he maintained that you were alive and that you would have a chance to make your escape sooner rather than later.”

Rane was a funny shade of red, but he wasn’t saying anything.

Tala looked back and forth between the two men before finally throwing her hands up in surrender. “Fine. I won’t press. I need to eat.”

And so, she ate, while the sapphire disc continued its rapid journey toward Bandfast.

The afternoon turned to evening, and Master Grediv gathered their attention. “I can continue on through the night, and we will likely reach Bandfast before dawn, or we can put down for the night and be on our way at first light. We’ll still get to Bandfast well before noon.”

Rane shrugged. “I’ve no preference either way. Tala?”

She sighed, the food Rane had procured for her long since consumed. “I’d prefer to arrive sooner rather than later. We could slow down just a bit, to arrive around sunrise? No need to cause a ruckus by arriving in the dark.”

Master Grediv hesitated, then nodded. “Very well. That is quite possible.”

The disc slowed down noticeably, but not over-much, and they continued their journey uninterrupted.

Chapter: 8
This Time

Tala sat in peaceful stillness, eyes closed, body relaxed, feeling the constant, pleasant breeze against her front.

That cool sensation was suddenly joined by a counter point when the sun crested the mountains behind them, the first light of morning striking her like a physical thing.

She felt power in the light, though it was most easily explained as the heat the light brought to her skin.

She hadn't been cold, per se, but the warm touch of that light eased tension she hadn't noticed building through her long hours of barely moving.

Tala had spent most of the night in quiet meditation, focused inward separately on her repairing body and the iron now threading throughout.

They would arrive in Bandfast soon, so she took the rising sun as a cue to review what she learned.

First, and most importantly, her physical form was *not* regenerating as quickly as it should.

The damage she'd sustained should have healed effectively instantly, but instead, it lingered as if something foundational had broken within each cell, and her magesight was becoming precise enough to detect the detritus that was surrounding her body in the dimensions of magic. At least it was precise enough when she focused with all her will and mental acuity.

Alat helped, too.

The picture wasn't a good one.

-I don't think we'll survive long without Refining or something like it. That is a rather unhealthy aspect to our body.-

I'd have thought the teleportation would clean this up, but it's tied to me, to my soul.

-Yeah, it's a deterioration of your body, which is soul-bound to you.-

Tala scoffed internally. *One of the unspecified 'downsides' of becoming Bound. There are some things that can't be healed in the standard way.*

-Mistress Holly knows of the issue, even if not the advanced state of it. We'll get it all sorted.-

Yeah. It was odd, feeling like her body was betraying her, even if that was a radically unrealistic assessment. She'd abused herself, and now there were consequences.

-Marginal misalignments in regenerative scripts, due to our imperfect nature.-

Yeah, and with every regeneration, those have been amplified. Do you have your estimate?

-Yes, as soon as I noticed your desire for independent analysis, I kept you from seeing those thoughts and calculations.-

I estimate ten years until total degradation, losing roughly a year for the equivalent of each full body regeneration.

-I estimated eleven years, but near enough, yeah.-

Merging with the dasgannach really threw everything *off...*

-It did. Your biology is no longer really human, I suspect a similar issue to Master Jevin's, but we're aware of it beforehand, so it shouldn't compound.-

Yup. Tell the more knowledgeable, find and enact a solution.

-Eh, we just need a perfect body, and we'll be fine.-

Well, we'll be Re-fine-d.

Alat paused for a long moment before sending a sense of disapproval. *-Bad Tala, bad pun.-*

It was amazing, and you know it.

But she was getting off into the weeds.

She had made some good progress. Towards that end, she purposely shifted the iron within herself towards the sun-side, darkening her skin by increasing the iron manifesting within it to increase her absorption of the warmth on this cold winter morning.

It also allowed the heat to radiate deeper, quicker, due to the properties of the iron.

She didn't *need* the heat, but it felt nice, especially as a counterpoint to the steady wind of their travels.

She also lifted her hand and willed some iron out through her skin, forming a blob on her palm.

It was clearly iron dust, but it moved and held together more like a liquid.

Alright, here we go. She'd been able to move the iron within her body with almost perfect precision, but this was new.

Cube.

The iron lifted in the middle just a bit, making vaguely square corners, but the result was *not* a cube.

The deep ache that Tala felt was familiar. *Willpower and spiritual fatigue.*

She groused.

-Hey! But this means it's a good exercise to improve both of those things? Especially since we probably shouldn't do too much sparring or physical conditioning with these issues.-

She hadn't considered it that way. She would have, but Alat was quicker this time. *Yeah, that's quite true. I'd be surprised if Mistress Holly wasn't in the group we're going to be talking to.*

Ahead, now that her eyes were open, Tala could see Bandfast.

She allowed her focus to shift to the approaching city, and she felt a twinge in her heart.

Home.

She'd been gone a *long* time.

True, it hadn't even been a year, but it *felt* like a long time.

In one sense, I've never actually been here. There's not a continuity of consciousness from 'me' to the Tala who lived in Lyn's house.

-Stop that sort of philosophizing. It helps no one and can easily be extended to say that 'you' die every time you sleep. It's just not helpful.-

That's fair…

Some of the outer defensive towers caught the light of the rising sun and almost seemed to glow in the morning light.

The farms, orchards, and other outer signs of civilization that had been absent around Alefast, Waning, were dusted with snow while still showing obvious signs of use.

Even in winter the work never ceases.

Tala also knew that the grow complexes under the city would be in full swing with year-round crops and starters for when the snows receded.

We have to eat, after all. She more than most.

It was somewhat odd to realize that her magical healing depended so strongly on having a mundane infrastructure behind her. *Well, it would, without my sanctum.*

-Your sanctum can provide your day-to-day needs, but it is not sufficient to replenish your reserves when they're this low. You'd strip the space bare and still be lacking.-

That's true, and I'm going to need a cook or two…

-We'll deal with that once we've addressed the more pertinent matters at hand.-

True. I'll be patient.

From this sky-down perspective, it was fascinating to see the bubble of civilization ahead and below them.

There were occasional flashes as arcanous creatures were killed trying to enter at various places around that bubble, but that was nothing new.

More than anything, what stood out to her magesight was the deep *pit* that the city was to the magic of the region. Power flowed downhill, in a sense, and this city was at the bottom of a crater in the magical dimensions dozens of miles in circumference.

She'd never seen the siphoning scripts so clearly before, though she was still only seeing the evidence of their existence rather than the scripts themselves.

Such is required with so many gated humans living close together. It was certainly more efficient than keeping the city moving at all times. *At least at this scale, it's more efficient.*

Master Grediv broke his silence. "We'll be through the defenses in less than ten minutes. Mistress Ingrit has gathered some interested parties to meet with us upon our arrival."

Tala nodded. Mistress Ingrit had said something similar in her latest message. *This is so convenient.*

-Yes. We are going to upgrade our Archive connection so we're never out of range again.-

Agreed.

The blue sapphire disc passed through the outer edges of Bandfast's defenses with ease and barely a ripple, and they were suddenly directly over the outer ring of the city, passing at the pace of a slow sprint.

The walls drew closer, and Tala glanced towards Master Grediv. "Aren't we going to scare some people?"

He huffed a laugh. “We are quite invisible to mundane sight, Mistress.”

“Ahh, that makes sense.”

She saw farmers clearing paths in the snow or checking their fields. She didn’t know what they were doing, precisely, as she’d never really looked into the profession.

-Do you want me to find out?-

Not particularly. Not right now.

-Alright.-

They were still flying fairly high above the ground, and so Tala was able to start picking out familiar features.

That’s the work yard I used for my trip to Alefast, and over there is the one I used for all my trips to Marliweather.

She easily spotted dozens of restaurants she’d visited in the past, and she started building a list of places she wanted to eat at once she was free to do so.

She saw the Guardsmen’s training yard where she’d received so much instruction.

The Way of Flowing Blood was vastly superior to what she and the guards had pieced together, but the aid that they’d given her was invaluable. It had kept her alive so many times even before her capture, and the mental structures and physical habits they’d helped to engender within her had allowed her to continue to improve even after she’d left the specific patchwork fighting style behind.

She obviously saw the teleportation tower that had first brought her to this city from the Academy, but that had been visible for quite a while.

They were closing in on the central districts, and Tala was able to pick out the Caravanner’s Guildhall.

I'm going to have to go talk to them about my contract. There is no way I'm doing caravan runs… At least, not for a while.

The Wainwrights might be a bit cross with her, though she believed that she'd gotten them their money's worth for their custom wagon.

I wonder if there'd be any benefit for Kit imbibing those…

Probably not.

Finally, she saw the park and Lyn's house.

Her house.

Emotion tried to build within her, but Tala suppressed it.

No. I need to be strong for this meeting. Then, I can go have a good cry.

-Stuffing your feelings isn't good for you, Tala. I think you know that already.-

I do, but what other choice do I have?

Master Grediv brought them in for a smooth landing near the center of the city.

They came down in a small courtyard very close to the Archon compound, which made sense to Tala.

As the large blue disc settled down, Tala, Rane, and Master Grediv stepped off before the sapphire simply vanished, presumably back into Master Grediv's untethered, soul-bound, dimensional storage.

That is a lot *of qualifiers for such a common item.*

Alat sighed internally, clearly aware that Tala was trying to distract herself. *-There really should be a simple name for something like that, yes.-*

Yeah, but what would it be?

-Inventory?-

That's an oddly specific suggestion. Why?

-Well, what is an inventory? It's a list of things kept in a certain location. For untethered, soul-bound, dimensional storages, all they are is an inventory, a list of contents, that you can pull from.-

Huh… that actually makes a lot of sense.

The internal conversation had taken virtually no time in actuality, and so Tala wasn't in the middle of the exchange when she saw the people coming out of a side passage and into the courtyard.

At the front of the group was Lyn who was quick walking, pulling ahead of the others.

She covered the last few feet with something akin to a leap, accompanied by an almost childlike squeal. "*Tala!*"

The older woman wrapped Tala in a tight embrace that felt more maternal than anything Tala had experienced in… She couldn't remember the last time that she'd experienced anything particularly maternal…

"Oof! What are you made of these days, girl?" Lyn didn't pull back, but her squeezing embrace didn't seem to deflect Tala's flesh at all. "This is like hugging a statue."

-You've not really had maternal contact recently. Certainly not since you upgraded your mind.-

Tala felt her own thoughts breaking down as she curled inward, wrapping Lyn in a tight hug in turn.

-Careful! She's fragile.-

Tala jerked slightly, keeping herself from crushing her friend even as she felt emotions roiling within her.

Keep it together, Tala. Come on. You can do this.

Rane walked up behind her and laid a hand on her shoulder. “You’re home, Tala. Everything will be alright.”

That broke the hasty dam she’d been trying to throw up within herself, and a shudder of emotion roiled through her.

Alat had to help keep the cathartic spasms from squeezing Lyn too tightly.

At some point, Rane wrapped both women in an immense hug that was only possible because he was just so much larger than them both.

It felt like a year and also like just an instant before she pulled back, smiling with tear-filled eyes at her friend.

Lyn similarly smiled back. “I thought we’d lost you.” She shook her head. “Welcome home.”

Tala almost descended back into tears, but instead, she solidified herself and nodded once. “I cannot express how glad I am to be back.”

She then looked around at the few other people around her, waiting patiently.

Mistress Jenna and Mistress Ingrit were the only two who’d come closer, and Tala focused on those two women, for the moment ignoring the other shape waiting back in the hallway.

Tala pulled a cloth from Kit to wipe her face clean as Mistress Ingrit walked forward.

Tala smiled. “Thank you for all you did once you had my message.”

Mistress Ingrit didn’t respond, instead stepping in to give a surprisingly powerful hug.

Tala stiffened for an instant, the gesture utterly unexpected, but she didn’t have any real resistances at the moment, and so after that brief hesitation, she accepted the gesture unreservedly.

The Archivist whispered for Tala's ear alone. "You poor dear. You've gone through something truly awful, and there is more to come, but I am on your side—and I'll be at your side—through all that is left."

Tala felt a huge amount of comfort from that. "Thank you, Mistress Ingrit."

Mistress Jenna came forward and gave her a quick half-hug. "Welcome back, dear. There is much we need to discuss before my husband will be happy with you staying in the city, but I think we can sort it soon enough. Mistress Ingrit hasn't given details, but she's gathered… quite the group." The wife of the Lord of Bandfast gestured towards the archway. "Let's finish the reunions and get down to business, shall we?"

Tala had returned the much older woman's brief hug, taking it for a greeting rather than an offer of support or comfort. At the Reforged's gesture, Tala finally focused on the singular figure who waited in the hallway, alone.

"Child. I see you're still finding yourself in… unique situations." Mistress Odera stood, bent over a cane, hunched in a way that Tala had never seen, her usual energy seemingly drained out of her. "Well, don't just stand there staring, girl. Come give an old woman a hug."

Tala crossed the distance and gave a careful hug to the woman who appeared to be the oldest person present. *Now that I think about it, Mistress Odera is likely precisely in the middle of the group, age wise.*

As a Mage, Mistress Odera was longer lived than a mundane, but that paled in comparison to even the shortest-lived Archon's natural span of years, and everyone else present was at least an Archon.

Even Lyn was more than halfway to Fused, her aura showing as a beautiful burnt orange to Tala's magesight.

Tala once again had to wipe her nose and eyes. “You never responded to my message.”

“You told me you would come to see me when you could. You asked no questions.” The woman shrugged slowly. “What purpose would there have been in replying?”

Tala groused a bit but had to admit that Mistress Odera was correct. “I was worried about you.”

“Then, ask a question next time.” Mistress Odera hesitated, seeming almost to stutter in place. “Actually, let’s not have a next time, hmmm?”

“I’d prefer that, yes.”

Mistress Jenna walked forward. “I will lead you to the room where the others are waiting.” She grinned. “We’ve arranged for a large quantity of food as well, per Master Grediv’s request.”

Tala gave the Paragon a grateful look. “Thank you, yet again.”

He gave her a nod in return. “I am glad to be of service and grateful to learn what you have to share.”

The group followed Mistress Jenna, and Tala took the opportunity to lean over and inquire of Lyn, “How are you? Are you doing well?”

“Well, yes, mostly. Kannis is progressing nicely, and I left her in charge of the work today. It will be a big step if she completes it all correctly, but it’s more work for me as I’ll have to review it after the fact.” She shrugged. “She’s a good mageling, and she helped after…” Lyn’s eyes flicked to Tala and away again. “I know it was probably worse for you, but I did *not* like you disappearing like that.”

Tala placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “I know, and I’m sorry. I definitely didn’t choose it.”

Lyn nodded, giving a weak smile. “I know. I really do.”

They stepped out of the hallway into what seemed to almost be a lecture hall.

True to Mistress Jenna's word, there were tables covered in food lining both walls.

There weren't a lot of people within, but Tala saw Master Boma from the Constructionist Guild, Mistress Elnea, the current head of the Archon Council of Bandfast, and Mistress Holly waiting for them.

Additionally, quite a few more chairs were filled with others, including Master Himmal from the Wainwrights' Guild, Aproa—Mistress Odera's granddaughter—and Cazor and Jean, the Mage Hunters who Tala knew.

Mistress Holly was the first to spot Tala, and she immediately pulled out a small, obelisk-looking thing, and Tala felt a prickle across the back of her neck.

The Inscriptionist's eyes widened as she clearly got some sort of informational download from sub-sections of Alat.

She didn't take long to scan the information before she'd gotten enough of a gist to start shaking her head. "Well, rust my biscuits, child. What have you done to yourself this time?"

Chapter: 9
Hit the Highlights

Tala came to an awkward stop as every eye in the room turned on her, Mistress Holly's question still echoing around them, "Well, rust my biscuits, child. What have you done to yourself this time?"

Tala cleared her throat and gave a self-conscious smile. "Well, I suppose that's what we're all here to discuss?"

That seemed to break the odd state of the room. Side conversations picked back up, clearly pushing towards quick conclusions now that Tala was here.

Mistress Holly took the return of side conversations as a cue to come over to Tala. She stopped just out of arm's reach. "Mistress Tala." She spoke incredibly softly, as was required for even a small amount of privacy in a room with such occupants. "You are dangerously broken."

Tala nodded, deflating a little bit. "I need to Refine as soon as possible, yeah."

"We will have to update your scripts and let them settle into a final configuration, but we'll get that done after this is over." The inscriptionist gestured to everything around them. "I am very curious about what you sent me, but that can wait until you are stabilized, I think."

Tala felt herself smiling. *That was incredibly kind of her.*

-*...Yeah. Suspiciously so.*-

Mistress Holly smiled. "After all, I have so many theories riding on your progress. I can't have you dying on me, now."

Tala huffed a laugh. *There it is.*

Oddly, Mistress Holly's antics felt more relieving and caring than it would have had the woman actually expressed care and concern. "Thank you, Mistress Holly. I appreciate your expertise."

The woman smiled in return. "Of course, dear. Now, get some food. It's going to be a long day."

The various plates in hands made it obvious that the food was open, Mistress Holly's prodding was all that she needed to make a move, and no one stopped Tala from going and getting an overlarge helping.

Lyn and Rane stuck close to her as Mistress Ingrit seemed to be arranging last-minute details.

After a quick glance in their direction, the Archivist had two chairs moved next to what was presumably Tala's seat to one side of the front of the room.

A quick five minutes later, during which Tala stuffed a good third of the offered food into Kit—she was trying to be restrained—it was time to begin.

Tala, Lyn, and Rane were motioned to the three chairs in front and off to one side, while Mistress Ingrit took center stage.

Mistress Odera had gone to sit with Mistress Aproa.

Ahh, that's why her granddaughter is here. That makes sense.

Master Cazor and Mistress Jean were sitting with a small group who all had a similar look and *feel* to them.

Mage Hunters? Well, that makes sense, too. Either I'm on humanity's side, and I have a lot of great info for these people, or I'm not, and Mage Hunters are the perfect ones to try and stop me.

-With our current state, a dedicated mageling could do the job.-

That's hardly fair. We could kill a few hundred magelings without much trouble.

-Yes, you are definitely 'for humanity.' Jumping straight to killing magelings on a whim.-

Hey, now. That wasn't fair. You set me up.

Mistress Ingrit's voice resonated through the room, stilling the lingering whispers and drawing all attention to her, "Thank you all for coming on such short notice. There are *many* layers to what will be discussed here today, and we will only be going through a broad overview. The information has been ordered and organized so that those with the lowest information clearance can be present at the beginning, and then leave when what they can know has been explored. Very few of you will be here at the end of the day."

The stunningly beautiful woman looked around with utter conviction.

"No one will contest me when I say it is time to depart."

There was a murmur of assent through the room.

"Now, it is required that a short evaluation be completed upon a Mage's return after a long absence. Master Grediv determined it wasn't necessary, but unfortunately, this is not his city, and so procedure will be followed."

Mistress Ingrit wrinkled her nose slightly at her own words before continuing.

"My understanding is that there is a mageling present who has a new methodology to test?"

Master Grediv stood in obvious protest. "Really? Mistress Jenna. This is hardly the time."

Mistress Jenna sighed. "The petition to try the methodology on the next returning Mage was submitted and granted three years ago, Master Grediv. It would take more time to alter procedure than to simply go through it."

The Paragon groused but finally nodded, coming to stand beside Tala. "Then, I will stand beside her for the process."

It was an obvious gesture of support for Tala, and she appreciated it.

A gray-haired man stood up from beside the Mage Hunters. “Oh, Master Grediv, there is no danger. It is purely a mundane test.”

Wait… They said mageling. Is that a mageling?

-‘He,’ Tala. Is ‘he’ a mageling? Treating people like objects isn’t the best start.-

Are you really lecturing me on grammar right now?

Alat did not respond.

The older man made his way forward and bowed to Tala. “Greetings, Mistress Tala. I am mageling Archie.” He hummed happily. “To put your mind at ease, I am a mageling by choice, yes I am. I enjoy researching the mundane aspects of life more than I like magic.” He shrugged. “But this isn’t about me.”

Tala waved, feeling awkward. “Good to meet you, mageling Archie.”

The older man straightened, and his countenance changed on the instant from one of an affable, if absentminded, researcher, to a questioner who Tala would have expected to see in a play about hardened criminals. “Now, answer truthfully. Have you had any urge to harm or kill your fellow man?”

Tala felt herself hitch. “What?”

“Have you had any urge to harm or kill your fellow man?”

“Umm… not without cause?”

The man nodded sagely, stroking his beard. With a quick motion, he pulled out a card with a splash of yellow paint on it. “What color is this card?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. What color is this card?”

“It’s a white card. The paint on the card is yellow… Are we going to do shapes next?”

“I’ll be asking the questions here, young lady.” His tone was even more stern than before.

Tala felt like someone was playing a joke on her. “What would this even tell you? Are enemies of mankind blind to color?”

The man ignored her, pulling out a completely green card. “And this one?”

Tala growled and glanced toward Master Grediv, who was standing with arms crossed, tapping his foot. She pointed his way. “Same as *his* aura.”

That seemed to give the mageling pause, and he smiled sheepishly. “My apologies, I’m just trying to follow the process.” He pulled out a third card, this one with a triangle on it.

Before he could ask his question, Tala shook her head. “This is a test of my patience for the imbecilic, isn’t it.” It was not a question.

Mageling Archie hesitated and deflated. “This part of the process was *supposed* to be used as a diagnostic tool on Mages, to determine their level of cognition before the next sets.”

Master Grediv cleared his throat. “Mistress Jenna, I think that mageling Archie’s methods might be better tested in a less… crucial case?”

The Reforged didn’t look very pleased. Clearly, she hadn’t known the exact content of this new, experimental process. “I’m inclined to agree.”

She looked seemingly at the empty air to one side of the room, then nodded. “My husband has authorized a change in procedure. Mageling Archie, you will be granted the next three *lower-priority* returnees to test your theories on.”

Did she just reach out to him via the Archive?

-*Or…*- Tala used her mirrored perspective, through her one bloodstar near the base of her skull, to examine the part of the room that Mistress Jenna had been looking at.

Yeah, I can't see anything, but if someone a few steps above me were there and hiding, I'd likely never see him.

The mageling opened his mouth to protest Mistress Jenna's dismissal, then seemed to think better of it. Instead, he bowed. "My apologies. My intention when I applied for the dispensation was for a less… important test subject."

Mistress Jenna waved that away. "Understandable. You may go."

He hesitated, glancing around, but then nodded and departed.

What an odd fellow.

-I suppose all types exist.-

So it seems.

Mistress Ingrit clapped her hands. "Now, if that is settled?"

Mistress Jenna sighed. "I'm afraid not. I will do a standard scan. Will you permit me?" The last was directed at Tala.

"Of course." Tala stood, just hoping to make it easier even though that was likely not necessary.

Master Grediv didn't move, making his position clear. This was a waste of time.

Tala saw power wash over her originating from Mistress Jenna. The Reforged frowned. "Child, are you wearing iron?"

Mature. But Tala didn't correct the woman out loud. Instead, she shook her head. "Not wearing it."

"Not even your iron paint?" That caused a ripple of murmurs through those listening.

"No, Mistress, but I am filled with it." If the iron-paint comment had gotten murmurs, this answer received shocked silence.

“Do you prefer I go through it, or…?”

Tala shook her head again. “Do you need to scan all of me? Or just parts?”

“All would be preferred.”

Mistress Ingrit hadn’t seen the end result with the dasgannach situation. *Could there be people who shouldn’t know?* “Mistress Ingrit… Dasgannach?”

The Archivist’s eyes flicked over those in the room. “They aren’t a widely known creature, but they aren’t hidden.”

Tala nodded, relaxing. *Alright.*

With an effort of will, she took all of her extra iron, all that would not normally be found within a human body, and moved it down and out her right foot, creating a blob that was near at hand.

Mutters rolled through the room, and Master Cazor stood, seemingly without realizing what he was doing, eyes widening in obvious shock.

Mistress Jenna gave the iron blob a curious glance but didn’t comment.

Power washed through Tala from the Reforged, and the woman grunted. “You’re human and as you appear. The only power active within your mind is your own. I deem you fit for these proceedings.”

Master Grediv nodded once and then returned to his seat, carefully stepping over the blob of iron.

Mine. The iron *blipped* across the ground and back into Tala, rolling through her and back into its previous locations and distributions.

Mistress Ingrit cleared her throat. “*Now*, with that dealt with. I am Mistress Ingrit, of the Archivists. Mistress Tala has entrusted me with a complete, perfect memory of her time away.”

That got a loud chorus of whispers in response, though no one addressed the speaker directly.

"As such, I will be directing this briefing, for that is what this is. The information that our young Mistress Tala has brought back with her is tremendous. While little is *wholly* new, little was also known to the extent that she has provided. It will be clear *very* quickly what I mean. Are we ready?"

The susurrations slowly died away and complete focus returned.

"Good. Let us begin."

There was a moment of pregnant silence before the Archivist continued.

"Mistress Tala has just returned, after spending roughly nine months in the arcane city of Platoiri."

The stunned silence that followed was somehow *louder* than the explosive clamor of overlapping questions that followed closely afterwards.

Mistress Ingrit held up her hand and silence fell almost immediately. "Moreover, Mistress Tala spent the majority of that time working up to, earning, and filling a position of no little power within a major House."

The Mage Hunter with the strongest aura stood up. Sparks of green-tinged power were obvious indications of his unsettled emotional state, but he was keeping himself well enough under control physically. "May we know *which* House?"

Mistress Ingrit glanced towards Tala, who shrugged. *I've no idea what she wants.*

The Archivist waited another long moment.

-*You only authorized her to share this much without permission.*-

Oh! Grant her authority to share whatever she feels is appropriate while I'm nearby and conscious of the sharing. That should be a reasonable restriction.

Things would have gotten really awkward, really fast if Tala had refused to give that permission, now that she thought about it.

Mistress Ingrit nodded once. “Yes, I can share that. The House of Blood.”

Only a few Mage Hunters nodded at the name, and the man seemed to decide to test his luck by asking one more question. “What rank did she reach? Master Servant of a small division? Foreman in one of their operations?”

The Archivist was fighting a smile as she shook her head. “Eskau.”

The Paragon looked like he’d been struck, and indeed, he fell back into his seat, eyes looking dazed as he frowned in obvious confusion.

Most in the room clearly had no idea what that meant, but one other stood from the back of the room. “That is preposterous! No human would be allowed such a position, and if it *were* somehow true, they would never have let her leave.”

Tala was somewhat confused as the woman speaking was only Fused, but Mistress Ingrit’s response clarified some things, “Archiveling, please remember your role and that you are here to learn. Would I have spoken it as fact, were I unsure?”

The Archon colored bright red and dropped back into her seat, muttering what seemed to be an apology so quietly that even Tala couldn’t hear it fully.

“Now”—Mistress Ingrit didn’t look ruffled in the least—“we have much to cover, and we’re not even through the introduction. I would appreciate it if questions would be held at least until each wave of you is to be dismissed?”

There were mutterings of agreement, and the woman nodded in satisfaction.

“First, we are going to hit the highlights, and you may all submit requests for further information, if what you are given, here, is insufficient.”

There were some grumblings, but they'd bought in by that point, so no one interrupted.

"Arcane cities."

She paused for the ripple of noise.

"That's going to get old. Stay silent or depart."

Silence.

"Good. Now, the basic ruling structure of the arcane cities on this continent is as follows. A City Lord rules over the city. Within the city are major Houses, which contribute to its day-to-day operation, as well as defense. Major Houses are structured in sorts of oligarchies. These oligarchies are made up of pairs: the Pillars, who are more administrative though not weak, and the Eskau, who function as the sword or right hand of their Pillar. Each House handles their exact form of self-governance, but it is generally the Pillars who make the decisions and the Eskau who enforce them."

There were some nods from those who already knew some of this. Others seemed to be taking notes.

"We must now discuss different forms of advancement, broadly speaking. Humans. You all should know as much as you are allowed on the subject, but to summarize, humans advance through the harmonizing and perfecting of their body and soul. Arcanes advance mainly through the increasing of power-density and the perfecting of their use of that power. One of the key differences between our magics is that arcanes focus on precision and efficiency, where humans focus on power and scope. We are our own power sources, so efficiency means less to us."

There were more nods around the room.

"Briefly, arcanous creatures are mundane creatures that have acquired power via some means, from an external source, and are at least somewhat independent of any source of power after the

magic is acquired. Magical creatures, in contrast, are bound to a source of some type. Yes, this is why familiars, even if they are arcanous in origin, are considered magical creatures, because they are bound to a source, mainly their Mage."

This wasn't *that* new or revolutionary. Still, many people were taking notes. Tala was simply eating the food that she'd taken earlier. *This is so much better than me having to try to convey this…*

-Unquestionably.-

"This brings us to differentiation among arcanes. Arcanes divide themselves based on how easily they can maintain their power density in a weaker environment. They designate races as low, mid, and high races based on this one trait. Not every mid race person will have more power density than every low, and same for high and mid, but it is generally easier for the more advantaged races to advance, and it is unquestionably easier for them to maintain that advancement."

Mistress Ingrit wrinkled her nose slightly.

"Humans are worse at this than even the least gifted low race. We are *terrible* at holding onto magic that is not inherently our own. This is why, without gates, we are nothing but chaff to them."

That got grumbles of discontent in response, but still, no one truly interrupted.

"Now, there are gated humans in the arcane cities but not many. Additionally, any human who is allowed to advance beyond Mage into the Archon ranks is required to wear a saorsa-collar, which is customized to each wearer."

She then pointed to three individuals in sequence.

“To preempt your most likely questions: yes, there are humans in the Archon range in the arcane cities, but they are few and far between. No, we don’t have many details on exactly how the collars are constructed, but we have some. Yes, I am going to tell you more about them.”

The three people who had opened their mouths each sat back, nearly identical looks of stunned acceptance painting their features as their mouths closed.

“The collars contain multiple dasgannach that were altered to make them more of a scourge than the normal specimens. Information on them is not restricted; look them up on your own time.” Mistress Ingrit then glanced towards Tala. “I’ve already gotten a dozen inquiries on the dasgannach-related information you have. Particularly, Master Jevin and Mistress Noelle said that you sent them a bit of information?”

Tala nodded. “I did. I’m happy to correspond with them.”

“Very well. Moving on. These saorsa-collars are created and controlled by the City Lord of the given city. If Mistress Tala had left the city without permission, the collar would have injected the dasgannach directly into her, with lethal consequences.”

Several people took bites of food, seemingly to keep themselves from commenting.

Master Cazor was regarding Tala critically.

“Back to the arcane hierarchy of power retention. Because of this hierarchy of power, and the fact that most don’t have access to personal power, Houses, both major and minor, pay their followers with power-density. Meaning, the very ability to live in a higher density environment is a large portion of the payment used to secure loyalty among the largest political powers in arcane cities.”

That got some appreciative and comprehending rumbles from the Mage Hunters in the audience.

“The way that they manage these places of higher concentration is via massive dimensional storage facilities, which they have expanded and outfitted for habitation. They call them ‘holds,’ generally, or ‘sanctums’ when they are primarily for a single individual. Because of this, most factions of any power have a hold, and those holds are accessed via a single point of entry. This results, at least in Platoiri, in their ‘District of Doors,’ a place where hundreds, if not thousands, of holds are all set up near one another, effectively compressing a truly massive amount of space into a very accessible arrangement.”

Mistress Ingrit raised her hand to keep the quiet.

“We are almost to the question-asking portion of this level of information.” She gave a single nod before continuing, “As you can imagine, having all these powerful, jockeying factions with holds close together means that the holds are points of conflict. This is why most holds have *extremely* powerful and effective defenses. The strongest of which even Paragons would struggle to breach in any meaningful timeframe.”

Master Grediv shifted in his seat, leaning forward.

Tala thought she saw a small smile on his lips, though whether it was at a possible challenge or some privately held knowledge she didn’t know.

“These defenses aren’t the only result of the factional conflicts. The most common way to build up power is to raid other factions for magical weapons or even to claim entire holds. From what Mistress Tala witnessed, these raids do result in death, but not nearly as much as we would expect. It is most common to have prisoners taken and to ransom them back to their faction. Additionally, there are rather strict dictates about fighting those weaker than yourself, unprovoked. That keeps the upper echelon from simply wiping out entire opposing groups. Though, there do seem to be some exceptions to the rule.

“These conflicts have also driven innovation. There are several artifact schema that show great promise, including those of far-seeing, and the Constructionists will be allowed to ask after those later. Their warriors, specifically their Eskau, seem to have developed highly specialized fighting styles centered around morphic weapons—that is, weapons that can change shape nearly instantly.”

That got a lot of attention, with many people seemingly jotting down reminders to request more information.

“Finally, it seems that even the upper echelons of arcanes do not have a good understanding of human inscriptions. While they seem to use inscriptions themselves, if less frequently than we do, they do not have records or methods of easily determining what our magics do.”

The Arcane Hunters grinned *broadly* at that, as each and every one of them seemed overjoyed at the news.

“Specifically, Mistress Tala’s scripts were never fully understood by those she interacted with, no matter what resources they had to bring to bear on that issue.”

Mistress Holly snorted. “That tells us less than you imply. My script designs for Mistress Tala are *leagues* more advanced than most.”

Mistress Ingrit frowned at the interruption but nodded. “While that may be true, they were not even able to extrapolate past the most basic of guesses. They *might* be able to understand something as old and little altered as a keystone but little else.” The Archivist nodded to herself. “I think that is a good overview of the most basic information. We will now allow questions.”

Nearly the whole room stood in a rush, each hoping to ask their question first.

This is going to be a long day…

Chapter: 10
Into the Weeds

Tala continued to eat the free food provided by the Archon compound of Bandfast.

Mistress Ingrit had just finished the most basic summary of her time away, and Tala was honestly a little surprised at how little of it fell under the ‘anyone can know this’ classification.

-Really? You’re surprised?-

Well… probably not, no. I’ve gotten a bit used to learning almost anything I wanted to know, and humanity doesn’t really work that way.

-Well, it does for you and anyone of the upper echelons of power. Do you really think that it would be a good idea to tell the average citizen that there are dozens, if not hundreds, of high-powered arcanes, hostile to humanity, less than a thousand miles south of us?-

Yeah… that would not end well, and it’s not like they could do anything about it, regardless.

-Precisely.-

As Tala had expected, the questions asked by those present were numerous and varied.

Many were answered with either a ‘We will discuss that later,’ ‘You are not permitted to know that answer at this time,’ or ‘Please submit a request, and we can discuss your acquisition of that information. That would require more detail than this meeting is intended to convey.’

Even so, noon came before Mistress Ingrit called an end to the questioning, bringing with it a replenishing of the available food and drink.

Blessedly, none of the questions had been of the type that Tala was required to answer. To be sure, they all could have been answered by her, but those that received answers received them from Mistress Ingrit in Tala's stead.

Throughout that time, Tala had little to do, and so she ended up talking with Lyn and Rane as quietly as they could. They didn't discuss anything of substance, staying away from the meeting's main topic, instead just chatting about small, inconsequential things like in the good old days.

Lyn looked at her friend askance. "Tala, what nonsense are you spouting?"

Tala frowned. "What?"

"You said, 'No one's afraid of being alone in the dark.' That's like the most common fear people have, Tala."

Tala lifted one finger in victory. "Ahh, but that's not true. People are afraid that they *aren't* alone in the dark."

Lyn blinked at her friend, then her eye began to twitch. "I did not need that in my head…"

Nearly an hour and many topic changes later, Tala rolled her eyes. "Rane, I don't care how you describe it, pancakes are not 'all crust,' unless you make them wrong."

"Crust is the harder, outer portion of bread. Pancakes are so thin that they are all crust." The large man was insistent.

Their conversation moved in ebbs and flows.

Rane had to control himself as he practically threw up his hands. "Lyn, what are you talking about? Nature and day are way closer than nature and night."

"No. Night is the natural state of existence. It takes the sun to temporarily banish the night. Without constant effort, without the constant expenditure of energy, nature is just 'night.'"

They weren't arguing or trying to change each other's opinions. They were just talking, and Tala reveled in the normalcy of such a frivolous conversation.

After lunch, close to half of the attendees were dismissed, and then the rest got settled in for the next level of informational discussion.

As they were leaving, Mistresses Odera and Aproa came over to welcome Tala back. Mistress Odera, in particular, smiled as she patted Tala's hand. "Glad that you are safe once more, girl. Come see me when you've got your feet back under you. If you can."

Tala smiled, feeling a bit of tension bleed away at the older woman's words. *And she didn't even have to say anything comforting.*

-We were really worried about her. It's good that she's still…-

...Not a fount?

-Yeah. Maybe something that we learned can help her? Probably not, as arcanes are good at making founts, not preventing them.-

Still, we can see what's possible.

Mistress Ingrit clapped her hands after the door clicked shut behind the last departing Archon. Mistress Odera had been the only non-Bound among the group, even for the first portion of the meeting.

Now?

Now, Tala didn't detect anyone below Fused, save Lyn. Though some kept their auras fully retracted, and Tala didn't want to be rude by looking too deeply.

"Alright, Archons. Now, we get into the meat of the information."

She turned and gestured at the wall behind her, and an image that Tala recognized blossomed across it.

It was Be-thric.

Tala felt a shudder as her whole body tensed up at the mere sight of the arcane. At the same time, her mind sang out in glorious revelry at knowledge of his death at her hand.

“It’s okay to still fear him, even after he is dead.” Rane hesitated. “I assume he is dead, right?”

That’s right, Rane saw the memories of my first two interactions with Be-thric.

Tala smiled at her friend. “He is, yes. But I don’t fear him, Rane. I never did. I feared his magic.”

Rane cocked an eyebrow as he whispered his reply, “That’s a ridiculous distinction.”

“No, it isn’t, Rane. He, himself, wasn’t scary, and that made what he could do worse. If he’d been some sort of villain from a play, it would be easy to fear him and hate everything about him. Instead, he was too… *human*. He wasn’t evil, he wasn’t worthy of fear, but he still had the power and the willingness to do things that were terrifying. I’d fear anybody with that ability and lack of concern or restraint surrounding its use.”

“That still seems like fearing him to me.”

“I wish he’d been worthy of fearing. That would make it easier. Defeating a great villain can be liberating. Overcoming ‘some guy’ with a scary magical ability still leaves the door open for others like him…”

Rane gave her a sympathetic look. “That sounds awful. Thank you for being willing to say so much.”

Lyn took her hand and squeezed it in camaraderie. “We’re here for you.”

Mistress Ingrit’s continued speaking drew Tala’s attention back from her side conversation, and Alat filled her in on what Tala had missed as if she hadn’t been distracted.

A large part of that was the laws and practices surrounding the saorsa-collar. She'd gone over the basics before, but the more intricate details hadn't been discussed.

As Tala tuned back in, Mistress Ingrit was refocusing on the memory and gesturing to the wall.

"As you can see, that arcane has a magical device. That device will be used to modify the saorsa-collar, while it is active. Those of you with the capacity will be receiving a one-time glimpse of the record of Tala's magical senses during the process."

The image began to move, showing Be-thric's modification of her collar the first time.

Tala hadn't thought too much about it at the time, but based on the reactions of the Constructionists in the room, she should have.

The Constructionists, and those with related professions, were wide-eyed and practically drooling as the memory ended.

Tala caught a few of the whispers. "Specifically altering an artifact-style item while it is active. How could that be done?"

"The material of the modifying artifact was… negated? Absorbed? What happened to it?"

These and similar questions preceded a storm of splintered dialogues, referencing portions of the memory.

Rane leaned in. "If I may ask, what was it like, having the collar around your neck?"

Tala gave him an arch look. "You mean, what was it like having the means of my execution affixed to me at all times?"

He hunched a little. "Yes."

She gave a sad smile. "Honestly, I forgot it was there half the time. There was almost a perverse sense of security in it being there, even when I did remember it."

Lyn leaned closer, confusion and concern furrowing her brow. “What? I don’t understand.”

“Well.” Tala sighed. “If they’d discovered me, the real me, they’d have triggered the collar immediately.”

Rane looked vaguely uncomfortable, but he still raised an objection. “Couldn’t he have just modified your memory again?”

“Not by that point, no. So, the fact that it was there meant I never had to second guess my situation. I was trusted, because if I hadn’t been, I’d never have even known that trust was lost.”

Neither of them seemed to like the explanation, but they didn’t contest her either.

Mistress Ingrit brought everyone’s attention back. “And now, here is another alteration of the collar.”

The next memory was of the City Lord’s modification of the collar so that she could go to Croi.

That caused another explosion of conversation, and Tala was able to hear basically everyone with any connection to working with magical items deciding to submit requests for those two memories in full, as well as all the surrounding memories.

Mistress Ingrit had been able to alter the focus of the memories so that neither Be-thric in the first memory, nor the City Lord in the second, stood out particularly.

-She removed your magesight input from everything not directly pertaining to the collar and its modification. Likely to keep the whole meeting from devolving into a discussion on the City Lord and Be-thric.-

I see that. I suppose she’s not certifying these as ‘perfectly accurate’ or anything like that. I honestly didn’t really consider how big of a deal the modification of the collar is. I’ve seen

magical items expanded before, but I suppose I've never seen them fundamentally modified like the collar was.

Unlike the previous part of the meeting, Mistress Ingrit let the conversations play out before she continued. When most had wound down, she cleared her throat, bringing a swift end to the few that hadn't stopped. Then, in the silence, she continued, "Now, for that specific item, we will next see how it looked when it was activated."

A ripple of surprise ran through the room.

"When Mistress Tala killed her Pillar to make good her departure, the collar was triggered, and the House of Blood determined that she was effectively dead. Thus, she was able to escape without being chased. Please take that as all the context we will give for the moment."

Quite a few mouths hung open in shock.

The Mage Hunters glanced her way in awe but seemed unwilling to take their eyes away from the displayed memory for longer than that.

Even many of the others seemed to take a moment to reassess her.

Master Cazor had moved several seats closer to her, Rane, and Lyn, clearly intending on talking with her when he could, but his focus was as utterly captured as everyone else's.

"Here is the death of the Pillar and the activation of the collar."

Lyn took her hand and squeezed it again, and Rane briefly placed his hand on her shoulder.

It was strange for Tala to see her own memory shown on a wall for so many to see, and the previous two hadn't inured her to that feeling.

Tala appreciated the support, but this was one memory that evoked nothing but joy, even though it hadn't ended perfectly.

He's dead, and I killed him myself. There was *a lot* to be happy about in that.

The perspective on the wall seemed to divide, showing a full five different points of view.

There were some sounds of discomfort, and a few Archons looked away, seemingly getting motion sick from the various perspectives, some of which were rotating at a good clip.

-That's better, but it still isn't quite the same. A two-dimensional perspective just can't capture what it's like to be there, even with multiple viewing angles.-

Even so, Tala rather enjoyed watching Be-thric die, even when her own perspective fractured, indicating the activation of the collar.

A large number of the Archons seemed confused, and finally, someone in the front asked what many of them were thinking, "What happened at the end? Why did the memory fracture?"

Mistress Ingrit nodded. "Mistress Tala was injected with two dasgannach. One was of gold, which stripped her of her magic. Thus, the memories were not recorded 'fresh' but after the fact, once she was reinscribed. Additionally, it is my understanding that the invasion by the creatures was incredibly painful, thus further harming the integrity of the memories."

"Painful? And it was that fast? Dasgannach don't disrupt active magics, and you can't feel them while they're claiming parts of you; that's two of the core things that make them so pernicious."

"These modified ones do it seems, which makes sense, given the purpose of the gold dasgannach was specifically to disable human magics that used gold inscriptions as quickly as possible. The pain was likely a desired feature as well, as it would disrupt any attempt to work against the execution."

A different Archon asked the obvious next question, "Shouldn't the spellworkings have continued, even as the gold dasgannach claimed the material?"

Someone beside him leaned over. “The spell-lines are physically… locked? Yes, physically locked while active, but if they are fundamentally changed, themselves? Mistress Tala is lucky they didn’t form other valid spellforms of some kind.”

The asker nodded, understanding, and took the opportunity to ask another question, “If one was gold, what was the other? Losing your spell-lines is highly inconvenient but hardly an execution.”

Mistress Ingrit looked to Tala.

Tala shrugged. *Not really a mystery if they’d taken a moment to think.* “It was iron.”

Before the obviously building explosion of questions could manifest, one Archon couldn’t help herself from shouting out, “If that’s true, you should be dead!”

Mistress Ingrit held up a hand. “All such questions should be held until the end and are hardly important to the current subject, which is magical creations.”

The next memory showed on the wall behind her. It was from earlier in Tala’s time away, well before she’d killed Be-thric.

Tala felt a smile pull at her lips as she recognized the basic automata.

Master Boma stood in a rush, along with quite a few others, but he spoke first and loudest, “The arcanes have automata? Why was this not brought to our attention immediately? We *must* mobilize and destroy them at—”

Mistress Ingrit cut across the Constructionist, “Enough! It has been dealt with. They were not sanctioned constructs, and the place of their creation was destroyed by Tala herself.”

Master Boma paused, mouth open, but finally, he nodded and sat back down.

What followed was brief selections of her fights with the automata, showing the various versions, including Io. The set of memory snippets ended with the raiding of all the materials

and, very specifically, the non-automata related items that she'd taken from the crafting guild's hold.

There was a bit of special attention put on both the ingots of white metal and the device that seemed responsible for creating the material.

-We never did take the time to figure out how that worked.-

That's why we're getting help. There is just too much for us to handle ourselves.

-It's definitely going to be interesting to see how they react to Io.-

Yeah, but that's going to be a much *smaller group.*

There were a few questions, but most of the more interested parties seemed to have fixated on the automata, and rather than sparking questions, it seemed to have keyed off fierce debate.

Rane glanced her way. "So, how do you think I'd have done against the automata?"

Lyn huffed a quiet laugh. "Of course that's what you ask."

Tala quirked a smile. "You would have done great until you got to those that could rain down fire. I don't think many of your defenses would have helped against that. It was a slower-flowing fire, so unlike a fireball, you wouldn't have been moved out of the way."

Rane grunted. "I've actually been working on addressing that issue. It'll be interesting to spar sometime."

Tala grinned. "I agree there."

He then glanced towards Lyn. "What did you want to ask?"

Lyn shrugged. "Were they creative at all? Or did they seem to just be magical constructs, following the dictates of their scripting?"

"The last one seemed… more, but I don't really know." Tala leaned close. "I do have someone I want you to meet, but that will likely be later, too." Lyn was going to be fascinated by Rob.

Mistress Ingrit didn't bother trying to intervene, and eventually, the animated discussions wound down so that she could continue.

The next sequence was a selection of Tala scooping up items from the House of the Rising Sun.

Lyn started laughing almost immediately, and that seemed to break the tension enough for chuckles to ripple through those watching her take almost literally everything that wasn't nailed down.

There was some murmuring at various items that they saw, and the Archivists in the audience stood almost as one when Tala started taking the library.

They then looked around at each other and realized what they'd done.

Then, in continued eerie synchronization, they each put in requests for all the books involved.

Tala almost laughed at how unified their individual responses were. She'd hoped that the Library would be interested in those books. *We have debts to pay, after all. What do we still owe?*

-Three hundred, eighty-one gold and twenty silver.-

That's a lot… but not that much? Tala didn't know how to feel. *How much do we have?*

-Two hundred eleven gold, eighty-five silver, and one hundred forty-seven copper.-

Why one hundred forty-seven copper? Why not transfer that to one silver and forty-seven copper?

-Because this is how it is held in your account, and I aim for accuracy.-

Fine, fine. She knew that most of that had come from Master Queue and the profits from the replication and sale of her comb.

She saw the man sitting near Master Boma and smiled his way once again.

He didn't notice as he was entirely engrossed in taking notes or maybe making detailed requests for information. She couldn't quite tell.

In either case, she could pay off more than half her remaining debt almost literally with a thought. *Am I rich?*

-No, but you likely will be when all of this is over.-

Huh. That didn't clarify her feelings at all.

After a moment, she found herself frowning.

How much do you want to bet that the Refining process is usually expensive, and us needing a custom version will be more?

-I literally have no money, and you're probably right.-

We can negotiate with Mistress Holly? She'll be extremely interested in the re-inscription device inside Kit. Maybe we could leverage that?

-That's one avenue, yeah.-

Mistress Ingrit had moved on to the next set of memories, this one focusing on the artificial sun in her sanctum.

Apparently, humanity had similar devices, but humanity's versions had been developed entirely independently, so there were *lots* of questions and exclamations even from the brief glimpses shared.

"They use a striated wave generation system? That's insane! Why would they isolate and individually generate each wavelength?"

"Greater control over the light and the heat? We definitely have some trouble tuning our radiant units on occasion, and this would remove that tendency."

“That only happens if you build the unit wrong. This is just needlessly complicated, but what about their cycle management? It looks like they tied the power variability in with the locational stability.”

“Yeah, that would force the change in intensity to be tied to the location of the artificial sun. It’s certainly better to keep those two functions separated and differently regulated.”

Rane was leaning forward, seemingly trying to listen in on the side conversations.

I’m glad I got that booklet, and those books, on the artificial sun’s functionality.

-And oh, so much more.-

That caused Tala to smile. Her side conversations with Rane and Lyn had become less frequent as more of her memories had been shown, and the two of them showed more interest in what was being conveyed by Mistress Ingrit.

The Archivist was only giving the most basic of overviews, but it was still fascinating.

Tala, herself, found that the woman’s summary of Tala’s experiences was riveting, given that they were interpreted and told by someone else, putting a lens on them that she’d never have herself.

When the latest ruckus calmed down, Mistress Ingrit folded her hands and lowered her head slightly. “Now, we arrive at some more… uncomfortable information.”

That got everyone’s attention, and even those who had been more relaxed and possibly starting to work on other things to the side straightened up and refocused.

“This is the city center of Platoiri.”

The room fell silent as the memory of the crystal and gold column came into focus on the wall.

“It isn’t easy to see, without magesight, but that is the magical heart of the arcane city. The scripting you see purifies the power flowing through the founts and releases it into the environment. This is the chief reason that cities are so populous and compact. Each arcane wants to be in the higher magic density afforded by the column.”

A voice came from the back of the room, one of the Archivists that Tala didn’t know by name speaking in a bare whisper, but still easily heard by everyone, “How many founts are in there?”

The answer was simple, and Mistress Ingrit gave it plainly, “Roughly twenty-thousand.”

Color drained from a huge number of faces. More interestingly, however, were those who didn’t look surprised.

Mistresses Elnea and Jenna were among those, as were Master Grediv and the other higher-level Archons.

Lyn was white as a sheet, and Rane’s eye was twitching. If Tala had to guess, Rane had known *something* about it, but not the full extent.

Mistress Ingrit continued. “This is, unfortunately, not news. Most arcane cities are running on souls that they harvested millennia ago, so while it is egregious, it isn’t something that is actionable. Not currently.”

That brought a wave of grimaces, but everyone present managed to maintain their composure, especially because those that were most aggrieved each looked to their elders and saw their lack of surprise.

Ahh, the atrocities of the past, how little we can affect you.

Mistress Ingrit cleared her throat. “One thing that is new to us is confirmation that founts can depart if they choose to.”

That caused a stir.

“What Mistress Tala has brought back confirms that the arcanes, while they use founts as a resource, have a view of that resource’s instability and act in a way to keep their sources of power intact. It still is an abysmal situation, and they are using human souls, but in a way, they have a better means of monitoring and catering to those souls than we do.”

A lot of people shifted uncomfortably.

Master Boma was nodding, and Tala remembered that the man had been searching for a means of communicating with vestiges. *He’ll be very interested to meet Rob, too.*

“In the vein of these founts, I will briefly go over how they are used, in general.”

What followed was a selection of memories, showing everything from the density enhancement room, the room that Be-thric had taken Tali into, to protian weaponry.

The fact that the founts in protian weapons served as a key source of magical power for the Eskau was of great interest to the Mage Hunters, as well as quite a few others.

The Librarian showed off the House of Blood’s armory, through Tala’s memories of it, but stated clearly that they didn’t have too many details on the items kept within.

Mistress Ingrit briefly covered gate-breaking, and Master Himmal paid special attention to that, clearly intensely interested in the subject.

Rane and Lyn both turned to Tala, obviously aware that she would have been subjected to the process. Tala waved them off. “It wasn’t great, but now’s not the time to discuss it.”

They weren’t happy but didn’t press her.

Mistress Ingrit didn’t discuss holds directly, not quite yet.

Instead, she ran them through the traditions around Pillar and Eskau selection, as well as the culture around the raiding of the candidates of other Houses, both literally and violently, or by enticing them to switch loyalties.

Finally, when that was handled, and the understandable, but simplistic questions were out of the way, Mistress Ingrit turned to the last subject that related directly to founts: holds.

She explained that arcanes didn't depend on the city column to power their holds. Instead, each hold had its own source of power. She pulled up memories showing the intricate spellforms required to make that happen and how it allowed for unprecedented control and customization of the dimensional spaces.

The main exception to this rule was, of course, ether holds.

Once again, everyone's attention was highly focused, and at the end of Mistress Ingrit's introduction to the topic, as well as a brief overview of void artifacts, she gestured to Tala. "We'll get to specific examples on those soon enough. In the meantime, do we have any questions?"

The room didn't quite erupt this time, but it was a close thing.

Yes, they did indeed have questions.

Chapter: 11
The Tour

Tala chatted with Lyn and Rane, answering their basic questions while Mistress Ingrit handled the questions of all the other Archons.

Master Cazor looked to be torn between Mistress Ingrit's answers and joining Tala, Lyn, and Rane, but he seemed to decide to not intrude on their clearly more private conversation.

Tala was grateful for that and took the opportunity to smile and nod his way in thanks when he glanced toward her.

That seemed to solidify something for him, and he visibly relaxed, his attention moving more firmly to Mistress Ingrit.

-He would be able to help us test out quite a few things about our new… bond. We should arrange some time with him.-

Agreed.

There was a pause when dinner was delivered, and Mistress Ingrit answered the remaining questions while the meal was consumed. Once again, most were answered simply or with a statement that such questions should be asked as part of an official information request.

-We have a few hundred of those already, by the way. Mistress Ingrit has master access over those requests, but she's allowed us to see how many there are.-

Tala was surprised. *How can there possibly be that many already?*

-I imagine that most people made more than one. A simple request is more likely to be answered quickly than a lengthy, multifaceted one, seeking many answers at the same time.-

That makes good sense, I suppose.

With everything pressing addressed, Mistress Ingrit dismissed nearly everyone below Refined, again with Master Rane and Mistress Lyn being exceptions.

Master Boma also seemed to have been granted permission to stay. He and Master Queue were the senior members of the Constructionists who had been invited to this meeting, and they seemed to have put in an explicit request to both be allowed to stay.

Mistress Ingrit had granted the request along with that of a few younger Librarians.

Master Cazor walked by them on his way out. "Welcome back, Mistress Tala. We'd love to have you back in the arena with us or even just for a meal. Take your time, and let us know if we can do anything to assist."

Tala smiled. "Thank you, Master Cazor. I'll do that." After a moment's hesitation, she added, "I think I would like your help testing out a few things, if you are willing. I can explain in more detail later."

He nodded. "I'll happily hear you out and help if I can."

"Thank you."

Soon enough, the room was mostly empty.

Mistress Ingrit glanced to Tala. "I believe at this point, the next logical thing would be to give them a tour of your sanctum."

Masters Boma and Queue made identical expressions, eyes widening and mouths opening in smiles of undisguised glee. Several others had similar reactions, but no one seemed too surprised at the implied knowledge that Tala *had* a sanctum.

They probably assumed it as I held the position of Eskau.

-And they're right to have assumed so.-

Mistress Ingrit continued, “First, though. I think we need to confirm something.” Mistress Ingrit looked around with hard eyes. “Everyone is to keep their aura tightly controlled, well within their own body. We will not be inside for overlong, nor are there *too* many of us, but even so, we will be straining the integrity of the space. Don’t move around unnecessarily and dump power.”

The Constructionists were nodding along, and Master Boma made an addition, “We will happily help restabilize the space after we exit. What we will no doubt learn is well worth the expense.”

Mistress Ingrit smiled and dipped her head. “That is kind of you, and I accept on Mistress Tala’s behalf.” She then turned back to Tala. “I believe that the nature of your sanctum should now be revealed.”

That caught their collective attention, and the few murmured side-conversations that had tentatively started up died down almost immediately.

Tala nodded to the Archivist, standing up. “So, thank you all for taking so much of your day to be here.”

A ripple of mildly surprised acknowledgment came back her way. They all seemed to have seen the time as well spent. That was gratifying, at least.

She smiled and decided to just dive in, “My dimensional storage, now my sanctum, is something that we know of in theory but have never properly identified before.” She pulled Kit from her belt and tossed it to form a door on the nearby wall. “Kit is a devouring dimension.”

Master Queue frowned. “That sounds like a dimensional storage version of the hostile artifacts we sometimes find in waning cities. We have procedures in place to prevent those from entering circulation.”

“Well, it was found near Alefast, Waning, and it is of that type, in a sense, though this one seems to be more advanced, or at least more… stealthy? Certainly more patient and discreet than most. It is a creature of the void, with its power specifically oriented around dimensional magics.”

Master Boma stepped forward. “Wait, is the thing’s magic void or dimensional?”

“Both. Like a Mage, creatures of the void can have mixes of magic. I call it ‘Kit.’”

That got a mixture of confused looks from some of those who didn’t know her very well.

She cleared her throat and continued. “With the addition of the syphon fascia, Kit now also has illusion and physical shape changing magics, among everything else.”

“That sounds… unsafe.” That was one of the Mage Hunters who had remained, one of three Refined. The fourth member of their group was a Paragon, equaling Grediv in advancement.

“Apparently, some arcanes specialize in taming these devouring dimensions, and they make the absolute best sanctums when so tamed, but the method of taming them is a closely guarded secret.”

“So… how do you have one?”

She shrugged, feeling a bit defensive. “I seem to have stumbled through the process. Kit and I work well together, and I have no concern about the safety of any within my sanctum. Even so, I agree with Mistress Ingrit; you deserved to know before you step inside.”

There was a collective, uncomfortable glance at Kit’s door.

Tala smiled, and the door opened behind her, invitingly.

She heard an artificial intake of breath and realized her mistake.

Alat was *slightly* faster to articulate the issue, though not by much. -*Right, Rob…*-

Yeah, Rob is going to be a problem…

Rob did indeed choose that moment to call out. "*Kill me!* Oh, great Mages of humanity, free me from this mortal coil. Let me pass into the world beyond!"

Mistress Ingrit rubbed her own temples, groaning slightly. "That is so much worse in person than in memory. That shouldn't be possible…"

Tala's shoulders slumped as she looked through the door.

She'd decided to bring them through into her room as it was the most normal room in the sanctum. With a thought, Rob was *moved* elsewhere.

Master Boma cleared his throat. "Mistress Tala, please explain."

Tala looked to Mistress Ingrit, but the Librarian gestured her way encouragingly. *Great…*

Tala pasted on a smile and did her best. "That was Rob. He is an artificial personality integrated into a casing around a fount." Tala held up a finger for emphasis. "He is *not* the fount itself, nor a reflection of the same, though they are connected. The fount is capable of passing on at any time but chooses not to. Rob does not wish to exist. It is that misalignment in desire which causes the… issue."

The Constructionist frowned. "We will want to examine… Rob."

"That is acceptable." *I would* love *to make him someone else's problem.*

Mistress Ingrit took it from there. "Right through this door is the main bedroom of Mistress Tala's sanctum."

Reluctantly, the group passed through the door and into the spacious room.

Even as large as the bedroom was, it wasn't intended for so many people, and so it quickly became crowded.

They were all looking around with curiosity, but Lyn and Rane kept glancing towards Tala. Lyn spoke first, whispering to reduce the noise from her statement, “This is *incredibly* fancy, Tala.”

Tala shrugged again. “It was a symbol of the House’s power and wealth. They didn’t skimp, that’s for sure, and this is the *least* of it.”

Rane opened his mouth to say something but seemed at a loss for words. After a moment, he just shook his head and refocused on his surroundings.

Tala turned and led the way out into the courtyard, beside her dais, and while most followed her, a few stayed, staring out her massive windows.

She heard them discussing how the illusion might have been created while hiding the magics involved and decided to interject, “That is a mundane window, Masters, Mistresses. The view is genuine.”

That got their attention, and they quickly followed her out of the room to look out in the direction that they had been, before, the window no longer obscuring the view.

“How big is this place?” Master Boma asked.

Tala tilted her head in thought. “Exactly? I’m not sure, but it’s in the range of three miles across, in the shape of a slightly flattened sphere.”

Master Boma’s eye twitched.

Now that she thought about it, Tala didn’t really have any idea how large Archon dimensional storages normally were, though Master Jevin had advised her to reach a minimum size before seeking certain alterations.

-His suggested minimum size was roughly one-forty-millionth of what we have now achieved.-

Tala felt her own eye twitch. *That can’t possibly be correct.*

-His recommendation was at least the size of a small house. Need I say more?-

I… I didn't actually consider that… Huh.

Master Boma and Master Queue seemed to be having the hardest time accepting the numbers. Everyone else likely didn't have the frame of reference to truly understand the significance.

Finally, Master Queue asked, "Is this a typically-sized sanctum or arcane hold?"

Tala shrugged. "It's probably on the smaller side, though it *is* bigger than I'd have normally gotten so quickly, without a few special factors, Kit being the main one."

He frowned. "Why does that factor in?"

"Devouring dimensions can consume other holds to incorporate their features, including volume, into themselves."

That left the Constructionists speechless once more.

Mistress Ingrit clapped her hands and gestured towards the library. "Shall we continue?"

Over the next hour or so, Tala and Mistress Ingrit led the group around the interior of the sanctum, pointing out the various features.

Mistress Ingrit lingered in the library, though it might have just been to pull the other Librarians out with her when the group moved on.

The crops and animals specifically imbued with Tala's magics for compatible consumption had Mistress Holly's eyes practically glowing with interest, and many others discussed some of the implications as they continued on.

The training facilities, weaponry, and books on advancement had the Mage Hunters drooling.

Masters Boma and Queue practically blinded themselves staring at the artificial sun at every opportunity, and they became almost as obsessed with the containment magics around her

endingberry tree grove. They twisted themselves into awkward positions to examine the magics that were used to imbue her crops as well.

Lyn and Rane simply trailed along, awe clearly written across their features. They did ask Tala some quiet questions, but not nearly as many as she'd thought they would have. *They'll likely pester me later.*

Finally, it was time to take them into the under-part of the sanctum.

Tala found the entrance hidden in the side of a hill and led the group down, down, down.

Purple light became visible ahead of them, and they entered the underground chamber that held all the automata-related materials, including Io floating inertly in her tank.

It was a mark of Master Boma's control that he didn't attempt to level the place as soon as he saw the large, glowing vessel. "Mistress Ingrit? Please explain."

Mistress Ingrit nodded. "This is an inactive automaton, recovered from the hold you watched Mistress Tala raid. She has all the materials, both construction and research related, from those experiments, and this was the final result of the arcanes' work."

"Why hasn't it been destroyed?" His voice was hard.

Tala stepped forward. "Because it isn't active. It's a complex, articulated statue at the moment. There is nothing to run it. There is no consciousness or scripts in place. It is the perfect specimen for humanity to study, to learn more about the Black Legion."

A vein was pulsing on the side of Master Boma's face. "I think this is foolishness. Such things are dangerous and *banned* for a reason."

Tala turned to regard Io, beginning to think of a way to respond, but there was someone standing beside the tank.

Master Xeel was looking down on the floating body of the automata as if he'd always been there. "There is no danger from this creation."

Everyone but Mistresses Ingrit, Elnea, and Jenna, and Master Grediv reacted with surprise to the presence of the Reforged.

He didn't react to their surprise. "I agree with Mistress Tala. This is a prime opportunity to study these things in a controlled manner. I've killed no fewer than ten Honored-level automata in the last millennium, five of which were in the last hundred years. Something is stirring, and we would be wise to increase our knowledge and insight into this enemy."

Without waiting for a response, the man vanished once more.

Tala focused her senses, but she couldn't detect him at all. Even so, she knew he wasn't gone. *How many others are quietly along for the tour?*

-Well, definitionally, we'll never know.-

She flicked to her voidsight, pushing Flow into a void-knife form.

The world gained fractures around her to her sight, and she was able to see a nodule of reality… separate? Somehow, a bit of reality was there but not. Like it was shifted slightly to the side of what was around it.

Somehow, Tala felt that fragment regard her more closely than it had before, and she got the *very* definitive impression of Master Xeel.

He was watching her, curious.

The fragment vibrated slightly, and Tala felt the minuscule tether between her center and that fragment buzz.

She couldn't hear words, but she got the impression, 'We will talk, but not now.'

She was so startled that she let her voidsight vanish and refocused on the world around her.

Without that extra sight, she couldn't see the Reforged at all.

-That seems like a secret and a deeper truth in one.-

That's for sure. She wished she could have learned more *right then*, but she was in the middle of giving a tour.

With an internal grumble, Tala continued the walk-around, showing them the other automata-related materials and equipment, along with resources and information that she'd managed to secret away. *I suppose I can move most of these books up to the library proper.*

-Except for the Black Legion manual.-

Of course not. That one stays locked away for sure.

After they left that part of the underground, she willed for just that to happen, and she somehow knew that it had been done.

Thanks, Kit.

Kit did not respond to her thoughts.

As she neared the surface, Tala decided it was time to deal with the issue she'd named 'Rob.' That decided, she summoned him to her hand just as they came back out of the underground near the endingberry grove once more.

The orb's voice cracked out in obvious surprise, even though he seemed to orient quickly, "*Gah!* What? Oh! Honored Humans, kill me!"

Tala glared down at the orb in her hands and growled out a not-so-subtle threat, "Quiet, or I'll give you to Terry to play with."

That silenced Rob immediately.

The Archons were looking at the orb with nervous curiosity.

Rane looked more curious than nervous, maybe even a mite amused at the threat of playtime with Terry, and Lyn just seemed baffled.

Master Queue was the first to speak this time, “So, you’re sure that the personality is distinct from the fount?”

Tala didn’t have a good summary, at least not one that was different than what she’d already stated. *Might as well test his helpfulness.* “Rob? Can you answer?”

“…I am not the soul housed within my casing.”

That was an unexpectedly frank answer. Tala was almost impressed. *Hmmm… Maybe, we can—*

Then, Rob continued, “I violate the sanctity of this soul. I am a false personality, a false consciousness, living off of the trapped soul. The only reasonable course of action is swift justice. This heinous act demands capital punishment.”

And there it is. Tala sighed. “I have a total of five founts, though Rob is the only one with an artificial consciousness built atop it. I am happy to turn them over to the appropriate parties.”

Tala looked to Mistress Ingrit, and the Librarian shrugged. “We don’t have a set procedure for such.”

Mistress Elnea stepped forward. “The Bandfast Archon Council is willing to take responsibility for the founts and sponsor the effort to determine the best course of action to decide their fate.”

That got a round of nods from everyone present.

Master Boma was frowning, even as he nodded. “Mistress Tala?”

“Yes?”

“You threatened the orb with ‘Terry.’ Is that the terror bird that I remember being with you on occasion?”

“Yes, that’s Terry.”

The Fused tilted his head to one side. “But why would that be—”

Terry flickered into being beside Tala, likely called by the repeated, rather loud, uses of his name.

He was the size of a large horse.

Magic spun up through the group of Archons, even as many of them stumbled back in shock.

Tala stepped between Terry and the Archons, holding up her hands. “Stop! This is Terry.”

Collectively, the Archons let their spellworkings die down.

One Archon had fallen to the ground, one of the Librarians who wasn’t even quite Fused yet, and he was staring up at Tala and Terry. His eyes flicked to the endingberries, then back to Tala. “Devouring dimensions, endingberries, trapped souls, and now a terror bird? What other horrors do you have in here?”

The cat chose that moment to finish weaving through the crowd and hop onto the downed Archon’s lap.

The man squeaked in surprise, and Tala saw many of those around him tense.

To his credit, the Librarian’s tone was mostly level, though his hands were trembling, while he tried not to move. “What manner of beast is this?”

Tala stifled her laugh. “That, master librarian, is a cat.”

There was a moment of silence before Master Boma glanced her way, obviously confused. “What?”

“That is a cat, Master Boma. Nothing more or less.”

A ripple of nervous chuckles passed through those gathered around, and the young man tentatively scratched the cat's head.

The kitty purred, pressing into the hand.

Tala glanced toward Terry, cleared her throat, and tapped her shoulder meaningfully.

The terror bird flickered to rest on her shoulder, sized appropriately for the perch.

"Now, shall we finish the tour?"

Chapter: 12
Tests of All Types

Tala led the group back to the center of her sanctum, ending the tour by showing them the ‘standard’ place the door would open, the highly defended, bunker-like setup of magical defenses.

She led them through the door and back out into the meeting room. Terry remained on her shoulder, seemingly content to nap on his perch.

Mistress Ingrit carefully emphasized to the group that she should be contacted with any questions and information requests.

Masters Boma and Queue reminded Tala to drop by the Constructionist Guild in the next few days. That way they could help her reinforce her sanctum and undo any damage to the underpinnings of reality within it. There almost certainly was some due to so many gated humans moving through it for a bit more than an hour.

That really is pretty kind of them.

-Undoubtedly, yeah. If it were cheap, dimensional spaces would be used to move people in much more efficient manners.-

She thanked them, and the meeting concluded.

With that, everyone but Lyn, Rane, Tala, Master Grediv, and Mistresses Holly and Ingrit departed.

Those six remaining Archons looked back towards Kit’s entrance.

Mistress Holly smiled widely, a predatory glint in her eyes. “Now, show me that *reinscriber.*”

Tala shrugged. “Sure.”

Lyn and Rane looked toward Tala questioningly.

They all went back inside Kit, stepping out before the dais, and Tala addressed her friends’ confusion, “It’s exactly what it sounds like. Specifically, it’s a conceptual magic device that reinscribes me, or reinforces my current inscriptions, matching my most recent set.”

The two glanced towards one another, eyebrows climbing, but it was Rane who responded first. “That’s incredible. Can it work for anyone?”

Tala nodded. “I believe so. At least, that’s what the manual said. Even so, without healing inscriptions, or a healer on hand, I don’t know how useful it will be.” She then turned to Mistress Holly. “Which form of reinscription would you like to see?”

Mistress Holly seemed to consider. “While I would like to see the ‘through the skin’ method first, I don’t think you’ll be demonstrating either, not for a while. We’ll still need to do some pervasive reworking of your scripts. We should be able to nudge you in the right direction for your Refining easily enough. Until then? We need to minimize the stresses on your body.”

-*Oh… right.*-

Tala hesitated then. “Oh… right.” She frowned. “I really shouldn’t do this, should I?”

Mistress Holly looked mildly annoyed even as she shook her head.

Mistress Ingrit frowned. “Mistress Tala?”

The Archivist was clearly waiting for Tala to explain, but it was the Inscriptionist who answered, “She is… damaged. I would say that she is in desperate need of Refining, but in the grand scheme of things, *everyone* below Refined is in desperate need of such.”

Master Grediv rolled his eyes, and Mistress Ingrit gave Mistress Holly an arch look before the Inscriptionist sighed. “I was simply hoping to examine the device, myself. Is that acceptable?”

Tala smiled. “Absolutely.”

Mistress Holly’s power rolled off her in a wave of yellow-tinted magic.

It was specifically yellow, which struck Tala as a bit odd because not every working was tinged with a Mage or arcane’s advancement.

Is she doing that on purpose?

-You know, the only reason we think she’s Refined is because of what she’s let us see.-

Worth asking?

-Probably not.-

Tala gave a small smile and shrugged to herself.

As Mistress Holly took a couple of minutes to magically examine the dais—which was more than the reinscriber, but Tala didn’t mind—the others looked around, taking a bit more time to soak in the features of her sanctum.

Rane stretched. “This really is a peaceful place. I know you told us there was a whole ecosystem in here, but hearing the songbirds…” He shook his head. “This is incredible.”

Tala smiled. “It is a pretty great perk to come away with, yeah.”

Lyn patted her on the shoulder. “Doesn’t make it better, though.”

“Oh, obviously not, but it is better to have, than not.”

She grinned. “Oh, obviously.”

Rane had his arms spread, eyes closed, and face toward the ‘sun.’ “It even feels like sunlight. I’ve been in Archons’ dimensional storages before, even those with artificial suns, and none were quite like this. This is so much *more.*”

Tala walked up to stand beside him. “Yeah, they spend a lot more time within holds than we do. So, it makes sense that they’ve perfected their creation and enhancement.”

Mistress Holly sighed loudly. “I think that’s all I can learn within any sort of reasonable timeframe.” She turned towards Tala. “I suppose we should get you to my shop, then, so we can do some proper diagnostics?”

They all agreed, and the group exited once again.

Terry headbutted Tala’s cheek and flickered away before she closed the door and hung Kit from her belt.

She took a moment to acquire the remains of the dinner that had been set out for them, carefully putting the cleaned plates back on the table for the staff to collect.

-Hey! That’s progress.-

I progress all the time. Tala grumbled internally, just a little.

-Ahh, but not on all things.-

That’s… fair. She sighed.

The group walked together out of the meeting room and to the entry hall of the Archon compound.

Mistress Ingrit stopped near the front desk and gave a shallow bow to Tala. “Mistress Tala. Thank you for allowing me to assist you, but in that vein, I do now have a *lot* of work, processing all that you brought back. I will be sure to be in contact with you as needed, and we will do what is required.”

Tala gave a bow in return. “Thank you for handling so much.”

Mistress Ingrit hesitated, then tentatively opened her arms.

Tala smiled and accepted the hug gratefully.

“Welcome home, Mistress Tala.”

Tala pulled back after a long moment, feeling water in her own eyes. The Archivist had unshed tears as well, and they each wiped their own eyes.

They bowed to one another again and parted ways, Tala heading out towards the street with the remaining four Archons, Mistress Ingrit moving towards the library.

Master Grediv came up beside Tala as they walked, speaking in a low, but not really confidential, voice, “I am happy to continue to accompany you or depart, whichever you wish.”

Tala glanced towards the Paragon, considering.

-He will likely have insights into quite a few things that still remain to be revealed.-

So would Master Xeel. Is he still around?

-We can look, but I think we should answer Master Grediv first.-

She nodded. “While I would be grateful for your insights, I am sure you have much to do. I will leave the choice up to you, but please know that you are welcome with me.”

The Archon nodded, moving to walk beside Rane. A power seized the air around them, and Tala recognized it as his privacy working.

Perfect time to practice and look for Master Xeel at the same time.

She pushed Flow into its void-knife form, leaving it in its sheath.

Her voidsight opened.

Firstly, she saw what she’d expected, though she hadn’t seen it explicitly before.

Master Grediv’s magic radiated from a nodule of reality that was *slightly* distinct from the pieces they were moving through.

It was odd to really analyze. Now that she knew what to look for, every person around her, even every animal, seemed to have its own bit of reality that moved through and around all other pieces without really displacing them.

It was instantly apparent which bits had gates—all the humans—because their fragments almost seemed to drag on the nodules they passed through like they were rougher than those of the few animals she saw.

Tala focused on Master Grediv's fragment, and she could see the working he'd affected was rather easy to spot. By the flick of his eyes in her direction, she assumed that was likely because he'd hoped she'd notice the working and could learn something.

He could have called more attention to it.

-Master Grediv seems to value 'go-getter' attitudes. If you saw, wonderful. If you didn't, that would be your loss, not his.-

So, I shouldn't expect to be able to see things like this as easily in the future. She sighed internally.

That spotted, she swept her gaze around herself.

No obviously hidden fragments were in sight, but she had no idea what that actually meant.

-I would bet that they are easier to detect in a space like Kit.-

That makes sense. The fabric of reality is thinner, so pieces moving behind or around it would be more visible.

She had to turn her head to look, but she did so as smoothly as possible. She'd not tried mirroring her voidsight onto her bloodstar perspectives, but it should be possible. *Another thing to experiment with, soon.*

Tala considered her list of things to experiment with and was shocked at how long it was getting.

Alright. I need to actually come up with a priority order for these. Toward that end, Tala began considering her to-dos.

After a moment's silence, Alat sighed. -*Tala. Not now. Focus outward.*-

Hmm? Tala looked up, really *looking* for what felt like the first time in a while.

Her voidsight had fallen away once she'd stopped maintaining it, and so she had a rather mundane view of the scenery.

Her magesight had little to highlight in a human city as most power was pulled away almost immediately, so she simply saw… normalcy.

It was a human city, very much like the one she'd grown up within.

Surrounding her were the sparse pedestrians of a winter's evening with the occasional animal darting towards the next sheltered place. Through the windows, Tala could see that, within the buildings, people were going about their normal lives.

This was what she'd been fighting to return to.

This was humanity as she knew it.

Safe.

Happy.

Normal.

Lyn seemed to have noticed something because she didn't interrupt Tala, even as they all continued walking.

Rane and Master Grediv were still speaking within the privacy magics, and Mistress Holly was muttering to herself, likely working on something only she could see.

So it was that Tala walked in silence, just soaking in the feel of the place, the people, the humanity of it all.

Home.

There was an incredibly light snowfall, drifting down from a mostly clear sky. It was the sort of snow that wouldn't have been noticed if Tala hadn't taken the time to look upward and allow her enhanced vision to sweep the sky.

More of a smattering than a true snow.

Most of the trees set into the sides of the streets or in the parks were free of leaves, with only a few evergreens standing out against the backdrop of snow and city.

Tala hadn't bundled up—she didn't need to—but she finally noticed that Lyn had.

Rane looked like he wished he had, but he didn't seem so uncomfortable that he was going to pull out warmer clothing.

Tala's eyes roamed, taking in the dichotomy of peaceful stillness of the winter evening and the bustle of the city streets.

No sound was as loud as it should have been, with the snow that was already on the ground, and a heavy stillness pervaded the air.

It was familiar.

It was stunning.

It was peaceful.

Tala felt herself relaxing further as she enjoyed a real winter stroll and let herself continue to note how different it was from winter weather in Platoiri.

The walk passed more quickly than Tala would have liked, and that helped cement in her own mind that she was moving too fast, pushing too hard.

She was still on the edge of panic, and that wasn't sustainable.

She hadn't really stopped and *rested* in the knowledge that she was home.

Even during the travel between Alefast and Bandfast, she'd spent her time examining herself internally and trying to adapt to her most recent changes.

I haven't stopped *in… well, a long time.*

-Makinaven?-

Yeah, I think that that month with Rane and Mistress Odera in Makinaven was the last time I really let myself just be.

The months she'd spent going back and forth between Bandfast and Marliweather to be with her siblings had been slower paced, but even then, she hadn't rested. She'd simply stolen moments for her family around her otherwise full life.

She needed a break. She needed to let herself realize that she was free, safe, and whole.

I still feel like someone's watching me, ready to snatch me back to the arcane lands. She shuddered even as they all entered Holly's workshop.

Lyn shivered, settling deeper into her winter clothing. "Will it be warmer in the back?"

Mistress Holly gave her a confused look. "Hmm? What?"

"The temperature. It's winter outside, but it feels basically the same in here. Don't you heat your work areas?"

There was a Mage sitting behind the counter, shrouded in layers, looking wide-eyed at Lyn.

As Tala expected, she couldn't get a reading on the woman's aura or advancement. *She's obviously freezing, though. So, she probably isn't Refined.*

-She's also probably too afraid to ask about the situation or do something about it.-

Tala frowned. *I've been here in the winter before. Was it cold, then?*

-No, not to our memory.-

Maybe something was broken.

Mistress Holly looked around, holding out a hand as if to test the air. “Mistress Emersen?”

The Mage sat up straighter, a lock of blonde hair falling free of her thick, woolen hat. “Yes, Mistress Holly?”

“Why did no one tell me the heat was malfunctioning?”

“It isn’t… Mistress.”

“What?”

“It isn’t malfunctioning. You had us turn it off last week.”

“That’s right, and do you remember what I said?”

The woman cleared her throat. “You said that as subjects’ skin heats up, it expands, ruining alignment, and you didn’t have time to wait for them to achieve thermal equilibrium. So, we should just match the temperature inside to outside.’”

“Yes, yes. But the rest?”

“Only leave the heat off until we found a better idea?”

“Precisely. Are you telling me none of my apprentices have come up with a solution? After all, the issue is that people tend to bundle up, so when they take off their outer layers, there is now the reverse problem.”

So, it was a test for her apprentices?

-One they didn’t pass, apparently.-

Mistress Emersen gave a careful smile. “There are several proposed solutions awaiting your approval on your desk, Mistress.”

“And no one enacted any?”

The assistant released a long breath. “No, Mistress Holly. We know better than that.”

It was then that Tala noticed the twinkle in Mistress Holly's eyes. *She's testing them in multiple ways?*

-Mad is the person who tries to understand Mistress Holly.-

I don't know, Mistress Emersen seems to be doing a reasonable job.

Master Grediv sighed. "Mistress Holly. Just heat the place. If you really care that much about the thermal shift, you can have your clients arrive early, so they come up to the proper temperature before they see you or your apprentices."

Mistress Holly turned to the Mage behind the desk and pointed to Master Grediv. "That is an excellent idea. Mistress Emersen, see that it is done."

The woman nodded vigorously. "Yes, Mistress Holly. I will do that."

From the woman's look, Tala guessed that that had been exactly the policy before.

Mistress Holly does seem to go down esoteric paths sometimes, doesn't she.

-Yes, but she also seems to put far more thought into her work than anything else.-

True enough, yeah.

Mistress Emersen got up and scampered into the back, likely to inform others and adjust the temperature of the warehouse-sized workshop.

Mistress Holly didn't watch the woman go as she was simply standing in place, muttering to herself, occasionally moving her hands through the air.

Tala cleared her throat, and the Inscriptionist jerked slightly. "Oh! Yes, yes. Right this way."

Soon enough, they were back in Mistress Holly's personal workroom.

The place gave Tala an ache of nostalgia.

Mistress Holly spun around as soon as the door clicked shut behind the last of them, all focus returned and oriented on Tala. "Now, my dear, let us see what you have done to yourself, hmm?"

“Didn’t you already get a scan and record from the monitoring scripts?”

“Of course, but that’s hardly comprehensive. We need to have you fully prepped for Refinement, and that requires *precision.* Precision requires knowing *exactly* where we’re starting, and where we need to go.”

That made sense to Tala, but even so, she had a sense of foreboding.

What followed was a lot of seemingly esoteric tests and measurements using a lot of tools that Tala didn’t really understand.

The first set were performed on her as she was. For the next set, Mistress Holly had her expel all the iron that she could remove safely.

Tala didn’t like that very much.

The iron never went far, simply waiting off to one side in a blob-like pile.

Still, the iron felt like the sun, shining at her. She could tell exactly where it was without effort or thought, and she wanted it back.

Well, that’s not concerning…

-We’ll get it sorted. This is going to be alright.-

Yeah. They won’t leave us broken.

As night fell, Lyn had excused herself to go home to sleep, but only after Mistress Holly had snippily indicated that the tests would last most, if not all, of the night.

Master Grediv and Rane took advantage of Mistress Holly’s begrudging hospitality and went off to utilize some cots the Inscriptionist had in side rooms.

Tala remembered using one of those rooms herself, after her initial sensory enhancements.

She did recall the cots being oddly comfortable, even to her overstimulated sense of touch.

They'll probably get a great night's sleep, then. Good. We want the Paragon in top form to help Mistress Holly plan out our Refinement.

-I don't doubt that Mistress Holly will be consulting far and wide on this. Master Jevin and Mistress Noelle will definitely want to weigh in.-

Oh, for sure.

Mistress Holly had *many* rounds of tests of all types.

Some involved blood, some samples of skin or hair.

For one, Mistress Holly took a careful core sample from her scapula, her shoulder blade.

That had been painful even with local anesthetics.

Occasionally needles needed to be inserted into her skin in various locations, allowing myriad magics different means of analyzing her physical, spiritual, and magical substance.

Mistress Holly also put each of her bonds, soul and magical, into analysis devices, gaining details on them in their own rights.

By the end, as Alat informed Tala that morning was drawing near, Tala was beginning to suspect that this was more than even Mistress Holly's standard 'overboard' testing.

Still, she trusted Mistress Holly, and she definitely didn't want to fight with the woman.

When Tala suspected that dawn had fully arrived, Mistress Holly finally sighed.

That seemed like an opening, and Tala seized it. She tried to be respectfully inquisitive, but she did not succeed in keeping the weariness out of her voice, "Are you done?"

"Yes, yes. There aren't any other reasonable tests I can think of that might be useful."

Tala felt her eye twitch. "Were you simply hunting for more tests to do?"

"In a sense, yes. Your biology, physiology, spirit, and magic are *all* significantly deviated from human standard, and we need to be sure that we don't cripple you with your Refinement. I

won't let some silly detail that I didn't bother to check be what kills you or prevents you from progressing further."

Tala blinked a few times. It might have been her general tiredness, but that actually made a lot of sense. "Thank you?"

"Why do you sound uncertain? Did you think I was just wasting both of our time?"

"No, of course not."

"Good. Because this will take *a lot* of careful analysis and planning before we're ready to proceed."

Tala felt a sinking in her gut. "So, it's bad?"

"I would say this is an unusually bad case, yes."

"Should I be concerned?"

"In general? No, but don't leave Bandfast city limits until you're Refined."

Tala deflated a little bit more. "Oh. That's pretty bad."

"Hmm? Oh, that's not really because of the results, it's just that last time that you left, it took you nearly a year to return, and it would be best if we didn't delay overmuch."

She opened her mouth to respond but found that she really didn't have anything to say.

-*Well, she's not wrong.*-

Yeah, that's what I'm realizing.

Mistress Holly was tapping her lips with one finger. "Why don't you take a week? Rest, eat, read, walk, and speak with friends."

Tala found herself nodding. That sounded absolutely wonderful.

Mistress Holly's eyes hardened. "This is not a training week. I don't want to hear that you've been pushing yourself or sparring. You may keep up with physical conditioning, but that's it. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Good. Now, send in Master Grediv. He and I have a lot to discuss."

Tala nodded, standing and stretching. She'd been moving around all night due to the nature of the various tests, but it still felt good to move just for the sake of moving. "What about going by the Constructionist Guild?"

Mistress Holly nodded absently. "So long as you don't power any scripts yourself, that should be acceptable."

Tala gave a shallow bow. "Thank you, Mistress Holly."

The woman paused, turning to fully face Tala. "You are most welcome, Mistress Tala. I am glad that you are safe and mostly whole." She smiled sincerely. "Welcome back."

Chapter: 13
Breakfast

Tala left Mistress Holly's workroom only to find Mistress Emersen walking down the hallway, a large mug of coffee in each hand.

The woman's blonde hair was now free of her woolen hat, held in a tight weave that seemed to circle the Mage's head. The older woman smiled. "Mistress Tala, I thought this might benefit you this morning."

Tala took the offered mug, savoring the smell. "This smells amazing. Thank you."

"Of course, Mistress."

Before the Mage could move on, Tala decided to ask a question that was bothering her, if only just a bit. "If I may, why do you work for her?"

Mistress Emersen shrugged, not seeming surprised by the question in the least. "She's the best."

"Does she actually teach you anything?"

"Of course."

"Is it… reasonable? Working for her, I mean."

The woman huffed a laugh. "'A fool cannot learn, even from a wise man, but a wise woman can learn even from a fool.' Mistress Holly is no fool, and I strive to avoid that label as well. Work is work, and I'm here to learn."

Tala found herself smiling. "I suppose that makes sense." She lifted her mug in salute. "Thank you again."

“You are most welcome, Mistress Tala. Good morning.” Without another word, she went on her way.

She didn’t really know what she expected, but she was glad that Mistress Emersen and Holly’s other assistants and workers weren’t universally trapped.

-*Yes, you made sure at least one was here of her own volition.*-

I’m not going to bug everyone, am I? She shook her head, taking another sip.

It was *so* good.

Now, where are Rane and Master Grediv?

She was about to call after Mistress Emersen when she heard voices from the front entry area and moved that way to investigate.

Master Grediv and Rane were in the waiting room, each drinking coffee from their own mugs.

It was the Paragon who saw her first. “Ah, good. You’re finally done. I assume that Mistress Holly is ready to speak with me?”

Tala nodded. “She is. Did you both sleep well?”

The men nodded, smiling.

“Yes, thank you, Mistress Tala.”

“I did, thank you, Tala.”

Master Grediv waved goodbye to Rane and headed down the hall that Tala had just come from.

Rane shifted a little, straightening just slightly as he took another sip. “Shall we find breakfast? I imagine you’re hungry, and I could definitely do with some good food.”

Tala grinned. “I know just the place. Let’s see if Lyn can join us.”

They left their mugs in the designated place to one side of the waiting room, thanked the young man behind the counter this morning, and departed.

The sun wasn't up yet, but the sky was beginning to lighten.

There were a few wispy clouds above them, but no sign of falling snow.

That which was already on the ground squeaked beneath their feet with each step, and Tala reveled in the pleasant cool on her soles.

Her weight distribution scripts kept her from sinking into the snow, but it still pressed against the bottoms of her feet, and that was as good for waking up as the coffee had been.

Even though it was a brisk morning, the two Fused didn't walk quickly.

Rane pulled out a cloak against the morning chill, sweeping it around his own shoulders, and only then did Tala realize that Holly's workshop had been quite nicely warmed towards the end.

I suppose the temperature controls are rather effective.

-Even if they weren't, it shouldn't take more than an entire night to bring such a space up to a desired temperature.-

That's true enough.

The streetlights were beginning to dim, though a true brightening of the sky was likely nearly an hour off. Tala suspected that she could see the current change only because of her enhanced perception.

As they meandered, neither Rane nor Tala seemed to feel the need to fill the space between them with chatter, and Tala found herself appreciating the quiet comfort of Rane's familiar presence.

It had been too long since she'd been among friends.

Thron could have been a friend, and maybe he still would be if their paths ever crossed again, but right now, she knew that her necessary deception had left him understandably reticent and suspicious of her.

Their last day together had undone some of that, but she would still have to be careful of him, at least initially, when they met again.

As the thought came to her, she realized that even after a bit of separation, she really did want to meet him again. *But maybe not for a decade or two. I need a break.*

Regardless, it had been far too long since she'd been with true friends.

She hesitated. *That's not really true anymore, is it.*

-We've only been back in the human cities for three days, so it's true enough.-

It's kind of funny that my birthday is three days away.

She was going to be twenty-one. In the grand scheme of things, she was a child.

Well, by her age she was fairly child-like, but by her deeds and experiences? Not so much.

I've killed my way through uncounted warriors older than me, more experienced than me, and even many more powerful than me.

-I could count them, if you wanted.-

That's not the point, and you know it.

-Yes, the point was to be melancholic and melodramatic.-

Tala grimaced, her mood thrown off. *I've waded through rivers of blood to get back, and I never considered that cost.*

Somehow, Tala *felt* a flick to her own forehead and immediately knew that Alat had sent the feeling her way. *-Death is never light, but it is sometimes necessary. Stop trying to make yourself feel worse than you already are.-*

Rane seemed to have noticed something because he cleared his throat. “Are you alright?”

Tala shrugged. “Caught in… memories.”

He smiled sympathetically. “I can’t imagine what you went through, what price you had to pay to come back.”

That struck uncomfortably close to home, but before she could compile a response, he continued, “If you ever want to talk, I’m here. If you never want to talk, I’ll still be here.” His smile grew a little. “I’m just glad you’re back.”

That hit a nerve, and she frowned. “How *did* you know?”

“Hmm?”

“How did you know I was still alive?”

Rane opened his mouth but didn’t seem to have anything to say. More than anything, he looked at a loss. “I wish I could tell you, but I genuinely can’t.”

She sighed. “Yeah, you already said that.”

Silence fell again between them, and before it could become awkward, Tala gently shoulder-checked the big man.

Even the relatively light bump knocked him to the side a bit, and he snorted a laugh. “Heavier than ever, I see. You are going to be a terror in the ring.”

Tala saw a flash of arcane blood painting the world around her, figments of walls rising up in a ring, candidate Eskau slain with brutal efficiency. *We need to deal with Tali.*

-*Eventually, yes.*-

Rane seemed to realize he’d said something wrong. “My apologies. I feel like I’m walking blind and constantly finding my foot in my own mouth.”

She shrugged. “It’s… It’s a lot, but I *will* be okay.” She looked up and saw Lyn’s house just ahead, then turned and smiled toward Rane. “After all, I’m home now.” She grinned slyly before adding, “And you putting your foot in your mouth is a very familiar part of that.”

She pulled the iron key to Lyn’s house from Kit even as Rane made mock affronted noises while they walked up to the door. She paused then, just holding it for a long moment.

There had been many times she’d wanted to pull this out when she was pretending to be Tali, but she’d never trusted herself or her emotions. It was too poignant a reminder of home.

There really is a lot that I need to work through. But first, she had to deal with something else.

Aside from the emotion attached to the key, there was another issue.

The key was iron.

The key was hers.

Tala could feel herself resonating with the key in her hands.

A blip of magic told her that Rane had activated his magesight before he asked a simple question that warmed her heart, “Do you need silence or help?”

“Silence.”

She saw him nod in her mirrored perspective before stepping back, positioning himself between her and the street beyond, facing away. She smiled at that.

-*That was kind.*-

Yes, it was. But that wasn’t important at the moment. *Let’s figure this out.*

There was a *pull* from the key, or maybe it was from within her, but in either case, her aura flared from the key, and it seemed almost to fuzz.

No. The word was more an act of will than a fully formed thought.

The key resolidified, exactly as she remembered it.

Curious, she held the key in her right palm and placed her empty left beside it.

Iron dust flowed through her skin without pain or issue, taking on the vague shape of a key.

No matter how she pushed, it wouldn't solidify into a usable copy, though she didn't take more than a minute to try.

Why can I maintain the key, but not create a new one? And in the asking, she realized the answer. *It is easier to destroy than create, and 'not destroying' is easier still.*

As she explored her connection to the key as well as her own feelings and instincts, she realized a crucial difference between the key and the iron dust that had been in the smithy.

This is mine and with me. There is no danger of it leaving my sway, so I don't need to take it from its current purpose.

-And in the smithy, if you'd left the iron dust, it would have been lost to you.-

Exactly. With that understanding, it made perfect sense. Dasgannach left the iron where they found it, until they themselves left. She wasn't leaving this key, so there wasn't any need to strip it of iron, though she knew that she still could.

"Huh." She grunted before putting the key in the lock and unlocked the door.

Behind her, Rane turned, a carefully small smile pulling at his lips. "Better?"

"Yeah. I'm still all mixed up on so many things, but there shouldn't be any present danger to me or anything else."

As ominous as that sounded, Rane took it in stride, simply nodding and gesturing for her to proceed.

They entered, closing the door behind them, and a voice called out to them, "Hello?"

That's not Lyn. "Kannis?"

A girlish gasp came from the sitting room. "Mistress Tala?"

The mageling came practically flying down the short hallway and slammed into Tala, in an attempt at a hug.

Tala caught her as gently as she could, but the young woman still groaned on impact, “Ow… you’re as solid as a rock.”

Tala chuckled in response. “And you’re still soft and squishy.”

Kannis pulled back, mostly ignoring Tala’s oddities, as usual. “I was there when Mistress Lyn got your message, but I still couldn’t believe it.”

Tala felt a bit awkward as they separated and used the moment to mirror the self-cleaning from her elk leathers to her feet before shaking each one gingerly. *No need to track muck from the street inside.*

Kannis gave an appropriate bow towards Rane. “Master Rane, welcome.”

There was a moment of silence as Rane pulled off his boots before the mageling gestured them farther in.

“Mistress Lyn just stepped back into her room a moment ago, I imagine she’ll—”

Lyn’s voice floated from the back. “Kannis? Are those voices? Is someone here?”

“Yes, Mistress! Mistress Tala and Master Rane are here.”

“Oh!” The sound of quick-moving, sure footsteps moved their way. “Come in, come in!”

Lyn and Kannis were both dressed for the day despite it still being quite early, and when Tala thought about her time living with Lyn, that tracked.

I still get up earlier, but with winter afoot, it makes sense that they’re up and ready before the sun.

Instead of sitting, Tala decided to just address why they were there. “We’re actually going to get breakfast. Do you want to join us?”

Lyn froze on the spot, looking *incredibly* conflicted.

Kannis smiled, glancing towards her master. “Go, Mistress Lyn. I can handle the morning duties.”

The older woman still looked uncertain. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. It’s not like this is an everyday occurrence.”

“Thank you, Kannis. I’ll make it up to you.”

“It is my pleasure.” She turned and bowed to Rane and Tala. “It was a pleasure to see you both. Don’t keep her too late.”

Tala grinned. “We’ll do our best.”

With that, Rane put his boots back on, Lyn pulled hers on for the first time, and the three went out into the calm, early winter morning.

Breakfast was amazingly uneventful, and Tala just tried to take Mistress Holly’s advice and follow her own growing sense of what she needed.

She relaxed.

She let herself just *be.*

Honestly, it was stressful.

At first, she constantly felt like someone was watching her, about to attack, but once she had done everything reasonable to ensure that wasn’t true, she came to the realization that it was actually the *absence* of danger that was making her nervous and anxious.

She was used to being on edge, having her every word potentially be judged. She’d gotten to a state of numb acceptance, even taking fairly foolish risks at times, but the danger had always been there. She’d been in a den of rats while made of cheese.

-*That is an awful metaphor.*-

I'm working through stuff, Alat. Let me process.

-Fine, fine.-

Thus, now that she was out of danger, it felt *wrong.*

Like she was just failing to notice the hostile people who *had* to be there.

The genuine safety and security felt unearned and false, like it couldn't possibly be real.

This had to be a trap, or an illusion, or a trick.

But it wasn't.

One meal wasn't enough time to truly convince herself of that, even though she desperately wanted it to be, but it was enough for her to catch the barest edges of the truth.

She had only begun her reconciliation with, and realization of, her homecoming.

She was more broken and ragged than she'd ever have realized, and now that she didn't need to put up a front, she was starting to crack.

Yeah, I'm glad we've got a Mistress-Holly-enforced vacation.

As breakfast ended, and Lyn bid them goodbye, the woman hesitantly brought up one thing. "I will need you to drop by the Caravanners' Guild at some point in the next couple of weeks so we can sort out your contract. There's no danger of violation or anything like that, but we do need to tie up the legal loose ends."

Tala felt her face twitch.

Lyn clearly noticed Tala's reaction because she held up her hands and smiled. "There really is no rush, and there is nothing negative to deal with. It's just a formality, but it is a required one."

Finally, Tala nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Lyn held up a finger. "When you're ready, and not a day sooner."

Tala smiled at that. "Sure. Are you sure you're okay with me using your house, again?"

“I’ll say it as many times as you need: yes. You are always welcome.” She looked to Rane, too. “Both of you, if you need.”

Rane smiled. “Thank you, but I won’t impose upon the three of you.”

Lyn shrugged. “It’s up to you. Take care, today. I’ll see you soon!”

As Lyn walked one way, they walked the other, and Rane glanced toward Tala. “What now?”

Tala shrugged. “I need to drop through the Constructionist Guild.”

“Right, to reinforce your sanctum.”

“Yeah.”

As he opened his mouth to respond, his eyes unfocused, and he pulled a small slate out of his dimensional storage.

“What’s up?”

“Master Grediv reached out through the Archive. I’m needed at Mistress Holly’s workshop.”

“Oh? How did you know?”

“He had me add a simple script that he can activate through the Archive and alert me when he messages me through there. He was… less than pleased when I vanished on him for a few months.”

“Oh…” The time he wouldn’t talk about. “What does he want?”

Rane shrugged. “Apparently, Master Grediv believes I’m about ready to Refine, or at least start the process. He’s been pushing me this way since before I was a Mage, so it’s not unexpected.” He huffed a laugh. “He reminds me quite often that I’m actually a couple years behind some of his previous students.”

“Well, rust, personalized training is the way to go, it seems.”

“That is why the system is set up with magelings and masters.” He gave her a wide, knowing grin.

“You’ve got a mouth on you. When did that happen?”

He shrugged. “Would you prefer it on you?”

They both froze, mid-step.

Rane flushed *deep* red. “That’s not what I meant!”

Tala started laughing.

He seemed to be torn between wringing his hands and grabbing her shoulders to emphasize that he had not meant *that*.

That just made Tala laugh all the harder.

It was a short while before she pulled herself back under control.

Those who passed them in that time gave them a wide berth but seemed to be smiling as they did so.

Finally, Tala grinned up at Rane. “I needed that. It was a good laugh. Thank you.”

Rane scratched the back of his head. “You’re welcome, I suppose?” He glanced over his shoulder. “I should get going though. Reconnect later?”

“Sure. I’ll drop through Mistress Holly’s after I’m done at the Constructionists’.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

With smiles and waves, they parted ways, and Tala set out to have Kit repaired and reinforced.

One mostly normal breakfast. Tala felt a sense of foreboding that she couldn’t shake, even though she *knew* that it was her mind playing tricks on her. *I wonder how many more I’ll be allowed?*

-Tala. Is there anything I can do?-

I know you could modify my mind, but that wouldn't be good on any level.

-Oh, yeah, one hundred percent that would be a bad idea. I more meant if there was anything you wanted me to look into or the like.-

Tala smiled to herself as she continued on her way, walking slowly but not slowly enough to be a nuisance to those around her. *Maybe begin parsing the books we have? I'd like to learn what they have to teach, but I doubt I'll have time to go through them all on my own.*

-Say no more. I'll get right on it.-

Thank you, Alat.

-Happy to assist.-

No, really. Thank you, Alat, for everything.

There was a long pause before the alternate interface responded. -*You are most welcome. Let's get both of us sorted, eh? Then, we can tackle anything that comes our way.-*

That, Tala had to admit, was an excellent plan.

Chapter: 14
Dimensional Stability

Tala purposely didn't take the most direct route to the Constructionists' Guild.

She let her feet lead her wherever they would, and she just enjoyed being out among humanity.

She'd barely taken a few steps before Alat briefly interrupted her.

-Mistress Ingrit has asked that we inform her when we're heading to get Kit sorted out.-

Oh, alright. Can you keep her in the loop?

-Sure.-

It shouldn't take too long, right? It's just a little repair work.

Tala felt deep skepticism from Alat. *-Every time we've done anything with Kit, it has been beyond our expectations in some way. I think we should be prepared for* something*, even if we don't know exactly what.-*

That's fair, I suppose.

In a city like Bandfast, there were almost always people about—at least in the central ring—even in less-than-ideal weather. This day was actually a rather sunny one, so there were even more people about than usual as average citizens tried to get a bit more sun while they could.

Tala didn't let her mind focus on anything too important, though she did open Kit and call to Terry to see if he wanted to join her.

He trilled back, seemingly grateful for the invitation but didn't flicker out.

That was fine.

She closed Kit once again, patting the pouch and sending a few void-channels to top off the dimensional storage.

She'd gotten in the habit of recharging the artifact periodically throughout the day, and she wasn't in a hurry to break it.

It was midmorning by the time she arrived at her destination, walking through the open entry way.

The scanning magics took a reading of the aura put forward by her through-spike, clearly noting that she was a human Archon.

Having just had the environment starkly pointed out in Mistress Holly's workshop, Tala noticed that flush with the archway was a stark transition of cold to warm air.

The magics keeping the distinction were *incredibly* subtle and complex, seemingly not keeping the air or anything else from moving freely.

Instead, if Tala had to guess—and she rather enjoyed the challenge—she would say that it was stripping outgoing air of warmth and adding warmth to whatever came through, seemingly based on density.

That meant that she received *very little* heat, but air coming in would come up to temperature immediately.

Fascinating. Why have I never noticed before?

-You aren't very focused on temperature, given that you aren't very affected by it.-

Yeah, that tracks. There were obviously other magics involved as well; otherwise, there would be a perpetual mist as the warm air exited and cooled, and that was lacking. Still, now was not the time for deep analysis of this bit of magic.

The chime that announced her entrance summoned an assistant almost as if by teleportation.

-Now you're just being regularly dramatic. They walked out, if quite quickly and as soon as the chime sounded.-

Fine, fine.

"Mistress? How can I assist you?"

Tala smiled. "I am here to see Masters Boma and Queue. I believe that they are expecting me, but not necessarily right now. Could you see if now is a good time for them to see me? I'm Mistress Tala."

At her name, the assistant's eyes widened. "Mistress Tala! Welcome, welcome." The young man clapped his hands twice, and Tala saw a script activate across his skin each time, sending a pulse of *something* somewhere that she couldn't determine.

The Archive?

-Could work, or just somewhere else to signal the arrival of specific people?-

Regardless, a moment later, two more assistants came out into the entry way.

The first assistant sent one to each of the Masters before turning back toward Tala. "They will be along shortly." The Mage gave a small chuckle. "Their instructions were quite clear; they wanted to be informed of your arrival the moment you came in."

"Oh, well, thank you." She licked her lips, an enticing scent catching her nostrils. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"It is, Mistress. Can I get you a mug?"

Tala nodded. "That would be lovely."

-Tala…-

It's fine. I was up all night. A little coffee won't hurt me.

-Mistress Emersen gave you some, then you had more at breakfast.-

And it's just one more cup here. See? Just three cups. No issue at all.

The assistant was already back with a mug of coffee.

"Thank you." Tala hesitated, frowning. "I apologize, I didn't catch your name."

"Srip, Mistress."

"Well, thank you, Master Srip."

"It is my pleasure. Is there anything else that I can get you or any other way in which I can be of assistance?"

"No, I think this is perfect." She lifted the mug in indication, then took a long pull. *Amazing.*

Alat sighed with obvious disappointment within Tala's head but didn't say anything further.

It was indeed a bare couple of minutes before both Masters Boma and Queue came into the entryway.

Their entrances were almost simultaneous, though they came from different hallways, and that fact seemed to make both men smile.

Master Queue was the first to speak. "Mistress Tala, welcome, welcome. Do you have any other business with us before we address the stability of your dimensional storage?"

We'll need to empower our Archive connection, but now is hardly the time for that.

-And I suspect it might put a strain on you, spiritually if not physically, and Fused as you are, it could complicate your Refining.-

That was my thought, too.

-Should we mention the Leshkin weaponry?-

Tala sighed internally. *Not yet. I'd love to combine some of it with Flow, if possible, move it closer to a true, morphic weapon, but we still might need to sell some.*

-If we are still in need of money at the end of this, I'm going to be rusting irritated.-

That's true enough. Tala shrugged. "Not off-hand, no."

The Refined man nodded before turning to his colleague. "You have it all set up, correct?"

Master Boma's gruff tone was slightly softer than usual, "I do, yes."

Without another word needed, the three went down a hallway, Master Boma in the lead.

Tala paused, glancing back. "Thank you, Master Srip!"

The assistant smiled and bowed in return. "You are most welcome, Mistress Tala."

The three Archons walked farther back into the compound and through a set of iron doors.

When Tala saw the massive bits of iron, she had a moment of panic, but while she could somehow *feel* the iron, there was nothing more than that.

Huh. Well, it's not like this is the first bit of iron I've come across.

-Not in the least, but it is probably the most in one place.-

Undoubtedly, yes. There is something odd, though… She could sense… *something*, but it wasn't clear what it was.

-It almost feels like a sure knowledge that the doors aren't yours.-

So, ownership or authority over the doors? Fascinating.

-Yes, we really do need to explore this new aspect of your vision. I am glad you didn't try to eat the door.-

Yeah, it is good to know I won't become a raving maniac around iron, I suppose.

Master Queue cleared his throat. "Mistress Tala?"

Tala jerked slightly, startled out of her thoughts. "Hmm?"

"Is everything alright? You were staring at the doors with sort of an odd look on your face."

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” Tala quickly entered the merging room after the two others, not making eye contact.

Inside waited a few dozen crates, each heavily imbued with magic.

To her quick scan, they all seemed to be oriented towards preservation and isolation of the contents. *That makes sense.*

“Now.” Master Boma was walking over towards one of the crates. “The most critical thing is to determine which method of reinforcement will work best for your dimensional storage. They would all do some good, but these materials are too expensive to use anything but the most compatible.”

A throat cleared from near the door, and the three Archons turned. Mistress Elnea stood in the doorway. “Were you planning on starting without me?”

They all seemed a bit startled as the silence extended.

The head of the Bandfast Archon Council tsked. “I asked Mistress Ingrit to keep me informed on anything to do with your sanctum, Mistress Tala. She let me know that you were on your way here, so I thought that I’d join you.”

Oh! Right, she’d wanted to see me bond with Kit when that happened. I suppose that means she’s interested in general.

The woman then lifted an eyebrow towards the two men. “I did send you each a message to the same effect. Was it not received?”

Masters Boma and Queue glanced toward each other, both shaking their heads, and Master Queue responded, “No, Mistress Elnea. We would have informed you before we came here, if so.”

Mistress Elnea chuckled. “Well, I’m not here to interfere, though I’m happy to consult. I simply want to observe and be of assistance.”

That seemed to settle the last bits of nerves.

The three lesser Archons bowed towards Mistress Elnea. “Welcome, Mistress.”

“Thank you, Master Queue.”

The Mistress came the rest of the way in and closed the door behind her.

“Now, it looks like you were about to test which method of reinforcement might be best suited?”

That received nods.

“Wonderful. If you will permit me, I brought a measurement and analysis artifact to be placed within the sanctum?”

Tala tilted her head to one side. “To what end?”

“Well, in theory, the dimensional space *should* be separate from the magics used to access and alter it, but it is always good to have measurements to be sure of that during and after the fact.”

Master Queue nodded. “We were going to use such a device, once we determined which would be best suited. Did you bring a universal one, or…?”

She pulled out a sphere that seemed to be made of rusted copper. “This is one of my own design, specifically made for assessing unknown sub-dimensional spaces.”

That perked their interest. In particular, Mistress Elnea noticed Tala’s reaction.

“Yes, we occasionally do come across such spaces, and some of them *are* ether holds—by the terminology of the arcanes—but not all. I’m happy to discuss the subject with you after this is sorted.”

Tala nodded. “That would be of interest, thank you.”

“Now, what do we have here?”

As it turned out, the head of the Archon Council had come bearing gifts.

She added two additional crates to those already arranged around the center of the room.

Tala listened as the other three discussed the contents of the various boxes. She tried to learn from what they were discussing, but much of it was beyond her understanding, and she simply asked for Alat to help her file the information away for later.

Apparently, each box held harvests or artifacts of magic with a bent towards dimensional stability and reinforcement of reality.

Tala opened Kit to drop Mistress Elnea’s diagnostic orb into it, and the woman began gathering information for comparison later on, though she was already reviewing it on a slate that she held in one hand.

Master Queue was the one to explain what would come next. “We will put your storage down in the center of the crates and open the lids. By close examination of the zeme in the room, we should be able to determine what resonates most closely with the magics of the pouch, and then we can merge it with those magics.”

Tala nodded. “I don’t know that a specific ‘merging’ will be required. Kit tends to just eat what I give it these days.”

That got their attention.

Seeing their heightened focus, Tala shrugged. “There’s not much more to say. Kit eats the hold or other things I give it and grows accordingly.”

The three seemed to take that in stride, pondering implications that Tala likely hadn’t considered.

“What is the difference between the crates?” Tala asked with curiosity.

Master Boma answered succinctly, “Well, each one has a slightly different method of stability or strength.”

That made a lot of sense, actually. Just as each fire Mage had slightly different methods for gathering and controlling fire, each of these items would have a different means of enacting their purpose.

Master Queue opened his mouth to say more but hesitated before turning to the older woman beside them, “Mistress Elnea, can you explain?”

Mistress Elnea smiled and nodded. “Certainly, though I doubt I’ll say it better than you could have.”

They all oriented on her, listening intently.

“As you know, our reality is not, precisely, stable. We don’t know how stable it *should* be, but we measure stability based on how close it is to the theoretical maximum.”

Tala nodded. “So a percentage scale?”

“Precisely, yes. We will not found a new city if the integrity is below fifty percent.”

Her eyes widened at that. “So low?”

Mistress Elnea shook her head. “That is near the maximum we’ve recorded. In this room, right now.” She pulled out a small disk, glancing at it before nodding. “Reality integrity is at forty percent. When this city is abandoned, it will be between twenty and thirty percent. As Archons have ranged far and wide, the highest integrity we have accurately measured on Zeme is sixty percent.”

Tala nodded. *I wonder what the world-fragment would be measured at.*

-The stability we felt… It very well might be a hundred percent or close to it.-

Yeah.

“Now,” the older woman continued, “a brand-new, manmade, artifact dimensional storage generally is measured at between ten and fifteen percent, and we’ve never recovered a side dimension measured below five percent.”

“That makes sense.” Tala pondered for a moment. “What about ether holds?”

Mistress Elnea grinned. “That is an astute question. There are two groups in that, in both cases the numbers come back in the twenty to thirty percent range. The odd thing is sometimes that reading is *negative.*”

Tala blinked. “What?”

“Exactly.” The Council Head leaned forward, obviously getting excited about the topic. “We’ve tried quite a few different measurement methodologies, and it just seems that some ether holds have an oddly inverse relationship with reality that returns a negative number. Some have theorized that they are dimensional storages that broke apart and kept breaking, that they descended so far into chaos it began to look like order again, but that isn’t something that has ever really made much sense to me.”

“So, what does Kit read at?”

She glanced at the slate in her hand. “Twenty-three percent.”

That caused the two Constructionists to pause. “So… the integrity isn’t in danger?”

“Oh, it is damaged, at least assuming that this type of storage has much in common with ether holds. They tend to begin to irrevocably break down at a higher percentage.”

Master Boma scratched the side of his nose. “So, more stable, but also more dependent on that stability.”

Master Queue nodded. “That would make a lot of sense. I also imagine that a larger dimensional pocket would be similarly more stable and more dependent on that stability.”

Master Boma waved him off with a huff. “Don’t tell me you’re a ‘pocket Zeme’ believer.”

“You saw the memories we purchased access to. That very well might be true.”

Tala frowned. *What?*

-Mistress Ingrit has been following your wishes and negotiating for access to your information on your behalf. I have a record of what has been granted and to whom. It appears that these two have access to brief glimpses of the world-fragment, many of the holds you entered, and a very *simplified look at the Doman-Imithe.-*

Ahh, I was wondering if and when the Doman-Imithe would come up.

-Yes, Mistress Ingrit added a note about that, for us. Apparently, it is heavily ‘need to know.’ Though, as we came by the information on our own, we are not required to maintain silence. Even so, caution is advised if we wish to share the knowledge with anyone.-

Like so many other things.

-Yeah.-

The two Constructionists were starting to get heated, but they seemed to both realize the fact as they each took a step back, turning half away.

Mistress Elnea politely cleared her throat. “So, testing… Kit.”

Tala nodded, walking forward and placing the pouch on the ground, centered among the crates, before backing up to stand next to the half-wall back near the entrance.

She briefly glanced at the stack of papers and other odds and ends sitting on top of the wall before dismissing them as unimportant.

Masters Boma and Queue took up their positions, their magesights flaring to life.

Then, with a synchronized movement of their hands, the men gestured, and their power opened all the crates simultaneously.

Power radiated from each box, up and out into the room.

For a long moment, nothing happened.

Master Boma slumped slightly, grunting. “No obvious resonance.”

Tala sighed. “Come on, Kit.”

Master Queue was less pessimistic. “Come on, little storage. These are all here for you. Take your pick.”

A breath later, she felt like a deep chord had been struck, thrumming through the room as something *shifted.*

No one else seemed to notice, but that seemed impossible.

-Tala. Is that…?-

Authority? Ownership? Her bonding of the dasgannach had given her a view into that esoteric side of magic, and that sight was trying to show her something, though she didn’t really understand what she was seeing.

Master Queue just gave Kit some authority over the items.

-And over this situation. But that doesn’t really *make sense. The authority was there, before, or it should have been.-*

But maybe not highlighted? Kit is a creature, it seems, but we don’t know how intelligent, not really. Maybe, Master Queue’s words were like telling someone that they’re welcome to a cookie that’s been on the plate near them?

-Sure, maybe?-

Then, her thoughts were interrupted as her own magesight showed her something that she’d only witnessed a handful of times when Kit devoured another dimension or item.

Power rose up from the pouch, reaching out in every direction at once.

At the same time, Tala detected Kit expending *massive* amounts of power. Without even pausing to consider, she extended her aura toward Kit and funneled as many large void-channels as she could into the pouch.

Every drop of magic she offered was slurped up with ravenous abandon.

Master Queue shouted, gesturing and causing his magic to slam the crates closed. Master Boma acted at the same time, but silently.

The lids obeyed, but dimensionality distorted, and the lids fell closed, only partially covering the now-much-larger openings.

Void power filled the room, radiating outward but not actually interacting with most of the space.

Like a smith carrying a glowing bar of metal through the room to cast heat everywhere, even though the metal didn't actually interact with anything, so it was with the void.

The four humans were all misted with void energy as Kit acted.

Chapter: 15
Mine is Secure

Tala watched in fascination as Kit seemed to claim every offered magical item in the room, containment crates and all.

If she had to put words to what she was seeing, she would have said that it appeared like limbs of power reached out towards the presented objects. Each limb was an unnatural amalgamation, seeming like fur-covered limbs with *far* too many joints, but made out of power rather than flesh and fur.

Every limb ended in a sort of hand-like paw, and each reached its crate at the same time, latched on in one motion, and *pulled.*

With a stretching and distortion of the entire room, every single crate vanished along with their contents. Several other things seemed to have been pulled in at the same time, including the papers and knick-knacks from the top of the half-wall and Master Queue's right shoe.

What?

-What?-

Why had Kit taken things beyond the crates?

Mistress Elnea was staring, wide-eyed, at what seemed to be readouts on the slate in her hand, seemingly utterly fascinated by what she was seeing.

Master Boma was panting and sweating, red-faced and wide-eyed. His hands were spread, and Tala could sense power on the edge of being released to defend the Archon, but it hadn't been needed.

Master Queue had his eyes closed tightly, his face drained of color. Even so, he similarly was sheathed in not-quite-released power.

Tala… well, she wasn't really surprised if she took the time to consider it.

That was a bit more dramatic than I was expecting.

-To be fair, Kit is likely much more powerful than the last time we presented it with something this small.-

That was true enough. Kit had devoured whole holds in a matter of minutes, what was a few crates? "Come on, Kit. That wasn't very nice. We're trying to help you, and you took *everything,* including more than you were actually offered."

There was a ripple, and Master Queue's shoe was suddenly sitting beside the pouch.

Tala sighed, walking forward to pick up the pouch and the shoe, hanging the first on her belt and moving to give the second back to its owner. As she did so, Tala continued speaking to Kit, "Well, thank you for returning that, at least."

The pouch did not respond.

Master Queue opened his eyes and hesitantly took his shoe. "Thank—" He swallowed, then licked his lips. "Thank you."

She smiled in return. "Sure. Thank you as well." Tala glanced towards the other woman. "Mistress Elnea, was that successful?"

The woman nodded without looking up. "Yes, very much so. More than just the raw number, it seems like the various *methods* of stability have been drawn in and incorporated. This is *fascinating.*"

-Tala, we might have a financial issue.-

Oh?

-They had offered the contents of one *of those crates as a courtesy to repair Kit after the tour we offered. Those that Mistress Elnea brought were a gift, but Kit still took dozens of times the value of what the two Constructionists received.-*

Tala had a bad feeling about that. *How much?*

-Each crate was apparently worth a couple of hundred gold.-

She cursed internally. *Come on, Kit!*

She decided to get in front of the issue. "Masters. The value of the crates?"

The two men looked towards her, and they both grimaced. It was Master Queue who spoke first, "Yes, that is… unfortunate. But I believe that there is *much* from your time away that is of interest to us. Master Boma?"

The other man nodded. "You have a habit of taking a *bit* more than is offered, but in this case, the fault wasn't yours. I would be grateful for an equivalent exchange." The man gave a slight smile. "May we have the crates back?"

It was Mistress Elnea who responded, "They are gone as well, fully absorbed and incorporated. If I had to guess…" Then the woman shook her head. "No, I won't guess. Mistress Tala?"

"Yes?"

"May I examine your sanctum from the inside?"

"Toward what end?"

The woman smiled with obvious, passionate interest. "To learn, of course. This is fascinating, and unlike any other artifact I've ever encountered. I would say that is likely due to the fact that it's come about from a union of natural artifacts, human magics, and arcane efforts. I don't know that there are many items of any kind with such a pedigree."

That made a lot of sense, actually. “Alright, so long as you share everything you learn with me.” Her eyes hardened, and Tala felt a little of her persona as an Eskau slip out. “I do mean *everything*, Mistress. Please do not test me on this. I want no secrets, and nothing hidden.”

The woman had glanced up for the answer to her query, and her eyes widened slightly, more in surprise than alarm, but it was there.

Tala only noticed because of her enhanced senses and Alat’s ability to easily compare memories to the current moment.

Mistress Elnea nodded slowly, seeming to consider. “I… Yes, of course. It is your sanctum. I will share all findings with you.”

“Then, that sounds quite workable.”

An uncomfortable silence started to fall over the room, and Tala realized that under her through-spike, iron had started to climb over her skin.

No.

She put a stop to that instantly. She didn’t need to make her condition worse with increased resonance, especially not in a situation where she wasn’t even in danger.

“Well.” Master Boma clapped his hands. “All accounted for, that was easier than expected. I imagine we all have much to do, yes?”

They all nodded, an air of uncertainty still heavy in the room.

Master Queue cleared his throat. “You are both welcome to use this room as long as you need. Good day to you, Mistresses.”

Mistress Elnea gave a slight bow. “Good day, Master Queue.”

With reciprocal goodbyes, the men left the women alone in the room, pulling the iron doors mostly closed behind them.

Tala and Mistress Elnea had been left alone in the merging room, and there was a moment of silence as both women turned their thoughts inward.

The iron cladding on walls, ceiling, and floor, along with the heavy iron door made the space as magically isolated as possible. Though, with the door propped open, it wasn't a perfect seal at the moment.

-That's an interesting thought. We now can push iron into the dimensions of magic. Master Jevin described going around iron as simply bypassing the physical iron via those dimensions. Clearly, we should be able to make a more complete containment, hence why we can't actually use it fully until your body is Refined.-

That's a good point. I wonder, could we make a better isolation chamber than this room?

Mistress Elnea pulled Tala out of her musings with a simple question, "Shall we begin?"

"Hmm? Oh! Right." Tala placed Kit on the wall, and it morphed into a door that seemed like it perfectly belonged there. *That is such a useful feature. I really don't notice it very often.*

-That is sort of the point.-

The door opened, showing a view of the central courtyard.

"Thank you." Her words were soft, spoken just for the door—for Kit—to hear, though Mistress Elnea probably had enough enhancement to have heard, regardless.

They were stepping through when Alat grabbed Tala's attention. *-Mistress Holly has requested permission to engage several experts and share the results of your test with them.-*

Tala frowned. *I thought she already had permission?*

-Apparently, there are a few that we've not met. When she was asking earlier, we only gave permission for those whom we had met.-

Oh, I do suppose it was a bit silly to assume that I'd already met those best able to help. Yes. She can use her professional discretion to bring in other experts. I want to Refine as soon as possible, and I want it to go properly.

-Alright, I've amended the shared informational space with our answer.-

Tala followed Mistress Elnea in, and the door swung shut behind them.

-You know, we didn't have to wait before we went in.-

Tala shrugged, but before she could respond, she felt *something.*

She looked around, instantly activating her voidsight through the use of Flow's void-knife form.

The nodules and fragments of reality became obvious, and she could see them pressed firmly against each other, the distinction much harder to perceive than the day before.

Moreover, she could see threads of power binding them all together in a way that she'd not noticed before.

Trying to focus on that was like trying to see a thin spiderweb in poor lighting, but it *was* there. There seemed to be other powers working to similar effects, but the web-like working was the most visible.

She asked Mistress Elnea about it, and the woman turned to her. "Oh! That's fascinating." She lifted her slate up, manipulating it before nodding. "Yes, one of the crates I brought was filled with dimensional spider-silk. Nasty predators, those."

Tala frowned. "I don't know that I've heard of them."

"I should hope not. They are a relatively new arcanous creature, less than five hundred years old, and we did—and still do—our best to wipe them out whenever we come across them or detect them."

“What makes them so in need of extinction?”

“Well, they manifest as the same size as regular spiders, but they weave their webs into intricate, magic-filled constructs. When you run into one, instead of having a web across your face, in your hair, or on your boot, you are jerked inside.”

“Inside?” Tala had a bad feeling about what the woman meant.

“Yes, within the webs. It is an expanded space of sorts or, more accurately, a compressed space—though, there is little save academic difference between those types of altered space. Once inside, you would seem the size of an insect, and the spider is massive in comparison. From examination, we’ve long since discovered that the spiders are actually the size of houses, if not bigger, but dimensionally compress themselves to better hide.”

Like Terry… Interesting. “And they hunt humans?”

Mistress Elnea shrugged. “Not usually. Not specifically, but they do eat those they can. Generally, they’ll spread their net on game trails and snag the occasional herd animal for their meals—or whole herds when fate favors them. Before we learned how to detect and hunt them, we suspect that many of our missing persons from that time fell afoul of these arachnids.”

Tala shivered, imagining being a mundane, minding her own business then suddenly finding herself in a massive spider’s lair. “That would be awful.”

“Precisely. We eradicated the founts that allowed them to spawn, but unfortunately, these seem to breed true. They are actually able to pass their magic down to their descendants without a fount. We keep them mostly out of human cities and away from the caravan routes, but they’re still scattered throughout the world.”

“Without getting their power from a fount? I didn’t know that was possible.”

The woman shrugged. “It’s vanishingly rare. Occasionally, a power *fits* a creature so closely that it seems to fold into their very being, and then it can be passed down to their descendants.”

“Lovely…”

Mistress Elnea seemed to hesitate. “To be clear, even though it’s incredibly rare, many of the most pervasive arcanous species are a result of this quirk. The advantage given to a genetic line with innate magical giftings is simply too strong to be easily overcome by mundane versions of the species. So, even though individual instances are rare, these days those that have happened have resulted in many descendants for whom it is true.”

“That makes good sense, I suppose.” *What were we discussing?*

-Kit.-

Right! “So, these threads?”

“Yes! Their silk has intrinsic properties of dimensional stability, specifically relating to pocket dimensions or expanded spaces.”

“That’s incredibly useful. I can understand why you thought it was a good candidate for repairing my dimensional storage.”

“It is useful, yes. But what’s truly incredible is that I have detected that magic woven throughout the entirety of this dimensional space.”

Tala blinked. “That must have been massively expensive. This place is *huge,* compared to most human dimensional storage spaces. Thank you for providing so much of the silk.”

Mistress Elnea shook her head. “No, I only brought a few skeins. It was not a large crate, after all. Most of this seems to have been fabricated off that template and incorporated into the natural magics of the space. *That* is what’s impressive to me.”

“That’s… *incredible*.” Tala repeated herself but found that she didn’t really mind. *Kit can replicate magical structures and methodologies?*

-I mean, we haven’t seen Kit do it before now, but it seems like the answer is fairly obvious.-

“You have no idea just how amazing this is.” The older woman gestured vaguely around herself. “This really is a creature. That is exactly what we’d expect from a merging of magical materials with a sentient thing, rather than a construct or artifact. Your sanctum is alive.”

The woman’s words were full of wonder as if she hadn’t really believed it until that very moment.

“This changes so much. I don’t know how you’ve come to an understanding with this being, but the implications and applications are practically endless. I hope that we can find more of these and replicate your process, one way or another.”

Tala was open to trying. “So, what next?”

The woman’s eyes practically sparkled. “Before we do anything else, I have so many measurements to take.”

Tala smiled in return, more excited for the result than the process. “Do you need me in here with you?”

“Hmm? No, no. I’ll just move throughout if that’s acceptable to you.”

“Absolutely. Make yourself at home. Do you want me to keep Kit anchored in the Constructionist’s compound?”

She waved her hand at that. “No, no. You’re welcome to go about your day. I’ll reach out to you through the Archive when I wish to leave. I can take the founts from you then?”

Tala only hesitated for a moment before nodding. “That sounds workable, thank you.”

“No, Mistress Tala. Thank *you.*” With an almost girlish giggle, the Head of the Bandfast Archon Council set off, pulling more and more magical devices out of her own dimensional storage.

Well, I’ll be interested to learn what she finds out. It should be fascinating.

-So it seems.-

Tala exited Kit and pulled the door from the wall, hanging it on her belt in the form of a pouch.

She’s in there with all my things… That shouldn’t bother Tala. There was no real way for the woman to steal from her—Tala somehow knew that Kit would move things out of reach if anyone tried to take things without her permission—and she shouldn’t have any motivation to do so.

Still, Tala opened Kit and pulled out the bars of white metal one after another.

-Tala, you have a lot of those.-

Even so, Tala wielded the void-aspects of her elk leathers, absorbing the ingots, one after another.

Somewhat to her surprise, the elk leathers took it all with relative ease. She was even able to somewhat sense the reserve of magical metal, much like she could sense her iron. Though, the sense was more distant, like being able to see how heavy a friend’s pack was by how they moved, compared to how easily she could feel her own pack’s weight.

Not that I will likely need to use a pack ever again.

The magical load from her elk leathers had increased with every ingot absorbed, but it was still well within her ability to sustain, even alongside Kit’s newfound power requirement.

She also knew from experience that she could remove the metal from the soulbound item later if she wished. *Or I can fabricate more with the machine in the underground room.*

Even with the most valuable and easily stolen resource secreted away, she felt an itch and reached for it within Kit.

There was something still within Kit that a large part of her didn't want to risk losing.

She came out with a handful of iron bits, some stolen from the House of the Rising Sun, and others were bits left over from the construction of the sanctum's structures.

With an easy pull, she absorbed the iron, letting the carbon and other trace minerals fall to the ground.

That complete, Tala let out a satisfied breath. *There, what's mine is secure.*

-Are you sure that you're okay?-

You know I'm not, but I'm learning.

-To Mistress Holly's? We promised Rane that we'd meet him there.-

Ahh, right! Yes, let's go.

As she stepped out past the massive iron doors, she felt something settle upon her.

Whether watching Kit had made her more sensitive—or her paranoia was just at a high point—she *felt* the sway of the city's magics settle down upon her. Any fragments of power that left her were subjected to cleansing workings and drawn away to the power matrices of the city.

Oh, that's… that's unpleasant. She checked her memory and found that she had memory of this feeling before, but like the clothes on her back, if she didn't think to focus on the feeling, she didn't notice it.

Great, now I can feel my clothing…

-Well, that one's on you.-

Yeah…

Tala passed back out of the Constructionists' guildhall, bidding Master Srip goodbye on her way by.

The Mage bid her good day, and Tala was back out in the cool of the winter's day.

Just as before, Tala didn't rush on her way through the city. She took her time walking to Mistress Holly's workshop, letting her feet lead her on a roundabout route, simply enjoying the freedom to go where she wished, how she wished.

Even so, it was a relatively short walk to the inscriber's shop, and Tala stepped into the warmth before she really realized that she'd arrived.

Chapter: 16
To Grow and Improve

Tala didn't recognize the Mage who was sitting behind the counter in Mistress Holly's waiting room, but that wasn't unexpected.

Before Tala could ask his name, he pointed towards the back. "You are expected, Mistress Tala. Please feel free to head on back."

"Thank you. I'll do just that." The young man had already looked back down to the book on the counter in front of him. *No need to bother him just to ask his name.*

Tala knocked on the door of Mistress Holly's private workroom.

She was invited in and entered. After closing the door behind herself, she found Rane in the middle of some of the tests she, herself, had been subjected to the night before.

She gave a half-smile. "So, you're getting poked and prodded with all these maddening tests, too?"

Rane grimaced, but it was Mistress Holly who answered. "He will be getting the prep-work inscriptions. So, the tests are required, yes, but he won't be Refining in the short term."

Tala cocked her head to one side. "What does that mean?"

Rane answered this time. "I won't be Refined for at least a year."

She winced. "Oh… I'm sorry to hear that." And she meant it, too. Even so, she gave a mirth-filled smile. "I guess I'll just have to get used to being better than you."

That made the man chuckle. "Yeah, yeah. I'll catch you eventually."

"Am I interrupting?"

Mistress Holly waved her off. “Not at all, Mistress Tala.”

That was good. *Well, might as well ask some questions while I’m here.* “So, when will he be able to get inscriptions for direct connection to the Archive?”

The Inscriptionist glanced at Rane, and the man nodded. Apparently, she had been getting his okay to discuss it with Tala. “Once he’s Refined, he’ll have the option. Most Refined get something like that once their mind can handle it.”

“So, he’ll get something like the alternate interface I have?”

Mistress Holly gave her a long look before shaking her head. “Honestly, most people don’t want anything like that.”

“What? Why?” Tala was genuinely confused.

-*What? I’m amazing! Why wouldn’t people want something like me?*-

Rane smiled but didn’t interject. Mistress Holly sighed. “The moral implications, for one. You are, in essence, creating another version of yourself, enslaved to yourself.”

Alat grunted. -*I don’t see it that way, but I could see some people assuming that.*-

Tala decided to push a bit. “Only if they think of it that way.”

“And many people do. Not everyone would work well with themselves. I, for one, would probably kill myself if I were stuck within my own head.”

-*She makes a good point. I wouldn’t want to be stuck in anyone else’s head.*-

Tala wasn’t convinced. “But it’s so perfect! Why wouldn’t everyone want to have twice as much time? To be able to devote themselves entirely to learning, while still doing other things as well.”

“That is a somewhat healthy way to view it, but also a bit incomplete. Could you spend a whole day studying while at the Academy?”

“Of course.”

“How often?”

Tala shrugged. “As often as I was allowed.”

Mistress Holly smiled, tapping the side of her own nose. “That’s one reason it works for you. That would drive some people crazy. I, for one, love to learn, but without experimentation and action, I become very grumpy.” She stuck a needle into Rane’s arm, drawing blood.

The big man grunted but didn’t otherwise react.

Tala found herself nodding. “So, if a person doesn’t already have a disposition leaning toward isolation and study, having a ‘self’ devoted to such wouldn’t be tenable.”

“Precisely.”

Rane nodded as well. “Then, I should be fine with that. Tala definitely has me beat in long-term focus, but I *love* spending days on end just reading, and I’m quite content in isolation for long periods.”

Mistress Holly nodded, not seeming too surprised. “I’d assumed as much. You are a prime candidate for such an alternate interface, and we’ll get it in place for you as soon as you’re Refined.”

He grunted. “Very well.”

The Inscriptionist started another test, moving various magical devices into position around Rane and giving him a few simple instructions before turning back to Tala. “Now, I did have one thing that I wanted to highlight for you. I requested memories of all your uses of magic, while you were away, and I noticed something interesting.”

“Oh?” Tala leaned forward. “What was that?”

“You used your old ‘Restrain’ working.”

Tala thought back and nodded. “Yes, I did. What of it?”

“You don’t have kinetic manipulation inscriptions anymore.”

Tala hesitated. *What?*

-*She’s right.*- Alat projected puzzlement. -*I didn’t really consider the lack because we’ve used that working for so long.*-

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing sinister. You’ve simply impressed your natural magics with some kinetic manipulation. I would say that your time with the ‘Restrain’ inscriptions wasn’t sufficient given how rarely they were active, but you’ve had a lot of time and magical interaction with kinetic manipulation scripts.”

Both women glanced towards Rane. The Fused was focused on following Mistress Holly’s instructions, so he didn’t notice.

Tala’s eyebrows rose. “That’s enough?”

“In many cases, yes. You had a mindset solidified for the working, you’d used the magic yourself, and your natural magics have long-term exposure to that power.”

Oh. Tala found herself at a loss for words.

Alat cackled. Finally calming herself enough to send. -*I knew that boy would be useful.*-

Rane still seemed unaware of the conversation.

“What—” Tala swallowed, feeling a bit conflicted. “What does that mean?”

“Aren’t you listening? It means that you’ve been around a kinetic manipulator as he used his power. It’s basically how early humans went about getting their power: sitting beside fires to gain fire magics, meditating in blizzards for powers over ice.”

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense. Isn’t this rather fast, though?”

The Inscriber bent to make a modification to one of the devices as she shrugged. “Not really. You can manipulate your own natural magics rather easily before you reach Paragon if you have a good understanding, and you started with inscriptions in this vein. Honestly, I’d be more surprised if you weren’t able to use that working.”

“Good to know.”

The current test ended, and Rane sighed. “That was rather… odd. It was testing perception, right?”

“Yes, specifically touch acuity.”

“Yeah, I got that with the needle point sensations. It almost tickled.”

“Of course, it’s not supposed to hurt.”

Tala cleared her throat. “Is he almost done?”

“No. Magical impressing goes both ways, and I need to ensure you’ve not tainted him somehow.”

Tala immediately paled. “I could have done that?”

Rane held up a hand. “It’s a danger for any partners, and even people who work together somewhat regularly. If one shows irregularity when looking to Refine, more care is taken with the others.”

She groaned. “How many people have I messed over?”

Mistress Holly shrugged. “Not too many, honestly. You didn’t spend too much time around those it will matter for.”

“Well, that’s good.” After a moment, Tala sighed. “I think I’ll go back to Lyn’s house. Come by when you’re done?”

Rane nodded. “That’s probably best, yeah.” He smiled. “Thank you for stopping by.”

“Of course, I wasn’t just going to abandon you.” She shrugged. “Was there anything else you needed or wanted from me, Mistress Holly?”

The woman shook her head. “No, no. I will remind you to take it easy with regard to any magics relating to your scripts.” After a moment’s hesitation, she added, “Your alternate interface excepted, of course. That shouldn’t cause issues.”

-Of course, I won’t. Thank you very much.-

“I remember. Thank you, Mistress Holly.”

“Very well. I do expect to have your next set of inscriptions worked up and ready for inscribing within the week.”

“I appreciate that.” Tala turned and gave Rane a smile. “You have fun now!”

He huffed a laugh and shook his head. “Oh yeah, buckets of fun.”

That done, Tala bid them both goodbye and departed without further delay.

It was a nice, pleasant walk for Tala through the city. *I’m getting used to taking my time.*

-I certainly can’t recall a time where you weren’t rushing from one thing to another. It seems to be doing some good for you.-

I think so, yeah.

While she walked, she played with a small mass of iron in her hand, using it like a child playing with clay. Though she was able to shape it with her mind, rather than requiring her fingers.

As a result, however, she ended up being worse at it than if she’d used her hands or other tools. *That just means that I have a lot of room to grow and improve.*

-Or you only have limited control?-

Tala huffed a laugh. *When has anything magical been so limited in our experience?*

-That's… true. Fair enough, yeah.-

Her feet brought her through the park and to Lyn's house.

The key was… enticing, but she barely paused to ponder the iron within it before unlocking the door and going inside.

It didn't take her long to decide to start reading the abridged and rearranged books presented to her by Alat.

Between sections, she continued to play with her manipulation of iron and did her physical exercises, letting her body become more accustomed to her new weight.

That was actually one of the bigger surprises of the day despite all that she'd experienced and all that she was reading.

As she had a modicum of control over the iron within her own body, it seemed like that ability was passively helping her move, and that was why she hadn't really *felt* the weight very much.

She discovered this while playing with her control over her internal iron. A flexing of willpower to suppress her control had left her hand feeling *incredibly* heavy, and that had hinted at the situation to her. After that, it had only taken a little bit of investigation to truly reveal the extent of her new state.

Passively making her movements easier wouldn't do, at least not for her exercises.

So, she purposely suppressed the subconscious control over her iron, and that left her panting and straining to do even some of the more basic exercises in her sets.

This is ridiculous! I was training under four-times gravity not that long ago.

-Well, that was with your last body. Remember, you were just rebuilt from scratch, and while some of your enhanced strength would have come through, not all of it did. Plus, you are quite a bit heavier, given the iron. And…-

Tala grimaced. *And my body is in pretty bad shape, overall.*

-Precisely. It's probably good to exercise and try to get back some of your physical conditioning, as it should help with the Refining from what little we know, but don't expect it to be like training has been for you lately.-

She grunted at that, struggling to finish the current set.

As she completed the latest repetition, she groaned and rolled onto her back. *Ask Mistress Holly to increase the surface area granted by my inscriptions on my feet and hands. I feel like once I'm back up to full weight and have some more iron to me, I'll be stressing some of the surfaces I interact with.*

-Yeah, that's already added to the list.-

Tala had been a bit hesitant to stress her body with exercise, but Mistress Holly had specifically mentioned that it was allowed. As she'd watched herself recover after each set, she had been able to verify that the mechanisms of healing from exercise were different enough from her standard regeneration that it didn't seem to worsen the issues she was having with her physical form.

It does seem like muscle recovery would be a bit different than healing from illness or injury.

She hesitated at that, a thought hitting her like a wagon.

What if I get exposed to something? Will that knock me out? Will that kill me?

-No, no. If you'd take a moment to think instead of panic, you'd realize that you'd only be in danger if you allowed yourself to get sick, then had to recover. But your processes for fighting off illness are enhanced and have nothing to do with regeneration, at least not for most diseases.-

So, avoid any flesh-eating plagues?

-That would likely be wise, yes.-

Thinking about her body's vulnerability reminded her that her reserves were still dangerously low. At the moment, a lack of those materials would kill her faster than the impurities in her flesh.

Additionally, Tala was getting hungry, even though she'd eaten the remains of the banquets provided for the meeting the previous day. *What time is it?*

-Mid-afternoon.-

We really need a cook, don't we…

Alat chuckled. *-One would be rather useful, yes.-*

Tala opened Kit. "Mistress Elnea?"

A contemplative sound came back, followed by a verbal response, "Yes, Mistress Tala? Do you need me to leave? I've only walked about two-thirds of the perimeter." Her voice gained some excitement, "I'm sure you know, but you have herds of deer and pigs in here, not to mention all the other, smaller animals."

"Yes, I do know. There's a whole reasonably well-balanced ecosystem in there." Tala found herself grinning. "I was wondering, how many people could safely be sustained within there?"

"Full-time or irregularly?"

"Let us assume full-time to be safe. I could use some mundane help, and I want to know if I should hunt up some gateless, or…?"

Mistress Elnea grunted. "I'm not done with my readings, so I might be incorrect, but I think with the recent… mergings, you could have seven gated humans in here, full-time, without undue restrictions on their movements. Now, if your sanctum can rearrange its reality bits without disrupting the physical manifestations?" She exhaled a sound of uncertainty.

Tala's eyes widened. "To spread out the stress. That…" She shook her head, making a very similar sound to the one Mistress Elnea had just made. "That's quite the idea. We'll have to test it."

Tala could practically hear the woman nod as she responded, "We'll need to get some different equipment to test if that's possible, unless… Did I see hints in your experiences? Can you really *see* bits of reality?"

Tala bit her lip, thinking. *I need help understanding all this. Secrets won't serve me in the long run.* "Yes."

There was a long moment of silence. "Then, when I'm done in here, give me a day or two to come up with a few tests, and we'll figure this out."

"That sounds wonderful. Thank you."

"No, Mistress Tala. I don't understate when I say that this is more excited than I've been in a long time. I've long studied dimensionally expanded or created spaces, and what I'm learning here… Thank you."

Tala smiled. "Well, then you're welcome. I'll probably try to find some people to help me, then."

"Do you have anyone specific in mind?"

"Maybe? Why?"

"Given the nature of this space, I am sure we could find a good family to work with you, depending on your exact needs."

"A good family, containing at least one researcher, of course?"

"Absolutely." There was no shame or deceit in the woman's voice.

"I'll consider it."

“Just let me know.”

“I’ll do that. I’m going to close the entrance now. Enjoy your work!”

“Oh, I most certainly will.”

Without another word, Tala closed Kit. Then, after a moment’s pause, she patted the pouch. “Thank you, Kit. I really do appreciate that you don’t ever eat anything I want maintained.”

Tala felt like she should have felt something from the dimensional storage, but in the end, the pouch did not respond.

Alright, then. Next book?

-As you wish. Next book!-

But then Tala’s stomach gurgled, and the woman grimaced. *Wait, no… I need food.*

Tala sighed.

We should drop by to see if Brand is in town.

-His food is rather tasty. Are we doing the culinary tour?-

Oh, yes. That would be amazing. There were so many foods that she remembered from her times in Bandfast. So many tastes that she wanted to experience again. *And I can hunt for a cook at the same time.*

-What about Lyn and Rane?-

Tala scratched the side of her cheek. *Let them know what we’re about, through the Archive. I’d hate for them to come while we’re gone and not know what’s going on.* She also pulled out a piece of paper and wrote a short note, leaving it on the dining table.

Then, without waiting for a response through the Archive, Tala stood and left Lyn’s house, being sure to lock the door behind herself.

Her first stop was the closest and also on the way to Brand's restaurant: Anachronistic Delights.

The staff chuckled at her order at first, when they saw that she was alone, but when she reiterated—and paid upfront— they happily fulfilled her desire for a *large* number of cheesy little caravans.

-Don't you think that, maybe, ten was too many?-

No. Obviously, I'm not going to eat them all right now, but I want some in reserve.

-…Yeah, I know that, but it still seems like too many.-

The next stop was Brand's restaurant, and Tala entered with an odd tightness in her chest and butterflies in her stomach.

Did he even know I was missing? Did anyone tell him, or did he and Lissa just assume that I stopped coming by?

She got her answer instantly as the woman behind the counter looked her way and gasped. "Mistress Tala? Is… Is that you?"

Tala smiled a bit sheepishly. "It is, Lissa. How are you?"

The woman practically sprinted around the counter and wrapped Tala in a surprisingly motherly embrace. "The big Mage told us you were missing but not that you'd been found! Are you alright? What happened?" The lovely, middle-aged woman pulled back, examining Tala from head to toe. "You must be starving. Sit, sit! I'll get you some soup."

Tala let herself be led to one of the few tables off to the side, and soon, she was eating a wonderfully thick, hearty soup. *Creamy, pork-based.*

Lissa brought out a stack of heavily buttered bread and set it beside the massive soup bowl. Tala suspected that the bowl was usually used for mixing up large recipes, but she didn't argue.

Instead, she dug in with gusto, bringing a smile to the older woman's lips. "I'm glad that your appetite hasn't changed." After a moment's hesitation, she added a tentative comment. "You seem… different. Are you alright?"

Tala hesitated, swallowing her current mouthful. "Is Brand in? I'd rather not repeat myself."

The woman shook her head. "Sadly, no. He's on a caravan run at the moment." She patted her belly. "Our seventh is on the way, and he wants a bit more in the bank before she arrives. I'm afraid he's scheduled for a longer route, only getting back for my last trimester."

"Oh? How far along are you?"

"Eight weeks. He left just over a week ago." She looked regretful. "I know he'd want to be here for your return."

Tala smiled and waved her off. "No, no. I'm glad that he's providing so well. Who's helping you?"

"The kids do a lot to help, around their schoolwork. The oldest is ten, and he's a natural." She pointed to the soup that Tala had been eating. "He put together that recipe from several customer favorites. Breads and soups are best when made ahead of time, so I just have to manage the front."

"It sounds like you have a good system worked out."

Lissa smiled contentedly. "We really do."

After a moment's pause, the woman seemed to pull herself back from pleasant musing.

"But that's enough about me? Tell me what happened?"

And so, Tala began to speak, sharing an *incredibly* abridged and edited version of her recent experiences.

Chapter: 17
Goodwill and Favors

Tala reached the end of her abbreviated tale and took a bite of her soup-soaked bread.

Lissa was leaning forward, her attention obviously raptly engaged on Tala. “Mistress Tala.”

There was another prolonged silence before the older woman shook her head, leaning back. Tala took that time to eat as much as she could while maintaining a modicum of manners.

Finally, the woman gave an overwhelmed smile. “I am so glad that I am not a Mage.”

Tala snorted a laugh, then kept laughing, the reaction coming from her gut and shivering through her whole being, bringing tears of mirth to her eyes.

Lissa patiently waited for Tala to recover herself.

Finally, Tala was calm enough to take another large bite.

“Mistress Tala. You need to work through this. Even what little you shared is enough to have given me nightmares if I were the one to go through it. Are you talking with anyone?”

She shrugged. “Some? A few know the full extent of what happened, and I’m talking with friends here and there.”

Lissa’s brow creased in concern. “I’m sure you need to be careful, but surely there’s someone available that you can *talk with*. You need to process, not just let me know what happened.”

Tala opened her mouth but found she didn’t have anything to say in response, so she just took another bite instead.

Lissa placed her hand on top of Tala’s that was resting on the table. “You are cared for, Mistress.” She gave a reassuring smile. “Is there anything that we can do?”

Tala shrugged. “I was thinking of offering you all a position, working for me, but I don’t know that it would work well.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I need a cook, and some other help, but I think your family would be a bit large. I need help on my outings, and they could be long trips.”

“I see.” The woman actually seemed to consider it for a long moment. “Would it be within reach of teleportation towers and offer funding for trips?”

Tala opened her mouth, then closed it. *That… That is a* brilliant *idea!*

-*Can you teleport out of dimensional spaces?*- An instant later, Alat continued, -*Of course you can, what sort of idiotic question was that? It’ll take a modification of the spell-form, but it can be done.*-

Plus, sending-scripts are much more complicated than the receiving ones.

Alat huffed a laugh. -*Even though the process of receiving is ‘harder.’*-

Such are the oddities of magic.

“That is an excellent question. The answer is probably yes, but I’ll have to check.”

Lissa looked around, clearly taking in the simple, clean restaurant around them before sighing. “While I won’t pretend there aren’t incentives that would get us to agree to something like that, I think that with the kids where they are in school, it would take a lot.”

Tala smiled. She’d not really expected to find help so easily, though it would have been nice. “That’s understandable.”

The woman must have felt bad about the refusal because she continued her explanation. “Brand’s nine siblings all live here in this city, as do his folks.” Lissa smiled. “His parents moved here, away from his extended family, so he only sees his aunts and uncles and their descendants

when he travels." Her smile turned quite fond. "We got a bit of a late start; he didn't find me until he had traveled a bit, and it took longer still before he convinced me to come back to Bandfast, to his family. I don't know that I could stand leaving all that I know, not again. It would be very difficult to leave our community behind. I'm so sorry."

"No, no. It's more than fine, and I completely understand." *I can't empathize, but I understand.*

Lissa had opened her mouth to continue, but paused, seeming to consider what Tala had said. "Oh, alright then."

Tala looked around. "The shop's a bit slow today, isn't it?"

Lissa gave her an odd look, then smiled. "School's getting out in the next hour or so, and most adults are at work. We get a few customers at these times, but the real business is done closer to normal mealtimes."

"Ah, yeah, that makes sense."

The two women fell into comfortable silence as Tala continued to eat.

Finally, it looked like Lissa was about to stand, so Tala asked, "Can you tell me about your children? How are they?"

The woman paused, then gave a hesitant smile. "Are you sure? It is kind of you to ask, but…"

Tala smiled and nodded. "I'd love to hear, if you're willing."

And so, Lissa settled back in the chair and began to tell of her family with the passion only a parent could muster.

In the little stories and anecdotes, Tala heard echoes of her own family, her siblings, and it pulled at her heart.

-I have the message composed to send to Master Leighis. He'll deliver it to your family with haste.-

Tala hesitated a long while, listening to Lissa pour out her love for her family. Finally, she relented. *Send it.*

-Done.-

The next hour passed just as pleasantly.

Lissa served the few customers that came through, but none stayed, so the woman always returned to Tala's table, and they continued to chat about Brand and Lissa's family.

In the end, Tala stayed until the kids came to the shop, and their mother had other things that she had to get done.

They parted with smiles and quick hugs.

Tala insisted on paying for her large meal, in the end going so far as leaving two silver coins on the counter as she hurried out the door.

The cool air wrapped around her as the door swung shut in her wake.

Tala almost turned towards the next restaurant, but Lissa's words had been marinating in her head for a bit now.

I need to talk with someone.

Alat sent positive agreement but wisely didn't say anything.

Without delaying, or giving herself a chance to change her mind, Tala turned towards the Archon Compound.

Mistress Ingrit would likely not be the right person to chat with, but given the fact that Tala wanted to be able to speak frankly, openly, and without censoring herself, the Librarian should be a good person to check with for recommendations.

Following her new pattern, Tala took her time walking through the now somewhat busier, late-afternoon city streets.

She was careful not to walk slowly enough to cause issues with those around her, but she definitely didn't rush.

Even so, she got to the compound before she was quite ready and was halfway down the hallway to the Arcanum when Alat grabbed her attention.

-Oh! Mistress Elnea is ready to come out.-

Tala pulled Kit from her belt and tossed it against the depiction of a thunderbull.

A door blossomed into being, matching the surrounding aesthetics as usual. It swung open, revealing rolling hills, and given the style and setting, Tala halfway expected to see a thunderbull charging her through the generous opening.

That really is a spectacular ability.

The sun was setting on the rolling hills within the sanctum, and the false sky was painted in stunning colors that Tala wished she could sit and soak in. *Soon.*

-Maybe, the person you talk to will want to sit in your sanctum?-

Yeah, that would be really nice.

Now that the door was open, Mistress Elnea strode out of the dimensional storage, her face practically glowing with excitement. "Mistress Tala. I am continually impressed with your sanctum. I would like to negotiate for the ability to station at least two researchers within, though we'll have to work out logistics so that you aren't inconvenienced."

Tala nodded. "I am open to the idea. Do you know how dimensional storages hold up with teleportation senders and anchors?"

The woman opened her mouth, then closed it. After a moment's thought, she nodded. "Normally, I would say it would put undue stress on the integrity of the space, but your sanctum is *much* more stable than standard. I think that with the proper reinforcement and more precise, delicate spellwork, that should be possible." She was tapping her jaw, below her right ear, clearly deep in thought. "That could be an incredible asset, actually."

"So, if I understand your proposal correctly, you'll look into this possibility first. Then, once we know a bit more, we can negotiate a rate and compensation package for my allowance of the long-term studying of my sanctum. Is that correct?"

Mistress Elnea nodded absently. "Yes, yes. I'll reach out in the next few days. I've granted you Archive access to the raw data from my measurements today. As I interpret the readings and compile them, I'll keep you in the loop."

Tala bowed, taking Kit from the wall as she straightened. "Thank you, Mistress Elnea. I appreciate that."

-I found it… Wow. There is a LOT of information here.-

"Of course, Mistress Tala." She opened her dimensional storage and held out a hand.

Understanding, Tala handed over the founts one at a time, Rob last. "Goodbye, Rob. I may see you again, but I may not."

"Coward! Destroy me!"

Mistress Elnea tucked the orb away with a shake of her head before nodding in thanks to Tala. "Good night to you."

"Good night."

The Head of the Archon Council walked back towards the entry hall, likely either leaving to head home or going to a different wing to get some work done.

Tala hesitated, standing in the ornate hallway.

-Tala?-

I'm going, I'm going. She took the first step, and that made the next easier.

Soon enough she stepped into the Arcanum proper and found Mistress Ingrit already waiting for her.

"Good evening, Mistress Tala, right this way."

The Librarian looked perfectly put together, relaxed, and in supreme command of herself and the situation.

Tala felt herself relax, even if just slightly as she smiled at the woman. "Good evening, Mistress Ingrit."

Together, they walked to a booth that was seemingly prepared for them, hot tea already ready with two cups set out.

I haven't taken the time for tea in… too long.

-We can correct that, too.-

"Now, Mistress Tala, what brings you here this evening?"

"Well, I actually do have a lot of questions for you, but first and foremost, before I lose the nerve to ask, I need someone to talk to, to process my experiences with."

"Ahh, yes. A good therapist is worth their weight in gold."

"Precisely." Tala looked away, feeling a bit awkward. "Plus, all that I experienced… I imagine that much isn't really…"

Mistress Ingrit nodded. "Someone who can hear everything is a must. Did you have someone in mind, and you want me to vet them and get the clearance?"

"I was actually hoping that you might have someone to recommend."

The Librarian cocked her head to one side, thinking. “A few names come to mind, but I’d like to give it some thought, if you don’t mind.”

Tala nodded, her smile returning. “I’d appreciate that. Thank you.”

“Now, what else can I do for you?”

“Well, I’ll just get a few of the topics out there and let you address them as you see fit.”

“As you wish.”

“How is the Culinary Guild’s information proceeding? How is the process around my own information coming along? What are you negotiating for on my behalf?”

“The short answer with regard to the Culinary Guild is that they are making great strides in connecting with the Constructionist Guild, and they are *very* happy with you. There is no obligation towards you, nor anything truly owed, but I would not be surprised if they would grant you *much*, so long as the request was within reason.”

“Good to know. Thank you.”

The woman gave a pleased nod. “Of course. As to your own information, there have been *hundreds* of inquiries from experts of all stripes. For basic, surface-level information, you have received some gold, but that is the least of what is available. My recommendation is that you come to me with anything you might need, and I will connect you with someone who can provide it. I imagine it will be a *long* time before you need to pay for anything or have trouble accessing a resource at need. Speaking of which, Mistress Holly has requested the rights to procure experts and resources on your behalf for your Refining.”

Tala frowned. “She already asked me if she could bring others in. Why reach out to you?”

“Oh.” The woman smiled. “I apologize, I was not clear. She requested the ability to pay for experts and resources using what I have negotiated for on your behalf.”

“Why wouldn’t she ask me?”

“With all due respect, even with the gold I’ve gotten you, you could not afford the things or people that she wants to use.”

Tala blinked a few times. “Well, one thing at a time. How much gold have you gotten for me?”

The woman shrugged. “Three hundred eight gold and a smattering of lesser coinage.”

Tala sat back, dumbstruck. “What?”

“Generally, I used a small fee to ensure that we didn’t have to entertain thousands of unnecessary requests. A fee of even two gold won’t deter anyone who could really use this information, and for those same people, it is a meaningless amount.”

“And you’ve gotten hundreds of requests.”

“Of course. I only charge metal for the initial request. Beyond that, I build up relational capital on your behalf, as well as debts to be cashed in later. Money is nice, and I will continue to ensure you have that, but there is much that money *can’t* buy.” She gave a knowing smile. “Like having the head of Alefast’s Archon Council personally escort you here or having the head of our own Council personally helping you to research your artifacts and their intricacies. Though, that one was a favor *gain* for you, rather than a withdrawal.”

Tala shook her head in disbelief. “I suppose I don’t really understand how it all works.”

“That’s alright, dear. Resources are limited, and so there is much that money simply cannot buy, no matter how much you have. I am working to ensure that will never be a barrier for you.”

“So, another siphon fascia?”

The woman smiled. “I don’t believe it would be useful to you, but yes, if you wanted one, I believe I could have one delivered to you within the week.”

That was… startling. *Connections are more valuable than money, and Mistress Ingrit is building us a network.*

-We should ask her for an accounting, all the same.-

Good idea. "Could we get an accounting of what was granted to whom and what you feel that means? I want to learn."

"Oh, absolutely. I have that accounting and can grant you access immediately, if you so desire, but I recommend that we hold off. You are still settling in, and I'd be concerned that you'd become bogged down in the specifics."

Tala considered. "How about next week?"

"If that is your wish. I am happy to grant it now or at any time. My intent was simply for you to consider not taking on more before you've processed what you already have on your plate."

"That is… probably wise."

The woman smiled encouragingly.

"Well, I suppose that's all on those topics. Next, I'm curious about the Doman-Imithe and the mobile towns in the plains beyond the forest."

"Not much to tell on both fronts. Your experiences in, and knowledge of, the Doman-Imithe are and will continue to be in high demand, more than I think you realize. We know of the place in theory, but to my knowledge, no one in living memory has been there and returned."

"Yeah, about that. Master Jevin said that Archons have traveled the solar system and come back, but my understanding is that the Doman-Imithe is the only thing that can be entered, once you leave the planet."

"I've not left myself. Maybe you could test out the theories? It does seem like humanity and arcanes have different theories and understandings of what exists outside this world."

“And what of the towns?”

She shrugged. “Anyone capable of getting there knows of them, and knowledge of them isn’t restricted in the least, but we don’t specifically talk about them, partially because if even one percent of our population tried to go there, they could overwhelm the infrastructure. They are far more closed-off communities than our cities, and you have to petition to be allowed to move into one. Again, we don’t hide their existence, but there’s no good reason to advertise it either.”

“I suppose I can understand that.” *I have to ask at some point…* So, she turned to a darker question. “What does it really mean that so many founts are being used by the arcanes? Are they actually enslaved souls? I know that Master Boma and others are researching the issue, and I turned over several founts to Mistress Elnea, but I’m… I’m conflicted.”

Mistress Ingrit’s shoulders dropped slightly, and she leaned forward, looking down at the table for a moment. “That is a matter of some debate. As you’ve gathered, there doesn’t really seem to be a natural personality to a gate, at least not one we know how to interact with. Even so, we know from some research stolen in ages past that different gates power arcane technology differently, and the specifics of a particular gate must be taken into account.”

“So, more like wood from a different tree?”

“That’s one way to look at it, I suppose. The prevailing theory is that the personality of the soul can only exist in one realm at a time, so when the person dies, the personality manifests in the next world, rather than remaining here. What is left behind is more akin to what used to be on the other side. It is a link, without being a true person.”

“So, not harmful?”

“That is one belief, yes. It then makes the act of using gates like the repurposing of organs or bones after death, rather than a long-term torment of the deceased.”

“But that’s not the only theory.”

“No. No, it is not. Some believe that we simply lack the ability to hear the soul’s torment, though it is generally accepted that the gates *can* close themselves, even against opposition trying to keep them in place, so that puts the ‘torment’ theory in doubt.”

“Huh.” Tala grimaced in frustration. “It’s not really cut and dry, is it?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“Well, then. I don’t suppose there’s much more to glean on that topic for now. I believe that you saw the Leshkin… generals in my memory. I would hope that they are not unknown.”

“They are a known element. They are the second most powerful variant of Leshkin we have encountered, the third most powerful that we are aware of, and the weakest of those capable of speech and true higher reasoning.”

“Why is that? Weren’t they all sapient before?”

“That is actually also a topic of some debate. They were never a truly prolific species, and some of our experts believe that part of their downfall came about because they tried to replicate human gates. Unfortunately, instead of bifurcating their souls and letting one half die, creating a thing like the human gate, their souls were shattered and scattered into the surrounding forests.”

“That’s why they can recombine?”

“That is one theory.”

Tala grunted. She was about to move on when she fully processed something that the woman had said. “Wait, there is a variant more powerful than any human has encountered?”

“Yes.”

“How do we know?”

“Extensive studies of species. Four generals, bound together with *something* else, forges a royal. To our knowledge, there are only eight distinct royals, but we don’t know how the specific personality is selected. Four royals, joined together by one of their sacred cores, would theoretically create a god of the forest.”

Tala blinked. “What?”

-What?-

“In the earliest Leshkin Wars, two artifacts of incredible power were stolen from the fledgling Leshkin. They are the Leshkins’ professed reason for waging war upon us.”

“But if we returned them…”

“They would theoretically have the ability to create Transcendent or Sovereign-level entities. Specifically, they could have two. From what little I know about the balance of arcane Sovereigns, two so united in purpose would have a chance of changing the face of Zeme.”

“That’s… terrifying.”

“Indeed. It is also why those cores were long ago placed beyond reach so that no well-meaning person could be deceived into returning them.”

Is it bad that I want to find them and merge them into my soulbonds?

-Yes, Tala. That is a bit overly ambitious.-

Fine…

-…Did you really not expect me to notice you adding that to your mental ‘to-do’ list?-

Hush. I need long-term goals.

“Now, what more can I answer for you?” The older woman smiled.

Alright, the harder topics… “Were we aware that the Mind Flayer was dead?”

Mistress Ingrit shook her head, her countenance falling slightly. “It was not common knowledge, no, but I was not surprised. He was a great friend to all the peoples of Zeme, at least in his later years. I don’t know that humanity had contact with him in the recent centuries.”

“Did we know that he had apprentices? People he taught his magics?”

“Yes, though last we heard, most were… not well regarded, not specifically because of bad actions, more because of what they were capable of. The Mind Flayer earned his place as a friend to all, and his apprentices didn’t.”

“Well, there are no more. Even his apprentices’ apprentices are gone. To my understanding, that line of magic is broken.”

Nodding, Mistress Ingrit looked down at her hands, resting in her lap, for a long moment. “That is good to know. There really was so much of import in your experiences, not all of it has really *settled* within my mind yet. Mind manipulation magic is a dangerous tool, and while its loss is unfortunate, I cannot say I am sad that those who had it are no more.”

Tala nodded as well. “And in that vein, has the security breach that allowed Be-thric into the city been closed? The arcanes seemed to believe that Clevenhold was even less well-defended than here, and they got a potential Pillar in to hunt among our people.” She tried to keep the anger from her voice, but she didn’t succeed. “To hunt *me*.”

“His breaching of our cities was a combination of his mental magics and a stolen collar, which was inclusive enough to allow its use on arcanes. I did see the conversation about Clevenhold, and I have notified the local Archon Council on your behalf.”

“To earn goodwill?”

“Precisely. I used my own name and standing to give weight to the warning, but they know that the actual information came from you.”

“Thank you.”

“As to if the breach he used has been closed?” Mistress Ingrit sighed. “No, but there is also no one else who could exploit it. Theoretically, a through-spike could bypass any city’s automated defenses as well as give an arcane an illusion to hide within, but those are highly controlled, and they show up on the city’s defense grid like a beacon, even if not as a threat. They are always investigated, even if just from afar.”

“And a collar, by itself, wouldn’t deal with an arcane’s visual difference.”

“Precisely.”

“What about a collar with a visual illusion?”

“Possible, but difficult. Any sufficiently advanced Archon could at least detect the presence of an illusion, and we do watch our cities rather closely. Be-thric slipped unnoticed because he did not project magic around himself. His acts of power were highly targeted and internal to his targets, making them doubly difficult to notice. I cannot swear that there are not holes in our defenses, as that would be foolishly optimistic, but they are not as glaring as your experience might imply.”

“I suppose I can understand that.”

“Now, it is getting late, was there anything else?”

Tala thought for a moment. *I think that is it for now, but it’s probably worth verifying.* “Should we modify my death clause to ensure that any information I gain in the future is not lost?”

Mistress Ingrit shook her head. “No, no. The standard magics are sufficient. If you don’t access your personal section of the Archive for three years, the designated portions will be reverted to the Library.”

Tala nodded; that was how she remembered it. “Thank you then. Good night, Mistress Ingrit.”

“Good night, Mistress Tala.”

Chapter: 18
Payoff

Tala stood before the Bandfast Banking Guild for the second time in her life.

I'd say it would be the last, but I bet I'll have more business with them in the future at some point.

-Agreed. Having access to greater capital could help down the line… or not? None of our current projects or potential projects should need it.-

Tala shrugged. *Never say never. Half of what we want to do, now, wouldn't have crossed our mind even a year ago.*

-That's the truth, and maybe that should say something about the wisdom of the ideas.-

Tala huffed a laugh, grateful for the momentary distraction.

She felt an odd sort of nervous tension. She felt like *something* would stop her before she could do this.

The prominent building jutted up before her; a beautiful, stone building, eye-catching without being ostentatious.

Massively tall windows let light into the single-story structure, and that single story was nearly twenty-five feet high on the inside. Its large entrance opened onto a small park space in which Tala now stood.

The green area had clearly been designed more for looks and to walk through rather than for families or children to play in, and that was evident even in the wintery weather, the beauty shining through. Some of the statues looked even more stunning with a light sprinkling of snow.

I wonder if the sculptor did that on purpose? Regardless, this park really is a lovely touch. Calming clients and potential clients and putting them in a happier mood before they entered.

She walked through the bank's large double doors, closing them softly behind herself. Even as she did so, she noticed flickers of magic that would have accomplished the same thing on their own. *They have artifact doors, hooked to the city's system?*

-One-time expense? They probably move them along with the guild when a city is abandoned, so why not?-

That was a really good point, actually, and it suddenly made so many things click into place. How many of the little services in the cities were handled by artifacts that had been made once, thousands of years ago, and then moved from city to city?

She knew that many businesses used inscribed items, but that just made sense. Why invest in something that's going to last ten thousand years, with proper maintenance, if an inscribed item costs a tenth of the amount and lasts a full city cycle?

It's a bit shortsighted, but both last longer than a single lifetime for mundanes, so I can see the reason for each.

She turned away from the doors and was greeted by an environment that was somehow more archival than that of the Library she'd just left. The rugs were thick, acting as sound dampeners in the vast space rather than as walking or standing comforts. *I suppose the Library uses architecture and magic to dampen the sound. This is probably cheaper.*

Large, unicolor hangings periodically decorated the walls. They weren't tapestries, simply being lengths of cloth, no artistry, no embellishments at all. *Those are different colors than last time I was in here.*

So were the rugs, now that she thought about it.

Before, she'd come in the fall, and the hangings and rugs had been fall colors, bold and beautiful, dark and earthy. Now, they were winter colors, cool and crisp jewel-tones. *That's a nice touch.*

As she stepped a bit farther in, she felt a small magical probe slide across her through-spike illusion and heard a distinctive *ding* echo through the far part of the room.

Almost immediately, a gray-haired woman bustled out. She was straight-backed, and she held a slate of deep green stone. It was a familiar sight, even if only from Tala's last visit.

The banker stopped before Tala and gave a deep bow. "Mistress Archon. Welcome to our humble Guildhall."

Tala smiled, giving a shallow bow in return. "Good evening. I am Tala."

"Greetings, Mistress Tala. I am Sangfraw, one of the senior bursars of this branch of the Banker's Guild. How may I assist you this day?"

"A pleasure to meet you, mistress Sangfraw." The woman wasn't a Mage or inscribed at all, that Tala could detect. "I need to make a payment on my debts."

Sangfraw looked a bit surprised but immediately hid it. "Certainly, Mistress. If you would?" She held out the slate, and a small, gold-outlined square grew into existence, centered near the edge that was extended toward Tala.

Tala smiled. "Thank you." She reached out, placing her thumb within the square and willing her power out, into the slate for verification.

The entire tablet shifted to blood red, as Tala had expected, and she tried not to grimace at the reminder. *My power is steeped in blood, and I was built up for use by the House of Blood.*

-That was their aim. They failed, and you succeeded. You are your own.-

That was true enough.

Only then did Tala notice infinitesimally thin, black lines in the slate that looked more like cracks than coloration. *What? Did I break it?*

She'd been very careful to not send too much power into the verification magics. Her enhanced vision could discern that they weren't *actual* cracks, but it still made Tala nervous. She looked up at the banker hesitantly.

Sangfraw simply smiled, seemingly unable to see the not-cracks. "Thank you, Mistress."

Do you think it's from the void-magics we carry?

-We don't have any in our body or gate, but that is the only explanation that makes sense to me. We are connected to quite a bit of void-magic, after all.-

The banker led her to a couple of *very* comfortable-looking chairs and gestured to one.

Tala slowly sank into the seat, and while it groaned under her, it held.

Based on her somewhat limited practice, she could tell that she was subconsciously holding most of the weight of her iron up and away from the furnishings.

Sangfraw settled at the front edge of her own chair, sitting as primly and straight-backed as any Mage.

Tala was only slightly less prim, but only because she had situated herself all the way in the seat. Her posture was no less impeccable.

The banker examined the slate for a moment before looking up. "Mistress Tala, it seems that you have automatic payments set up with us and that you are current on your debts. The next automatic payment will be made in just under two weeks' time. How can I assist you, today?"

Tala smiled. "I would like to make a payment and cancel my automatic withdrawals."

“Certainly.” The woman was the picture of politeness, manipulating her slate for a moment. “I have that noted in the system, and we will confirm shortly, along with your payment. For that transaction, would you like to pay the minimum or some other amount?”

“I would like to pay the balance, please.”

The woman rocked back slightly, obviously surprised. “Mistress, please pardon if I overstep, but you realize that this debt does not accrue interest, correct?”

“I am aware, yes.”

“If it is not overbold of me, this seems fiscally unwise. You could take that same amount and invest it in any number of ventures. Are you sure? We are happy to advise you, or even offer you a basic account with minimal restrictions that would give you a quite fair rate of return.”

Tala nodded firmly. “I am sure, though I appreciate you voicing your thoughts. What is the exact balance of my debts, at this time?”

“Three hundred eighty-one gold and twenty silver, Mistress.”

She nodded again. *Rust, that’s so much. We have enough, right?* Her nervousness was threatening to boil over.

-In our account, after Mistress Ingrit’s transfer, we have five hundred nineteen gold, ninety-three silver, and one hundred fifty-two copper.-

Tala felt her eye twitch, even as the nervousness faded. *A ‘yes’ would have sufficed.*

-We like precision.-

Tala suppressed a smile. “Thank you. Yes, I would like to pay it off in full.”

“May I ask why?” The woman looked genuinely baffled, though she maintained a professional tone.

Tala shrugged. “I don’t mind telling you. This debt has emotional weight for me, and I wish to lighten that load.”

The banker smiled warmly. “Ahh, of course. Say no more, Mistress. Thank you for entertaining an old woman’s questions.”

“Of course. It is kind of you to ensure that I am making a cognizant decision.”

It’s happening. It’s happening!

Alat simply sent back her own bubbling excitement.

Sangfraw nodded to herself as she manipulated the red slate, setting up the last details, then turned the tablet back around for Tala’s confirmation. “Well, then, Mistress Tala, congratulations on paying off your debt in full.”

Tala read over the short bits of silvery text and confirmed.

The construct shifted back to green, and Sangfraw bowed over it. “Is there anything further that I can assist you with today?”

“No, thank you. I appreciate your kindness, professionalism, and the time that you took to assist me.”

Sangfraw smiled genuinely in response as they stood together from the seats. “It was my pleasure, Mistress. I hope that we see you again, if ever the Banking Guild can be of service to you.”

They each gave a half-bow and parted ways.

Tala got all the way outside before her glee bubbled up from deep within her, and she started giggling.

She made it halfway through the small park before the giggling grew to outright laughter.

Thankfully, at the somewhat late hour there weren't many people about. Even so, those that were passing nearby gave her odd glances and hurried on their way.

Tala flopped down on a bench, sending up a puff of loose snow, and her laughter shifted again, morphing into mad cackling.

-*Tala?*-

She didn't answer, instead wrapping her arms around herself, hugging tightly.

-*Tala, I can read your thoughts, and I'm still… uncertain. Tala?*-

Tears had started to stream down her face, and her cackling shifted into sobs as her whole body shook.

-*Oh, Tala…*-

"That's it? In an instant, it's gone?" A huge, shuddering sob burst from her before she could continue, "Years of stress and torture, strain and division, gone in a single moment?"

She bent forward, placing her head in her hands and bawling.

Her tears weren't for any one thing, not really.

She cried over her capture and her escape.

She wept over the injustice of her debt and the triviality of finally paying it off.

She sobbed at what she had been forced to do to survive, and in fear that this was somehow a lie, that she was still back in Platoiri and that she would never be free.

There, in the small park beside the Banking Guild, Tala's emotions, long bottled up and neglected, finally broke free.

Alone in a city of her own people, she let herself truly *feel* for the first time in a long while, and now that the tears had started, it took a long time for them to subside.

* * *

The next week passed in a blur. Given her required week of rest, Tala scheduled time to meet up with Mistress Odera the following week. Master Xeel had similarly asked for time to talk with her and been scheduled for that week.

Master Grediv had returned to Alefast, Waning, but before he left, he went out of his way to ensure that Tala knew that she could call on him if she needed.

Tala took as much time to enjoy her freedom as she could, eating most meals with Lyn, Rane, or both.

She read extensively, both from Alat's summaries and from the original texts when she wanted to compare to the primary source. It was an odd experience, somewhat like reading a book on something that she had been taught, orally, while growing up.

It wasn't *new*, but it was usually enlightening.

That made sense, as Alat's goal hadn't been to give her a perfect recreation of the information. Instead, Alat tried to structure the summaries for Tala to understand the general concepts faster and build a stronger foundation in whatever the specific subject was.

Tala exercised around her reading, finding that she could work different muscles and add to the effectiveness of the sets by altering how her iron weighed on her. After all, doing pushups worked far more muscles when her center of mass was constantly shifting.

It was through those exercises that she realized that she could also work in the opposite direction, purposely shifting her center of mass to give her balance and stability in stances and extensions that would be otherwise impossible simply because of the leverage involved.

To relax, she took long walks through the city, simply soaking in the feel of humanity. She sat in parks, watching families or neighborhoods of kids build in the snow, fight with snowballs, and otherwise enjoy the winter weather.

She avoided the guards, even though she knew they wouldn't pressure her to train with them. She just wasn't ready for yet another reunion.

She did send a slightly more detailed note to her family through Master Leighis, however. She knew that Nalac and Illie would likely communicate with her family from the Academy, and she wanted more details of her return to come from her, not from those younger siblings.

The only thing of true note that she did around her reading, exercising, and relaxing was to give the Leshkin Juggernaut weaponry to Rane, and he merged them with Force.

Previously, he'd merged Force with a few of the swords that they'd taken during their Makinaven caravan run. Now, he was adding all of the weaponry, regardless of type.

The very nature of the Leshkin weaponry, like their armor, was to form available material into various forms for battle. The obvious result of the merging with so many such weapons was that Force was now able to alter its shape, though the method and results would be different from either Flow or most morphic weapons that Tala had encountered.

Sadly, she'd have to wait until her body was fixed before she could spar with the man and truly see what his weapon was capable of.

They'd had Flow analyzed before Rane's merging, and while the weapons *could* have been merged with Tala's weapon, it wouldn't have granted any improvement. Even the weapons that were different from one of Flow's three forms wouldn't have expanded its capabilities.

In Master Boma's words, "It's too weighty of a magical item, bound to you, and settled into its form. You'd need something of at least equal power to expand it now."

From Tala's perspective, it was pretty obvious that the void sword had been a major contributor in this regard. That was even more obvious when she looked back.

Flow had been merged with multiple Juggernaut weapons in the past, and the void sword had been so potent in the merging that its power had spilled over into Tala's elk leathers.

At Master Boma's words, she had immediately thought of the god orbs that were supposedly hidden from human and Leshkin alike.

Alat had immediately created the feeling of a slap to the back of Tala's head. -*How about we look into the general weapons or maybe those from the royals. Or we could even branch out away from Leshkin items altogether.*-

We'll have to wait for the Leshkin Wars for general or royal weapons.

-*Oh no! A hundred years? How will we survive.*- The last had not been a question, and Alat made sure to project her feelings quite loudly.

Fine… spoilsport.

Now, after a week, Tala was due at Mistress Holly's in about an hour, and she was doing the last of her newest type of exercise.

Iron arched through the air, forming the vague shape of a fist as it slammed into the ground in front of Tala, barely connected to her by a thin tendril.

She was in a training room within the Archon Compound, and the walls and floor flickered with magic that barely had to activate to contain the rather weak hit.

She was moving through her forms, Flow shifting in her hands as she followed the Way of Flowing Blood.

Her bloodstar-core items moved in their prescribed patterns along with her, covering her weaknesses and making her incredibly difficult to hit.

On top of those manipulations, she had added sweeping strikes of iron.

Tala didn't have the control to form anything close to a blade, so more than anything, her efforts created what was effectively an iron club or other vague shapes.

Because of that, Tala mainly made them act as a shadow behind Flow's movements, but she was trying to alter the movements to be more effective than simply a trailing, secondary strike.

The iron 'punch' to the floor, paired with a knife parry, had been one such attempt.

She grimaced at the results. *No, a vertical strike at their feet doesn't make sense with this parry.*

-What about a grab and pull down towards us?-

That was an interesting idea. It would be more like an iron club striking down towards her own feet and rolling back and out. It did fit much better with the knife parry than the 'punch' had.

Alright. Let's try it.

Tala moved back to the beginning of the form and moved through each movement with a liquid grace that was easily utterly beyond anything a mundane human could accomplish.

Through every stance and strike, she felt the phantom touch of that annoying bear, who would have knocked her flat for any instability.

I hate that rusting cuddly bit of slag.

-He was an effective teacher, though.-

Oh, no doubt. I hope he's doing alright.

She got back to the knife parry, and her iron moved in the newly prescribed pattern.

It felt better, adding weight to the block in a way that might even cripple the theoretical attacker in addition to keeping her own flesh from damage.

There we go.

She continued on, finishing out this particular form. She was only altering one movement at a time to prevent from fracturing her fighting ability by having too many things in flux at once.

Not that I should be fighting for a while.

After she came back into her starting fighting stance and held it for a moment, she dropped her hands and groaned, looking towards the ceiling in purely mental exhaustion.

"Ow…"

Manipulating the iron felt like using an unfamiliar muscle, but not a weak one that had never been used. No, that would be relatively easy for her to deal with.

Instead, it was an incredibly powerful, involuntary muscle that she suddenly had exclusively voluntary control over.

It was like she suddenly had to control her own heartbeat, perfectly regulating each chamber, synchronizing the valves, and not being either too powerful or too weak on any beat.

It was *exhausting* trying to regulate and manipulate every aspect simultaneously, seemingly without end.

-Like trying to control every muscle fiber individually and consciously as you reach to pick up a glass of water?-

Exactly… And that analogy reminded her that she was thirsty. She pulled out her cold-water incorporator and took a deep drink.

The arcanes saw no use for incorporators, and so even if the items had been seen, they wouldn't have been taken. Even so, using one as Tali would have been *incredibly* out of character.

As such, she'd utterly fallen out of the practice.

Like with so many other things, she was purposely overcorrecting, now that she was back with the bulk of humanity.

-*We need to get over to Mistress Holly's*.-

Tala nodded, tucking away the incorporator. She mirrored self-cleaning onto herself and hopped up and down, freeing herself of the grime of her workout.

She then undid her hair, ran her comb through it, and quickly re-braided it with nimble fingers.

Let's go.

Chapter: 19
That is the Plan

Tala walked into Mistress Holly's back room, and the Inscriptionist didn't even look up from the slate she was studying.

The woman pointed toward a side table with a mug on it. "Coffee?"

Tala shrugged and walked over. "Thank you, sure."

She picked up the mug and found it empty.

Frowning, Tala turned toward the woman and found her glaring.

"So, you have fully regressed, have you? Not just a one-time thing?"

Tala felt her eye twitch. "I've only had a few cups of coffee. That is hardly regressing."

Mistress Holly set her slate aside and rubbed her own temples with two fingers on each side, closing her eyes in frustration. "Mistress Tala. Your body is being slowly torn apart by your soul, which it is Fused to. It's a cascading effect. Caffeine is a *poison.* The fact that it's too low a dosage to kill you outright is meaningless. It isn't doing good things to you, and it is pushing you in the wrong direction."

Tala bristled, and Alat provided her with the exact information, which Tala used to push back. "I've had a total of twelve cups in the last week. That is hardly an issue. I've had more sugar than caffeine."

"Ahh, yes. I was going to discuss that with you as well."

Her eye twitched again. "What?"

“There is a long list of things that people eat that you’re going to need to avoid until you Refine. I hope you’ve enjoyed your little bender this last week.”

“Bender? Are you serious? I’ve been refilling my stores. One of the core parts of that is calories.”

“Yes, you’ve been getting by with whatever calories you can find, but you have multiple, wonderfully balanced sources of calories and nutrients. Your sanctum foods are specifically designed for you, for that exact purpose, and you aren’t utilizing that resource at all. Additionally, you should still have a stock of meals from the Culinary Guild, and even if you didn’t, you could get some without question.”

Tala opened her mouth, then closed it sullenly. She *had* been indulging a bit in the last week. Arcane food had been good in its own way, but the flavors weren’t quite the same, the ratios of spices balanced differently, and she had been glorying in the tastes of home. *But that’s hardly a bender…*

-She’s obviously being extreme to get your attention.-

Oh, I know, but it still irritates me…

“But, we can address that as part of the holistic approach. I have your updated scripts. Given your density, and extenuating circumstances, this will be the last set.”

“Do I need to drain those I already have?”

“No, no. I’ll be adding some connections, a few offshoots, and sub-workings. I anticipated something like these in the previous design, I just hadn’t figured out and perfected exactly what they would need to be.”

“Were the consultations helpful?”

“With the other experts?” Mistress Holly gave her an odd look. “Of course, that’s why I sought them out.”

Tala suppressed a smile at the woman’s obvious incredulity at having to answer such a question. “So, how long will I need these updated scripts before we can perform the Refining?”

“Well, with your magical density and other quirks, I suspect we could make the inscriptions set sufficiently to work in a few days, if we pushed it.” Before Tala could get too excited, the Inscriptionist continued, “But that won’t be the deciding factor, timewise. As you well know, your Refining will be trickier. Several of those experts will be coming, and we’re going to have to modify the process for your… unique aspects.”

“Ah. And how long will that take?”

“We believe we’ll have it ready within a month, but we won’t rush. The proper solution is worth whatever amount of time it takes. We could permanently cripple you, or effectively so. If we decide it needs your remaining decade for research, I expect you to accept that verdict and keep yourself safe and undamaged until then.”

Tala grimaced but didn’t argue. “Fine. I will… I will listen to you and the other experts.”

A small smile pulled at Mistress Holly’s lips. “You’ve matured, haven’t you?”

Tala gave her a flat look, not letting herself twitch at the unintentional reference to her advancement in the arcane system.

By their measure, Tala was ‘Mature,’ and that reminder made her want to grit her teeth.

She didn’t.

She didn’t even let herself consider it.

Not one bit. “I just came from a place where being disrespectful or pointlessly obstinate could get me killed.”

“Ahh, yes. That would do it, I suppose. It’s a shame that such training tactics aren’t widely accepted in these parts.”

She gave the older Archon an incredulous look. “Really?”

Mistress Holly shrugged. “Effective is effective, and it’s sad when an effective tool is taken from our collective toolbox.” She hesitated for a moment. “Not the killing, of course, simply the harsh measures to ensure proper decorum and respect.”

That made too much sense to Tala, though she wasn’t sure if that was because it was actually logical or if her time away had distorted her sense of how things should be and what was reasonable.

That made Tala a bit uncomfortable, so she decided to get back on topic.

“So, get my inscriptions altered here, change my eating until this process is complete, and Refine in a month or so in the best case?”

“Yes, that is the plan as I’ve just outlined it.”

Tala sighed. “Honestly, why bother?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why does it really matter? Sure, if we used the standard process, it would move me away from human, but I’m hardly a standard specimen of humanity anymore.”

Mistress Holly uncharacteristically pulled a stool over and sat down. “We have no idea what it would actually do to you. On the simple side, it could kill you, instantly.”

Tala blinked at that. “I didn’t think that was a possibility.”

“It’s not really likely, but it is possible. Aside from that, it would almost certainly sterilize you, likely irreparably so. It could block you from the higher ranks as well, depending on exactly

what happened, even if you didn't die. More than that, it could alter your mind, your thoughts, your very self to the point that you wouldn't really be 'you' anymore."

Tala opened her mouth and closed it several times, considering. "That… that is a lot worse than I really considered."

Mistress Holly huffed a laugh. "Master Jevin wears it well, but he is the *best* outcome of such an error in Refining. There is a reason why none of us are willing to risk it on your behalf."

"Alright. Let's get it done, then."

"Iron out, please."

Tala grimaced. "Can't I just move it into the dimensions of magic?"

Mistress Holly gave her an incredulous look. "Where do you think my needles pass through to bypass your flesh, dear?"

"Ah…" Well, that was good to know, actually. "Wait, doesn't that mean that I didn't need to remove iron from my skin for earlier inscriptions?"

"Iron, even in the physical dimensions, interferes with magic in the same area. They *probably* would have worked, at least much of the time, but they would have worn out faster, and there would always be the chance of simply shattering a needle, sending the shards into your flesh as the needle's magics broke and the metal fragmented like shatter-tipped arrows."

Tala blanched. "Well"—she paused to swallow nervously—"I'm very glad we didn't test that, then."

"Quite."

She nodded once more and forcefully moved all her non-biological iron down and out, forming a rough cube on the floor beside her.

I'm not abandoning it. It's mine still. I'm just using it right there… as a cube… Stay.

Tala was actually pretty proud of that shape, as it was something she would have struggled to make even a week earlier.

Rane offered to give me some pointers on sculpting the iron, and Master Cazor likely would have some good insights on iron specifically.

-Those are probably good avenues to pursue to improve our manipulation of the material.-

Over the last week, they'd learned that Alat was able to affect the iron as well, so long as Tala wasn't doing so already. Additionally, Alat benefited from Tala's training as if she'd done it herself, so that was incredibly useful.

Once they could spar again, they both thought it could be quite useful to have Alat control the iron more directly and leave Tala free of that detail and distraction.

Mistress Holly brought over the auto-inscriber. It was her current primary project, the culmination of years, if not decades, of research and experimentation. Even so, the Archon seemed less pleased than she usually was when handling her invention.

Tala thought she understood. "The reinscriber is amazing, but it can't make changes, Mistress Holly. This is a more versatile tool."

"Of course, dear. I know that." Even so, Mistress Holly seemed to perk up a bit, a small smile pulling at her lips. "Shall we?"

Tala sighed and nodded, slipping the hedgehog-skin-like device on before retracting her elk leather, leaving her naked and unprotected under the covering of the magical device.

"Let's begin."

* * *

While the inscription process with the auto-inscriber was even less pleasant than Tala remembered, it was much more palatable than using the reinscriber.

-That was a terrible pun.-

Hush you. You don't have to experience the inscription process if you don't want to. I'm stuck with living through it.

-And I am grateful that you maintain my inscriptions so diligently.-

Alat had discovered something that should have been obvious to them both. The alternate interface didn't *have to* experience or access anything that she didn't wish to.

They both knew that every memory she didn't access would move her further from Tala, both in personality and experience wise, but they were already diverging, and neither of them *really* minded.

They functioned more as a team than as two parts of one individual, and they both enjoyed their role within that team.

The decision to allow Alat's continued divergence was helped when Alat figured out that every physical sensation she denied herself from feeling tended to push her further from ever wanting a physical form at all. It was like over dramatizing a fear of something. Every over-the-top act caused the underlying fear to grow.

Every time Alat refused to experience something physical, all physical things became less appealing to her.

Tala refocused on the moment and opened her eyes as the device was loosened around her.

With a flex of will, her elk leathers grew outward, forming clothing incredibly quickly. *I should reform my scale vest. That's a good defense to have, especially as vulnerable as I am right now.*

-Add it to the list?-

Yes, please.

The auto-inscriber came off just after her elk leathers re-covered her, and she smiled at Mistress Holly. “Thank you.”

The woman grunted back as she moved the device back to its holder.

The difference to Tala’s magic was subtle but noticeable since she was looking for it.

The closest thing that she could compare the sensation to was from back when she’d just been learning how to do pushups.

She’d thrown herself through the motions, unwittingly only strengthening parts of the muscle with the jerky motions. When a teacher had finally gotten her to listen and Tala had slowed down, she’d discovered that the middle portion of the motion was *much* harder because she hadn’t been practicing it. Once she got used to doing the exercise properly, the strength had filled in more uniformly.

Her magic felt like that, as if the ‘middle bits’ had finally been filled in, and her power was now acting smoothly through complete actions rather than just pointing in the direction she wanted and shooting power out in the hopes of accomplishing the task.

It wasn’t the greatest analogy, but it made sense to her.

-That’s because you’ve been exercising so much recently. Of course that is the first frame of reference you turn to.-

Yeah, that’s probably fair. Even so, it doesn’t really make sense to draw an analogy to something else esoteric that I’ve been trying to grasp.

-This is like an automata given five fingers rather than two. It’s not able to do more, necessarily, but it is able to do the same things better.-

Tala smirked to herself. *It's like the Doman-Imithe, given centuries without magic eroding Zeme on the other side to recover. It's not any more coherent, but it still provides a better backing to reality.*

-That was a bit of a stretch.-

I did say that it wasn't a good idea to try to analogize one odd subject with another.

-Fair, fair.-

It's like learning that the fighting style you've been using for years has another form, filled with all sorts of more advanced techniques?

-Yeah, that's a good comparison.-

Mistress Holly cleared her throat, and Tala blinked, returning her attention to the woman.

The inscriber was standing, one eyebrow raised in obvious impatience. "Are you quite done with your internal conversation?"

"I am," Tala said sheepishly.

"Incidentally, that is another reason such alternate interfaces are not as common as they might otherwise be. There is an incredible danger of falling into the habit of only talking to yourself, and since the ability and penchant toward working with yourself is required to begin with, the natural safeguards one might assume would be in place in such a situation simply don't exist."

"I will keep that in mind, Mistress Holly."

"If it becomes too much, I can alter the inscriptions to remove the capacity for independent personality."

-That rusting—-

Tala spoke before Alat could finish the thought, "What would that even do?"

“It would make it so your consciousness, at the moment you wished a secondary task to be accomplished, would duplicate, accomplish that task before remerging with you. There would be no true separation, no divergence of experience or personage.”

Tala shook her head. “I don’t see myself wanting that.”

Mistress Holly shrugged. “It’s your mind, dear.”

Tala frowned at that. “You know, I don’t remember you testing if this was a good idea before doing it.”

“Every note ever made about you screamed that this was possible for you.”

She colored, feeling embarrassment rising within her.

“Additionally, it was one of two paths, due to your pre-existing consciousness restoration scripts. Your own mind chose this path, and I saw no reason to prevent it or revert it once it happened.”

“Oh… I suppose that makes sense.”

“Now, I’ve granted you access to an extensive set of guidelines to curb your more self-destructive tendencies and help you avoid bad influences.”

She frowned, remembering the kind assistant who had brought her coffee. “You aren’t going to discipline Mistress Emersen for offering me coffee, are you?”

Mistress Holly huffed. “Of course not, child. I specifically asked her to do so. I needed to get another data point on your mental state, and that was the least intrusive way I could easily come up with.”

Tala really didn’t know how to feel about that.

“We’re done. I’ll let you know when I know more or if we need anything else.”

She nodded and left without another word.

Ironically, Tala now knew Bandfast much better than she had before being taken, just from a week of long walks. She used that knowledge to take a much more scenic, if slightly longer, path back to Lyn's house.

When she had almost arrived, Alat grabbed her attention. -*Mistress Elnea is ready to come out again.*-

Without hesitation, Tala walked to the closest blank wall and placed Kit as a door against it, opening the portal and letting the Archon out.

The woman's recent, perpetual smile was still in evidence as she came out and thanked Tala. Mistress Elnea didn't stick around, as she'd already given Tala and Alat access to a detailed accounting of what she'd done and learned.

She asks for access nearly every day.

-*She keeps getting good information.*-

Oh, absolutely.

The older Archon was a fantastic resource that Tala knew wouldn't be available to her long term.

They'd made progress in modifying teleportation scripts to work with a dimensionally segregated space.

It turned out that it was a line of research that had been explored on occasion. Early caravans had brought an emergency retreat wagon on every venture, and those mobile scripts had been expanded to work with expanded spaces, which were not locationally *fixed.*

The real issue was power and material costs. Additionally, the variations made them incompatible with the modern teleportation towers. So, they needed to create a single location for Tala's circles to connect with.

All of this was problematic for a dozen reasons. It looked like it would happen eventually, but likely not for a month or two at the very earliest.

But that was neither here nor there for the moment.

Tala continued on her way, holding Kit in her hands and gently topping off its reserves as she thought. “I feel I know so little about you, little Kit. We’ve helped each other at every turn, but will it last? Will you decide you’re done with me and just eat everything?”

She didn’t think so, but there was always that possibility.

Just like a person could always decide they’re done with me and leave.

-That’s why trust is so important. Kit has been trustworthy, and I believe that you’ve treated Kit in the same manner.-

That did help.

She hung Kit back on her belt. Tonight wasn’t for such bleak thoughts, however.

Lyn had apparently learned some new card game, and she wanted to teach it to Tala and Rane.

Tala opened the door to Lyn’s house, able to hear her friends already chatting amicably inside.

Tonight is not about mysteries and concerns for the future.

No. Tonight was a time for friends.

Chapter: 20
I'm Listening

Tala sat in her sanctum beneath the fake night sky. It was fascinating how the stars, clusters, and even nebulae *looked* real while being utterly alien to what she was used to on Zeme.

She'd asked about it once, and she was told that it could show a facsimile of Zeme's sky, or something like this, depending on what she wanted. Apparently, it was a feature of Kit, not something that they'd added specifically.

Still showing me what I want to see. Eh, Kit?

The stars above almost seemed to twinkle.

There was, obviously, no light pollution and no clouds. It was a sight that few would ever see.

And it's fake.

-But it's still beautiful.-

Tala was on a randomly chosen hill in the plains that ran around the outside of her sanctum. The grass and turf beneath her was soft and springy. Nighttime birds and insects could be heard throughout the space, lending a further element of realism to the false reality in which she sat.

The arcanes really knew their craft, and this sanctum stood testament to that.

Even so, the night wasn't perfect.

A small annoyance sat in the back of her mind.

There was a message sitting available in the Archive.

She knew what it said because Alat had immediately read it when they were granted access, but she wasn't ready to act on it.

She really did need to, though.

-Tala. You need to talk to someone. You asked Mistress Ingrit to find someone. She has. We can't just ignore it.-

I know… Tala was absently working on her new scalemail vest.

She had to remove the white steel from her elk leathers for the scales, but that was easy enough. In fact, she was able to use the magics of the garment to make the metal come out in the exact shape she needed. So, now, instead of forming a shaped log of metal and separating scales from that, she was simply creating each scale on her sleeve and then pulling it free, removing it from the elk leathers.

The process was magically expensive but nowhere near prohibitively so.

Thus, the results were actually much better this time around. The main difference was a small hole at the base of each scale, which she caused her vest to grow through.

She would take off the vest when she was done, making it separate from her other garments, but it wasn't time for that, yet.

She would have formed the scales in place, but she had to separate them before she could amplify their gravity. If she didn't do so beforehand, the separation would be a sufficient change to their makeup to break the working.

The benefit of the tie was simple. The little bit of resistance would force a scale to orient properly as it pulled outward. Thus, they should now all strike edge-first, rather than the somewhat haphazard orientation that she'd dealt with for her earliest version.

-Tala. He is a professional, specifically trained to help Archons process through traumatizing experiences. He has centuries of wisdom and practice.-

I know.

After a short pause, where Alat was clearly waiting for Tala to continue, the alternate interface sighed. -*Most of his clients are those traumatized by merging, either choices taken or those experienced before being avoided.*-

He sounds great.

There was another pause. -*...So?*-

Tala sighed. *Fine… Schedule something for tomorrow?*

-*He has a slot open first thing tomorrow morning. Would you like him to come here, or would you like to go to him?*-

Him coming here would be nice. Should we ask Lyn?

-*She's never been too picky on company. I'll update a note for her, so when she sits down for her morning reading, she'll know what's going on.*-

Thank you.

-*Appointment scheduled… You know, we could move Kit to the front door. It shouldn't be too difficult to have it only open for the right people or under the right circumstances. At other times, Kit could be dormant across the opening, and Lyn's door would function normally.*-

That's… I'm not sure if it's incredibly clever or really terrifying.

-*Why not both?*-

Sure, I suppose.

She'd already slept, and even after staying up late with Rane, Lyn, and Kannis to play the card game, morning was still quite a way off.

There was another long pause while Tala continued creating and amplifying the gravity on the scales.

Alat was the one to break the internal silence this time. -*You know, I've never experienced voidsight directly…*-

Tala grinned. It was a topic that they'd wanted to experiment with, and it was a welcome distraction. *Fine. We did want to test mirroring voidsight onto bloodstar perspectives, and passing a bloodstar perspective to you is the easiest way for you to directly experience it for yourself.*

Tala *could* pass direct access to her own eyes' perspective, but it left her utterly blind, and she *hated* the experience.

With regard to voidsight, Tala and Alat had been digging into exactly how and why it had come to be, and the answer was laughingly obvious after they took a bit of time to research.

When Flow was in a void-weapon form, it should kill her.

When they'd realized that, Tala had needed to take a long walk and eat a stack of donuts before she could return to the problem.

The truth was, she *shouldn't* be able to wield it at all; no human should. So, as a natural part of the merging, as the results selected specifically involved her ability to use the weapon, her body had been touched with void, immunized to it almost.

That had actually explained quite a few of Mistress Holly's test results, and the Inscriptionist hadn't been surprised in the least when they'd conveyed their discovery to her.

When Tala pushed Flow into a void-form, the weapon acted as a source of void-magics, and those flowed through the tendrils already in place within Tala, allowing her to wield the blade without inherent danger.

There was a lot more that happened, obviously, but the end result was that the void-magics collected around her eyes in her most strongly cemented natural magics: her magesight.

This combination was what granted her voidsight.

Thus, in order to mimic that sight, Tala had to mirror not only her perspective but also her natural magics of magesight onto a bloodstar, and then further mirror void-magics from Flow or her elk leathers overtop the other aspects.

It was quite convoluted in totality, and she'd been hesitant to try it because she knew that she'd likely obsess over getting it right once she started.

Well, now is as good a time as any. She had just finished adding the latest scale to her armor.

With careful deliberateness, Tala mirrored the aspects overtop one another, onto a bloodstar.

First, she mirrored her ability to perceive onto the drop, looking back at herself. She still found that mildly disconcerting even though she was incredibly used to it by this point.

Next, she focused on her magesight, joining that with the bloodstar and the mirrored perspective already in place.

She could have simply mirrored the magesight, but as it was a working used to enhance and alter vision, that wouldn't actually have accomplished anything.

Her own loosely controlled yellow-orange aura became easily visible to the secondary perspective.

The coloration was faint but distinct.

The magesight was impressed within her natural magics, else it wouldn't have been able to be mirrored, but it still wasn't deeply impressed, and without her inscriptions to back up and reinforce the spell-form, it was much weaker than she was used to.

-Oh, Tala. This is going to be insanely useful, even like this.-

That it will be. It was difficult to force the mirrored aspects to merge, but they were already used in conjunction naturally, so they didn't fight back too hard.

Finally, she twisted her will, catching onto the void with her elk leathers.

She might have used those magics from within Flow, but that void-power was dormant, and she was looking for a means of voidsight without having to have Flow in a void-form.

The void in the elk leathers wasn't overwhelming, but it *was* pervasive.

After a flick and extension of her mind, the void joined the other aspects mirrored onto her bloodstar.

The small drop of blood turned black. No, that wasn't right. The change rendered it much more than black—or rather much less—the bloodstar seemingly becoming a hole in the very air.

As the void filled the mirrored aspects, the perspective it granted Tala *changed.*

Before, it had been like having an eye floating above her, giving her a single direction of view.

With void added, light now came in from every side, giving a forced omnidirectional perspective.

The world seemed to shatter within that view, and uncounted nodules of reality flickered into visibility even as her perception spun and rotated, seemingly at random.

As it was an omnidirectional view, what she could see wasn't changing, but it seemed to be constantly reorienting within her own mind, and the results were incredibly nauseating.

Tala heaved, even though she couldn't puke, her body rebelling against the input.

She let the aspect mirrors fall away and flopped onto her back, trying to let her head settle.

Oh, that was awful.

-Just a bit, yeah.-

Great first attempt, though!

-Oh, undoubtedly. I'm not sure how we'll fix the… oddities, but unreservedly a promising start.-

* * *

Tala knelt over a bucket that she didn't need.

It was filled with slightly crushed mint leaves, wafting a powerful anti-nausea scent.

She groaned. *This is awful… Why? Why are we doing this!?*

-I still say you should just give the perspective wholly to me. When we tried that, it worked just fine!-

Of course it did, and we have that in our tool bag, but I want to be able to use this, too.

She heaved, but the anti-vomit scripts kept her stomach contents where they belonged.

This is worse than just vomiting…

-Well, you could disable the scripts, right?-

But then I'd vomit. Do you want me to vomit? What kind of idea was that?

-…You're fine. Stop being difficult.-

Tala flopped over on her side, groaning again.

The sky was lightening overhead, and dawn was approaching—both that of her fake sun in the sanctum and that in the city outside.

So, you'll watch with voidsight?

-That's the plan. You'll have to hold the mirrors, but I can watch.-

Tala sighed, sitting up.

With now-practiced ease, Tala set up the three layers of aspect mirroring, purposely denying herself access to the perspective and surrendering the point of view to Alat.

-*Ready.*-

A simple thought allowed Tala to dismiss the bucket of herbs, and as expected, it was simply gone.

-*Fascinating. It's just as we've seen before. It's like the nodules of reality slip apart, and the fraction which is most closely related to the bucket was pulled backward, or away, or downward, or through, or… We don't really have a word for it. I think I was able to somewhat trace it moving toward the center of the sanctum, though.*-

That's really interesting. They'd seen the bits of reality moving before when Kit acted, but Alat had been honing her ability to discern details with their voidsight. Now, using it herself, directly, she seemed able to see a bit more than she could while just reviewing memories.

-*I'll keep playing with this. While I do that, you have your appointment with the Archon.*-

Right. Tala stood and willed herself back to the core of her sanctum.

An instant later, she was standing where she had wished to be.

-*Oh!* Rust my biscuits*!*-

Tala frowned. *Isn't that Mistress Holly's phrase?*

-*Tala! You were moved.*-

Yeah, that's what I wanted to happen. We can't move other sapient life because it naturally resists, but I asked to be moved, so it worked. When she'd really realized that, she'd passed the detail on to Mistress Elnea for the team researching the founts. Rob couldn't resist her transferring of the orb. He clearly wasn't the same as a person, and neither were the other founts.

-No, no. You're not understanding. You *moved. Kit didn't move around you, nor did it restructure with you in the new place. The bit of reality that is you was moved like teleportation, but it was direct, not a throw through the void or ether, or whatever, and a complicated catch. You just* moved.*-*

Her eyes widened. *Direct manipulation of the bits of reality. Did you see how it was done?*

-Ha! Are you kidding me? Not even a little… well, maybe a little.-

Well, we'll have to test and re-test. There's lots to learn.

-…Not now, though. Go.-

Fine… Tala opened the door even as it appeared before her.

She stepped out into Lyn's hallway, hanging Kit from her belt as she walked out into the sitting room. She was about to take up a chair when a solid, simple knock sounded against the front door.

It was a double-rap and no more.

Well, that was good timing.

Tala moved to the entry way and opened the front door.

An older man waited on the other side. He was tall and slender, seeming built more like a deer than a lion, if that made sense.

He had short, curly hair that had all gone gray, and his face was an odd mix of stern and soft. He smiled warmly, his voice a bit higher pitched than she might have expected, "Mistress Tala, I presume? Or is she within?"

"Um, that's me. Master Nadro, is it?"

"I am, indeed. It is my pleasure to meet you."

"And for me to meet you."

Tala stood for a long moment, and Nadro simply waited, a patient smile comfortably held across his features.

She frowned. *Isn't he going to say anything else?*

-Invite him in, Tala.-

"Oh! My apologies, won't you come in?"

"Thank you." He gave a shallow bow and followed her back inside. "Should I take off my shoes?"

"Hmm?" Tala glanced at his boots. "Oh! No, that's fine."

She tossed Kit at the wall just beside the entrance, opposite the washroom.

"Please, after you."

Nadro nodded and pushed open the door, stepping through and out into her dining room. More specifically, they came out beside the two cushy chairs, overlooking the plains and forests beyond. "Oh, my. This is truly stunning, Mistress."

Tala followed him through. "Thank you; I find it rather peaceful. Tea?"

He didn't take his eyes from the view as he shook his head slightly. "No, thank you. I have a jug of my favorite, if it comes to it. I'm happy to share, if you wish?"

"No, thank you. Do you mind if I make myself some?"

"I don't mind in the least." The man took another step forward to stand closer to the massive window.

Tala pulled out her tea making supplies, going through the motions she'd refamiliarized herself with in the last week. Nadro did nothing to interrupt the comfortable silence as she worked.

Finally, when she poured herself a cup, his voice reached her. He hadn't turned around. "You seem content to separate yourself from others. Has that always been the case?"

She hesitated for just a moment before sitting in her favorite of the two chairs. "What a way to start a conversation."

He turned toward her, even as he moved to sit in the other chair. His smile shifted slightly, but he simply left his question as it was.

Tala took a sip and shook her head. "What do you even mean?"

"I could ask you what you think I mean, but that would start a whole cycle of unhelpful ridiculousness."

She chuckled in spite of herself.

"To answer your question, though, I was honestly hoping you would tell me. I haven't gathered any information on you. I try to let my clients tell me about themselves on their own. I am simply gauging based on what I have seen in the minutes since we met."

"And that is?" Tala was genuinely curious why he'd come to that conclusion.

"You live in here, even when there is plenty of space in the real world."

"Why do you think I live in here? I could have just brought you in for a private chat."

"You could have, of course, but I can see the magics about you, the telltale signs of time in a dimensional space. You've spent more time outside of Zeme in the last days than within."

Tala tried to see his level of advancement but couldn't. His aura was utterly undetectable to her.

"Your choice of tea-ware is cast iron. While such a choice could merely be a stunt for Fused or higher—rarely truly dangerous at that level of advancement—it is clearly familiar to you, and

I would guess that you'd had it well before becoming Fused. This implies incredible neglect in your education, apathy from your acquaintances, or a cognizant choice on your part."

She leaned back, taking another sip.

"I see I have guessed correctly, but this time is not about me, nor about what I can guess about you."

Tala shook her head. "Then why would you start our time together with such a question?"

Nadro's smile pulled up on one side. "Because our time is valuable, and it is best if you recognize early that there is no point in deceit. You don't have to tell me anything you don't wish to, but falsehoods won't be borne."

She almost objected but finally nodded. "Alright."

He flicked his hands, and a large earthenware mug and jug appeared within them.

With careful deliberation, he poured himself some of the steaming liquid before the jug vanished, presumably back into his storage space.

Nadro didn't say anything else, turning his gaze back out of the window and letting the silence settle in.

Tala shrugged to herself, enjoying her own tea while looking upon the view as well while the false sun rose.

She had refilled her cup three times before she finally broke the silence. "I fear that I am nothing more than a tool, used at the whim of others, for their benefit."

Nadro turned slightly to regard her, his face showing hints of empathy, along with careful attention. "I'm listening."

And so Tala spoke, telling her story from the beginning. "My mother died in childbirth…"

Chapter: 21
No Place for Deception

Tala sighed, nodding as she reached the end of what she had to say, “That’s a pretty good summary, I think.”

It had taken a few hours, and noon was approaching.

Nadro had only interrupted once to ask if she was alright with him eating as she continued. She’d agreed, and they’d both eaten off and on throughout her tale.

She obviously hadn’t been able to give many details, but she had been able to hit the highlights of her homelife, her time at the Academy, her first contracts, her reunion with her siblings, her capture and time as an Eskau, and finally, her return to the human cities.

Wow… that’s a lot when thought of all together like that.

-Well, it did take you a while to convey it. I don’t think I’ve heard you talk that much… ever.-

I suppose that’s true.

Nadro had listened throughout, only interrupting the once. Even then, he seemed to have chosen carefully, and only interjected at a natural pause.

Early on, he had pulled out a slate and writing implement, seemingly taking notes as Tala monologued.

Even with the writing, he had maintained a good amount of eye contact, easily conveying that he was listening intently without staring her down.

Now that Tala was done, he took a few moments, glancing at his notes occasionally, but also looking out the window once again. Finally, he nodded to himself.

“Thank you for sharing all that you did. I cannot fully understand all that you have experienced. It is possible that no one alive can, despite the horrors of this world. Even so, I have heard you, and I appreciate the vulnerability and forthrightness.”

He then fell silent once again.

For some reason, Tala felt a wave of relief. As she considered, she realized that she’d been afraid he would immediately try to fix her, or tell her that he knew what she’d gone through, or try to get details from her, or any number of other things.

He hadn’t.

He had simply listened.

“Thank you”—she took a sip of her refreshed tea—“for listening.”

He smiled and nodded again. “Of course, Mistress.”

There was another long moment of silence.

Nadro seemed to be contemplating before he finally decided what to say, “So, there are several things that we can do, now.”

“Oh?” Tala felt herself tense slightly. *Is he going to try to ‘fix’ me, now?*

The look in his eyes was one of utter sincerity. “First, you could tell me what you want to accomplish, and I can advise you.”

Tala grunted at that, but she felt herself relax just a bit. *That doesn’t sound too bad, though I don’t know what I actually want…*

He smiled. “We could also simply schedule to meet up again and talk further. I am happy to listen to anything that you want to discuss.”

She shrugged. That would probably be nice, but it didn’t seem like what she needed.

“I could also give you my opinion of one or two things that I believe might help you.”

Tala sighed and nodded. There it was, an attempt to fix her, but… somehow, it didn't feel that way. Rather, it felt like a friend offering advice, rather than someone trying to 'make her right.' That actually sounded relieving. "Honestly, I feel like I'm so deep in this that I don't know where to start."

"So, would you like us to try that last option, then?"

She smiled. *Kind of him to double check.* "Yes. Please."

He smiled. "In that case, I have two suggestions."

Tala sat up a bit straighter, leaning forward just slightly.

"From your story, my understanding is that you have an Archive attached division within your mind. You called her your alternate interface, and Alat is the name she prefers."

-Well, he did hear at least some of what you said.-

It would be pretty hard for someone to hear my story without knowing who and what you are.

-That's fair.-

"I do. What of her?"

"I have something similar, though he goes by Retson." A small smile pulled at the man's lips, likely due to some personal knowledge regarding the name. "If you are willing, I think that Alat and Retson should speak via the Archive. It shouldn't cause any disruption to you or me, and it will help your alternate interface process as well."

Tala shrugged again. "I have no issue with that. Let me check."

Alat?

-Sure? Might be interesting.-

Don't let him convince you to give me the boot, eh?

Alat sent a huff. *-Of course not, Tala.-*

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Good, I will set up that communication.”

-*Done!*-

Tala smiled. “Seems like it’s done.”

“It is. Archive connections are a wonder.” He smiled, seemingly at a simple joy.

-*Oh… this guy is exactly like Nadro.*- There was a minute pause. -*Ha! This should be fun.*-

Tala stretched her neck slightly to either side, growing hesitant again. “What was the second thing?”

Nadro leaned forward, seeming to purposely relax as he set his hands on his own knees. “My advice would be to confront Tali directly and deal with that splinter of your mind once and for all.”

Tala stiffened. “Why?”

He gave her an understanding smile. “You have a segregated part of your mind that you absolutely reject. Holding that within yourself isn’t healthy or good for your long-term health and growth.” He leaned back and took a sip from his own mug. “In a sense, we are each many different people. Who we are with one group versus another. Who we are in battle. Who we are when holding a child. But they are all *us.* We cannot divorce them from ourselves or from each other. We cannot reject who we are. A warrior should be gentle with a babe. Do you know what that means?”

“Not hurting the child?”

He chuckled. “Quite, yes. But gentleness, specifically? Do you know what that means?”

“Soft?”

“Some would say that, yes. But in truth, gentleness is strength under control. If you don’t have strength, you cannot keep it under control, thus you cannot be gentle. So, the warrior is strong whether on the battlefield or when holding his infant. In both places he acts differently, but in both places, he is using his strength in a controlled manner to accomplish what he wishes. He is the *same person*, though he acts differently.”

Tala frowned but nodded slowly.

“Tali is *not you*. She is, in theory, someone that you could have been, but you are not her. You are no more her than an actress in a play *is* the character they pretend to be.”

“What’s your point?” Tala was shifting, a bit uncomfortable.

“What would you say to an actress who had divided her own mind so that she could create a part of herself that *believed* she actually was that character?”

She chuckled nervously. “That sounds… a bit extreme.”

He smiled at that. “True, I suppose. Would you advise her to keep that segregation? After the play was over? After the story was done, and she would never be asked to play that part again?”

Tala didn’t answer, and Nadro seemed content to wait.

She had finished another cup of her tea before she finally answered.

“The segregation should be let go.”

He nodded but still asked, “How come?”

“Because it is a lie; it is a seed of falsehood that can grow and fester if left in place.”

Nadro’s eyebrows rose. “That is fairly harsh language.”

“It is a harsh reality.” Tala felt her resolve firm. “Allowing a lie, a false identity, to remain sequestered in my own mind will do nothing good for me.”

He took another drink.

In the silence, Tala felt more stir that she wanted to say, “What could have been doesn’t matter, does it? I am not Tali, no matter how much I pretended to be, no matter how many people knew me as her. It wasn’t really me that they knew, but the character I was pretending to be. The lie that I put forward because I didn’t feel I could be the real me, the me that exists, grounded in reality.”

He smiled sadly and continued to wait.

“I don’t want to be her. Though parts of her are in me, the core of who she was isn’t. I can’t let that lie form me, neither positively by embracing it, nor negatively by rebelling against the similarities. Either would be treating the character—the lie—as if it were real.”

After another lengthy pause, Nadro leaned forward. “So? What would you like to do?”

“I want to tell her the lie of her own existence, then break down the division between us, excise the false memories, and recontextualize what I experienced while forced to be her.”

There was another pregnant pause as Tala felt tears building in her eyes.

“I want to tell her how much I hate her for what I had to do because of her. I want to tell her I’m sorry that she was a lie. I…” She swallowed and wiped away her tears. She hadn’t cried in the retelling, but this was striking much closer to her heart. “I want to tell her that I forgive her. My suffering wasn’t her fault, even though she was an indirect contributor. I want to eliminate the last stains of Be-thric from my mind.”

Nadro’s smile was full of empathy as he continued to listen.

Tala laughed and wiped away some more tears. “I’m sorry. That was… that was a lot.”

“Mistress Tala. You never need to apologize for the truth, and I think what you’ve said is a deep truth in your heart. Thank you.”

She smiled and shrugged. “I’ve taken your whole morning.”

“I set it aside for you, Mistress. I do have an appointment after lunch, but I can postpone it if necessary.”

Tala waved that notion away. “No, no. This has been… good… I think.”

He smiled. “I agree. I have enjoyed getting to know you, Mistress Tala.” He stood. “Would you like to meet up again?”

Tala stood as well, setting her cup to the side. She frowned for a moment, then nodded and smiled again. “Yes. I think I would like that.”

“I’m glad. I trust that Retson and Alat can set something up for us?” He tilted his head to the side for a moment, then nodded.

Tala gave a shallow bow. “Thank you. Thank you for your time, and thank you for listening.”

“Absolutely. It’s more than my job, Mistress. We must care for one another if we are to thrive.”

With a thought, Tala caused the door out of Kit to appear behind Nadro.

He gave her a shallow bow, taking one last, long look out the window. “Stunning, truly. Few have mastered the art of dimensional space creation like the arcanes, at least not since the restoration.”

With a shake of his head, and a last smile sent her way, he turned toward the doorway out like he’d known it was there all along.

Tala hesitated.

Before he could leave, she decided to go for it, “If I may ask?”

Nadro stopped with his hand on the doorknob. He didn’t turn back. “Yes, Mistress?”

“How advanced are you? I don’t see any inscriptions on you, nor can I sense your gate or aura at all. I don’t sense a through-spike, nor any other form of concealment. I’ve never come across such perfect magical control.”

He smiled, turning toward her then, and bowed deeply. “Thank you, Mistress Tala. That is an incredible compliment, especially from you, now that I know your story.”

She shrugged. “It’s just the truth.”

“Even so.” He hesitated for a moment. “You know, someone with my level of control can fake any level of advancement, even to magesight as advanced as yours.”

It was her turn to grin. “Ahh, but you said there was no place for deception with you.”

He laughed then, obvious smile lines and crow’s feet showing on his face along with the genuine mirth. “I did, didn’t I?”

Tala waited, taking a cue from him.

He waited too, smiling, but finally, he nodded. “I am who I am, Mistress Tala. I think you, as much as anyone, will be able to accept that.”

Without another word, his aura was suddenly visible.

Tala’s eyes widened, and she felt herself tremble.

Kit quaked, seemingly also able to sense the man.

Before she could recover to respond with anything, Master Nadro had hidden his aura once more and exited Kit, closing the door behind himself.

Tala sunk backward into her chair.

Master Nadro was decidedly human; he bore every hallmark that she knew to look for.

She had checked, because unlike most humans she knew, he lacked a gate.

Even so, her verification had been reflexive, faster than thought, her conscious mind frozen at the color of the aura presented to her.

Indigo. And simply because of her enhanced vision and Alat's ability to compare, she'd been able to see, *Indigo with hints of violet. He's Ascending.*

-No. He doesn't have a gate, Tala. He would need to advance as the arcanes do.-

Hallowed… She'd been right before. He didn't have any inscriptions, but he didn't need them. At least, he didn't need them anymore.

In the brief unveiling, she'd seen his natural magics thick with power and detail. The dimensions of magic around the man were carved as deeply as any she'd ever glimpsed, though she couldn't interpret them at all.

There had been so, so much in that brief glimpse that as Tala processed through all of it, she didn't notice noon come and go.

It was mid-afternoon before she shook herself free of her rumination and stood once more.

-Are you ready?-

Tala nodded to herself. She could deal with the existential questions brought up by finding such a powerful human later. Tala already had thousands of questions, but it was not the time. Most of them likely overlapped in one way or another, regardless.

Yes. It is time to deal with Tali.

Less than a minute later, Tala was sitting on the hill she'd occupied the previous night.

-I believe I can do what you're thinking.-

Good. Let's do this.

Alat used the same method that allowed her to show Tala books that weren't really there to create a duplicate of Tala in her own vision.

No, not a duplicate. Tali.

The woman sat with closed eyes, her posture subtly different than Tala's own. Her head tilted down just a bit, showing default subservience. At the same time, her shoulders were a bit straighter, her confidence more prevalent and obvious than it was for Tala.

-We're ready for your part.-

Tala nodded, moving a bloodstar to hover in the center of the apparition's head. She then mirrored her perspective onto the bloodstar and handed access to and control of that perspective over to Alat.

Alat, in turn, activated the part of their mind that was Tali and passed the perspective to the false personality.

Tali's eyes snapped open, immediately focusing on Tala. They widened in shock, but just for a moment.

The Eskau had a phantom of Flow in her hand in an instant, even as she lunged to plant the blade through Tala's throat.

Tala didn't react as the weapon passed harmlessly through her. *Fascinating. Could you make me feel that?*

-Now is hardly the time, Tala. This is harder than you might assume, maintaining the illusion for you both.-

Fine, fine.

"Tali."

The woman stopped, looking down at her weapon in confusion.

"Sit. There is much we need to talk about."

The Eskau glared but dropped into a seated position. Tala could practically hear what the woman was thinking.

-*Oh! I could let you hear, if you want.*-

Tala almost said yes, but that could be confusing, and it would be against the spirit of what she was trying to do. *No, but thank you.*

"What magics have you worked to protect yourself from me, imposter?"

Tala sighed. "I am Tala. You and I are the same person, Tali. More accurately, I am the person who was kidnapped and erased so that Be-thric could create you."

Tali laughed. "Master has no need of disloyal creatures, and anyone willing to say such a lie cannot be considered loyal."

"Be-thric is dead."

Tali paled. "What? That is… No. That's not possible."

"By my hand. Or, as you would see it, our hand."

She flushed red with anger. "Liar. I would never hurt him."

They had kept that memory locked away from Tali as there really was no reason to try to reconcile it for the fake personality, given Tala had never intended to use her again. *Please let her see the memory.*

Tali gasped, eyes widening again and the wash of color in her cheeks draining away. "Lies. Horrid, obviously false lies."

Tala shrugged, sighing with deep weariness that she'd not really noticed creeping up on her. "I don't need you to believe me. I don't need anything from you. I don't need you at all."

Tali growled but didn't say anything—seemingly quite off balance still—before Tala continued.

“I conjured you up—”

-Excuse me, you?-

Do you really think that it will make things easier if I tell her about you?

-Fair…-

“As I was saying, I conjured you up for very specific purposes and nothing more.”

She narrowed her gaze, obviously wary. “What would those be?”

“To say goodbye, and to tell you that I’m sorry that you were created to be abused and subjugated. Your existence was a lie from the beginning. You are a lie, created to control *me.* Nothing more.”

Tali opened her mouth, rage building on her features, but Tala lifted her hand, and Tali was unable to speak.

Thank you.

-Hey, this is easier on me.- Alat sent a shrug.

“We will not meet again.” There was a long pause while the other woman silently raged. Tala knew that she would be heard when she spoke despite Tali’s actions, “I forgive you, Tali. You were as much a victim as I ever was. I forgive you.” Tala gave a soft, mournful smile. “Goodbye.”

The apparition vanished, and Tala felt something break down within her mind.

In that moment, everything that Tali had experienced slammed into Tala’s consciousness, and the memories rushed through her as if she were back in that time, again. She was a passenger, forced to watch as she acted out a horrid play.

Before, she’d had the memories there, separated and isolated. She could reference them, but she was only able to access them in a theoretical sense.

Now?

Now, Tala *lived* them.

She threw her head back and screamed at the sky, feeling every emotion, every lie, every death.

She screamed, and the world within Kit trembled at the force of it.

Chapter: 22
Cazor, Alex, Hemeter, & Harcraes

Cazor sprinted down the street. His net of hyper attenuated sensors had picked up a blip.

This was the tenth he'd investigated, but he had a good feeling about this one.

I had a good feeling about the last one, too.

That hardly mattered. This was his job.

The target had seemingly been covertly cutting people's purses with some sort of magically created blade.

Moreover, the thief was so efficient at it, the city grid hadn't detected the magics. It had only been uncovered when enough people reported thefts, and the Guard, after further investigation, noticed how perfectly clean the cuts were.

The Mage Hunters were informed, and Cazor had been assigned to the case.

That was a week ago, and he was starting to get frustrated.

There'd been ten more purse snatchings brought to his attention, only three of which seemed to be the same person. The others were common thievery; unfortunate, but definitely the Guard's job, not his.

He'd found the areas this 'Mage' worked in, set up his net, and here he was.

His net would mark the worker of magic as well as the target. That way, so long as the thief wasn't using instantly disposable items, he could track perpetrator and victim.

There.

His magesight was flooded with power, filling his vision with unfamiliar sights. Though, he could interpret them well enough to know what he was looking at.

He slid to a stop beside a woman whose belt held cut purse strings.

He held up a badge of office. “Excuse me, ma’am, can you tell me where you just came from?”

“Oh! Master Guardsman. I… I just came from down that street there.”

Cazor gave a slight bow. “Thank you. Report in to the nearest Guard post. Your coin pouch has been taken.”

The woman glanced down in alarm and let out a cross between a yelp and a groan when she saw that he was correct.

He was already down the street that she’d indicated.

The street was sparsely populated with slowly walking people, but no one stood out.

It’s been less than a minute. Where is he…? Where is he…?

Somehow, the thief either hadn’t been marked or had gotten away quickly enough.

Cazor was about to curse when his net pinged him again.

The thief had decided to grab two purses in quick succession.

This time, it came from just around a nearby corner.

Cazor sprinted around the turn and his eyes locked on the rag-wrapped figure.

There!

This poor creature’s skin—what little of it that he could see—was covered in blisters. *Does he have some sort of illness?*

That was all the more reason to bring him in. The city grid should have detected anything truly contagious, but the last thing they wanted was something spreading through the populace.

The man's eyes locked on Cazor and widened.

This side street was less well traveled, with only one other pedestrian in easy view, likely the latest victim.

The thief turned to duck into an alley, but Cazor was already acting.

With an easy pulse of magic, he created an acceleration tube in the form of a free-floating, powerful, long, hollow magnetic field, snatching out a clump of iron dust from the closest pouch and launching it with precision.

He'd gotten the velocity dialed in to the point that it *shouldn't* break an adult male's bones, and it wouldn't break the sound barrier either.

The thief yelped, clearly sensing the attack coming and twisting to get out of the way.

Cazor's attack—which amounted to a well-clustered, fast-moving handful of sand—hit the wall beside the man as he stumbled back, making a loud *thwack!*

The rags fell away, revealing even more blistering at various stages of healing, some seeming *incredibly* recent.

The spell-lines that Cazor could see looked… haphazardly done. They didn't seem *wrong*, but they did seem inexpertly executed.

A set glowed, new blisters formed around them, and a blade of hardened, sharpened air formed and flew toward the Mage Hunter.

Cazor pushed off of a cluster of iron dust, vaulting upward, over the incoming wind blade.

He twisted in midair and flicked his power forward. He traded speed and stopping power for accuracy, guiding his attack all the way to its point of impact and filling the man's mouth with a cloud of iron.

The thief sputtered, swiping at his own face, even as he kicked out with a sandaled foot, sending another cutting arc.

Fast deployment. Sloppy scripts, though.

Cazor could see yet more bubbling under the man's bare skin as some of the manipulated air got between the various layers.

He didn't seem to cut himself with his magics, but the air manipulation was likely a cause of constant pain.

What a waste.

A simple manipulation of magnetic fields swept iron through the incoming working and obliterated it.

Cazor landed and punched the man in his shoulder, even as he kicked out the thief's forward knee.

The blister-covered man cried out as he dropped, spinning and landing on his knees facing away from the Mage Hunter.

Compressed iron dust formed shackles around the man's wrists, drawing them together and locking them in place behind him, near his waist.

Cazor's voice cracked out, speaking with practiced authority. "You are under arrest for unlawful use of magic toward the detriment of other humans. No further use of power will be tolerated. Any attempt to activate a spellform will result in your keystone being disabled. In such a case, we cannot guarantee it will ever return to functionality. Do you understand what you have been told?"

Instead of responding, the man tried to roll forward and away, power moving to yet more inscriptions.

Cazor sighed, and the shackles jerked upward, lifting the man even as twelve iron needles slammed precisely into place. He had used his magnetic manipulation to aim and propel them with sufficient force to penetrate only to the required depth.

Every Mage Hunter had a method of disabling a criminal's keystone, but most had devices or circuitous methodologies.

Cazor cut to the heart of the issue, literally severing the main lines of the keystone, rendering it useless.

The needles effectively rendered the man mundane.

The thief bled from the small holes in his back, and his hand spasmed, dropping the coin pouch he'd been clutching.

Cazor picked it up and filed it away to be turned in as evidence, and hopefully for reclamation by the original owner.

"You were warned."

The man hung from iron that now wrapped him, wrists to upper arms, putting incredible strain on the man's shoulders.

With a repositioning, Cazor alleviated most of the pressure.

Blood still ran in trickles down the man's back as he tried, ineffectually, to gather enough coherence to curse.

Cazor stepped forward and grabbed the man's chin as he hung there. He looked into the vacant, roving eyes and nodded. "It's a common thing, the panic. You will become accustomed to your lack of power soon enough."

A bit of blood dripped from the side of the man's mouth, and Cazor sighed. *I might have nicked something important…*

“Let’s get you back to the node. There are healers on deck that will get you in tip-top shape.” He looked the thief up and down, again seeing the dozens of blisters. “Better than you’ve been in a long time, most likely.”

The man moved to float behind Cazor as the Mage Hunter walked, now also supported by an iron belt as well.

Cazor pulled out and tossed a cloak over the man, then caused him to follow with the cloak just brushing the snow on the ground.

It simply looked like the man was walking incredibly smoothly as they went around, and the Mage Hunter collected all of his sensors.

These things were expensive, and if he lost one, or allowed one to be damaged, he would have to pay for its replacement out of his own wages.

He could have removed the iron needles from the man’s keystone since the lines were severed, but such *could* sometimes reconnect, and if Cazor had hit something important, removing the needle would likely make it worse.

All told, he had the thief back at his local node less than twenty minutes after their short fight.

If you can call it that.

He had outclassed the man at every level. He’d been using the interaction to hone his abilities more than anything.

It was a bit foolish of me to not take it seriously.

But the man was just a Mage and likely not even that. He was likely a runaway mageling, who’d just never been recovered.

Cazor sighed as he pushed open the doors, the man floating in behind him.

The easy part was done.

Now, he had paperwork to do, and as the slow *drip, drip, drip* of still-flowing blood attested, it would be quite a lot of paperwork.

Let's get to it. A smile pulled at his lips. Regardless of anything else, he'd made the city a little safer this day.

* * *

Alex sat back, looking at his partner. "Well, rust me, Mistress Kadlyn. That's the proof we needed."

Mistress Kadlyn shook her head. "I'm still frustrated with you. You spent half our research budget on these memories and books."

They didn't know where the memories had come from, and as might be expected, they couldn't see the person whose memories they were, but they were clearly from the arcane lands to the south, and they showed, in detail, how their holds functioned.

Additionally, the book was a somewhat detailed overview of how hold-systems were set up and interlinked. It wasn't all there, but most of the key components were pretty obvious.

"But this is the proof we needed. Now, we can get more funding and actually move forward. Imagine it, collective magical systems that act in a magically rich environment. I knew it. I *knew* it! This could revolutionize caravan defense."

"You knew it, eh?" She gave him a sardonic smile.

"We knew it." He grinned back.

"So? Take this to the Wainwrights? Get them to sponsor us?"

"Oh, that's thinking too small. What's the core of this system?"

Mistress Kadlyn frowned. “A fount, yeah, that’s not great.”

“No! Well, yes, but not what I’m trying to say. It’s a gate.”

Her frown deepened. “What are you getting at?”

“What if we created integrated systems that could hook into a gate, without requiring training at all?”

Mistress Kadlyn’s eyes widened. “Mundanes’ gates can’t take extra strain.”

“Not without conditioning. We’d be making a universal keystone, part of that is expanding. People wouldn’t be able to have a heavy magical load at first, but eventually?”

“That’s… That’s amazing. City grids only function when they suck all the power from the area, but these, these function with a single source, irrespective of the general zeme.”

“Exactly.”

“Would this make Mages irrelevant?” But then she answered her own question. “No, of course not. Mages would always have an advantage in power and control, but this… Imagine a Guardsman with magical protection, not dependent on a Mage or the city.”

“I know… This could change everything.”

“If we can get it to work, and that’s a big if.”

“Oh, undoubtedly. This won’t be a short road, but it just might be possible. It’ll be a hard road either way.”

Even so, the two were grinning from ear to ear. Decades of research and investigation, and now, it could all be put to use.

Their plan had the initial tests and support-gathering taking another century, but now, they had a proof of concept in hand.

They were going to change the world.

* * *

Mistresses Decate and Hemeter gave each other a massive hug as they laughed almost maniacally.

Mistress Decate was the first to speak. “I can’t believe it was that simple.”

“I know, right? The impressing of magics into the food is *individualistic.* It’s not dependent on the power, nor the scripts involved. It has to be customized to the specific Mage.”

Archons were always researching magic and crops, attempting to improve them in some way, or in the best case recreate something like the famed endingberry.

But even when they succeeded, the results had the same limit as that berry of myth and legend. It slowly overtook the natural magics of the consumer, killing mundanes and potentially magically crippling Mages.

There had been attempts to cater toward certain types of Mage, but they’d never succeeded.

Of course they hadn’t, because no one used magic in exactly the same way, so there was always disjointment between the power consumed and that which the Mage already had.

Hemeter looked down at the purple strawberry they’d made with the techniques hinted at in the memory they’d traded for.

It had taken a lot of power, partially because they’d accelerated the growth to have a sample so soon, but it seemed like it worked.

The strawberry was specifically grown and imbued to match her own magic.

Hesitantly, she reached out and picked up the oddly warm fruit.

Her magesight let her see power swirling through the fruit in achingly familiar ways.

She took a careful bite and felt the power rush through her.

It was trivially easy to guide that power to her palm, where the mirrored magic existed in her inscriptions.

The power filled her inscriptions, activating them without even a trickle of power coming from her own gate.

A hauntingly beautiful ball of purple fire came into being over Hemeter's hand. If anything, it was brighter than she normally created, though the temperature didn't touch her flesh.

Mistress Decate took a step back, a protective layer of power coating her against the heat that she could feel.

"Mistress Decate, this is… this is amazing. I don't know what it will be useful for, but it *works*."

"Mistress Hemeter, I think congratulations are in order."

"Thank you, Mistress Decate. Congratulations to you as well."

The two continued to grin even as the purple fire expended the last of its power and winked out.

* * *

Harcraes huddled in his basement, pouring over the memory of desecration one millisecond at a time.

"Why would you destroy those magnificent creations?"

The monster whose memory he'd acquired had shattered dozens of automata, dozens of superior beings, and he was forced to watch every excruciating detail.

How else could he backward engineer their construction?

I only have this much work because I was denied the true prize.

The blasted Archivist refused to grant him access to the book he knew they had, no matter what he offered.

She'd even tried to revoke his access, once she'd realized what he was looking for.

The shortsighted fool. He'd gotten an explanation of what would be available, and he'd made a request for all fights within holds. It was an innocuous enough set of memories that, while valuable, didn't get too much scrutiny.

Humans were weak and flawed, but they were better than the other alternatives, if only just.

Animals were filthy and stupid.

Even magical beasts lacked the wisdom to focus on anything beyond their small corner of reality.

Insects were worse.

Plants, while not inherently objectionable, were inefficient and lacking in impetus.

But automata… these are perfect. They could be our next step.

They required a fount to work, and most humans had just that.

Imagine what we could do if we all had such perfect, everlasting vessels?

Hunger would obviously be eliminated; the best researchers would have unlimited time to continue their work and no distractions pulling them away from their progress.

"I just need to figure this out."

He relived every strike the brute landed, recording every scrap that fell from the magnificent creations, and tracking back where it had come from.

This was at least his hundredth time he'd stepped through, and before him was a stack of massive papers that together was a nearly complete schema for the basic creations.

"Those fools in the Constructionist Guild don't know what they're missing. These shouldn't be forbidden. No tool is universally evil. It is only how it is used that makes it good or bad."

Harcraes ignored the fact that automata had *never* been used for good, despite dozens of confirmed attempts and hundreds of lost outposts which had likely fallen to the automata-related research they were working on.

"They just didn't do it right. I can make it work."

He would use his own gate as the power source while it remained within his chest. He would keep his physical body, at least for now, but he could power an army of automata, all enslaved and beholden to him.

"I will prove it works, then we can start the migration."

Even so, he wasn't a fool. He'd build in failsafes in case he was discovered before he could perfect the design. After all, nothing ever worked exactly as expected the first time.

Less than three weeks later, Harcraes's body lay in a growing pool of his own blood, a hole through the center of his chest.

His life was gone, his soul had passed on, his gate was now closed.

Over him, an automaton soldier stood, holding the man's heart. "Ah, I see it now. His gate wasn't physical. That was an unfortunate misunderstanding."

The inhuman head lowered in what almost seemed to be regret, but its eyes focused on the cooling corpse on the floor.

"Your explanation was flawed, much like your nature." The voice had just a hint of accusation, even as it faded near the end.

With no more power to be had, the creation slowly powered down, its self-destruction scripts using the last vestiges of power to turn the humanoid shape into nothing more than a pile of dust.

Chapter: 23
Alternates

Tala lay on her back on the slope, tears streaming from her eyes, across her jaw, and down her neck.

Tali's memories… now *her* memories, were fresh in her mind.

She could *feel* the bones broken under Tali's fists. She could see the hurt her words had brought as she lorded her position over the lessers of the House of Blood.

If the Eskau were the siege engines of a major House, the candidates were the street-level enforcers. Tala had done her best to not dwell on those parts of Tali's time, but they were there.

Tala had undoubtedly killed far more than Tali had, but Tali was responsible for more direct suffering.

She found herself huffing a laugh. *What sort of justification is that? 'I may have killed people, but she made them cry!'*

-A self-defensive one.- Alat's tone was soft.

Yeah… Tala knew what she'd done. She'd killed dozens, maybe hundreds directly. *Probably dozens.*

-Do you want me to count?-

Absolutely not.

It was nearly sunset, and even though it had taken but a moment to relive Tali's memories—integrating them into herself and dissolving that personality forever—it had taken hours to work through the emotional fallout.

It was obvious why Tali had been so devoted to Be-thric.

He'd been good to her.

Tala had known that, but there was a difference between knowing a thing and experiencing it herself.

Still, that obviously didn't offset what he had done, not even a little.

There was a certain sadness, however, in seeing what *might* have been, even if there was no realistic way it could have come to pass.

I need to get out of my own head.

-Yeah. That would be good.-

Tala *really* wanted to spar, but she couldn't.

Huh… Would that work?

-Oh, you think a lot of me, don't you…? Yeah, I think I can make it work.-

Tala felt herself grin with hope in the possible distraction. With a simple mental flex, she was sitting just to the side of her training circle, beside her sanctum home.

She relaxed her control over her aura, letting it extend to fill the whole surrounding area.

She was now of a power density that simply being within her aura would be incredibly uncomfortable for a mundane. It might even be damaging to them if they lingered. Though, Tala still wasn't clear exactly *how* it would be damaging.

Within her extended aura, she moved two bloodstars to hover within the sparring ring as if they were in the place of the heads of two combatants.

-Who do you want to fight?-

Who would be easiest for you? This is a new thing.

-Only slightly new. I've been doing similar things for a while.-

Tala scoffed. *Only in the loosest of senses. Who would be the easiest?*

-You.-

Alright, then. She smiled. *Let's do that.*

To Tala's eyes, two identical women appeared, encompassing the bloodstars.

Tala mirrored her perspective onto each bloodstar, passing one set to Alat and keeping the other.

She then closed her eyes, even as Alat slowly cut her off from her own senses.

It was slightly panic-inducing, because even while she could see and hear through the bloodstar as if she were now standing in the ring, she couldn't *feel* anything.

Moreover, it felt like she was floating, weightless and untethered.

-One moment… There.-

Tala suddenly had the phantom sensations of a body once again; she felt her feet on the ground and gravity pulling her downward.

But she couldn't move.

With practiced mastery of self, Tala kept herself from panicking.

-Gah… This is… This is not easy. One moment.-

Tala felt something click into place, and she lifted an illusory hand to examine it.

In every way that she could sense, it was her own hand and her own eyes that she used to examine it.

"This is amazing."

"Thank you." The other Tala smiled, tilting her head experimentally. "This is… interesting." Then, the woman grinned and placed her hand over her heart. "In fact, this is a lot."

Tala grinned in return. “You’re ridiculous. But in all seriousness, are you going to be alright, Alat?”

Alat shrugged. “I think so. There’s an odd positive resonance, once everything is established. It’s easier to maintain a full immersion—a full body and suite of senses—than just a part. There’s a nice harmony that helps keep it working. I also don’t think I could do this without the bloodstar anchors.”

“I suppose I can see that.”

“Even so”—Alat looked a bit abashed—“if you were any less magically dense, I wouldn’t be able to do this… And you were right. I couldn’t do this with anyone else, not yet.”

“After Refining?”

“Probably, yeah.”

“Fascinating.” Just to be safe, Tala started funneling more power to Alat’s scripts, and those that enhanced Tala’s own mind, giving Alat more to work with across the board.

“Retson says that this should be beyond us right now.”

Tala hesitated. “You’re talking with Master Nadro’s alternate interface?”

“Off and on. It’s odd to convey what it’s like for me.” Alat shrugged. “He’s always there, open to instant communication. It makes it so I can talk with him if I have a question. Interestingly, he says that after you Refine, we can work together to let you and Master Nadro speak as if you are in person, no matter where either of you are, so long as you are both within Archive range. It’s similar to this actually.” She gestured at herself. “But with only one body, and I have someone else helping me.”

“We still need to enhance our Archive access range.” Tala bit her lip. “It’s a bit silly that we haven’t done so already.”

“Shall I ask Mistress Ingrit to make the arrangements? I assume you’d prefer to leverage some of that collateral than be limited to our gold?”

Tala quirked a smile. “Only the best for you.”

Alat grinned. “Why thank you, Mistress Tala.”

“Now.” Tala fell into a fighting stance. “Are we going to just stand here all night or will we fight?”

Alat hesitated. “Do you want your full capacities or a subset? I can try to mimic the iron manipulation, but I don’t know that we understand it well enough to guarantee accuracy. I’d hate to misrepresent it and train us in something that isn’t true or accurate. That’s a good way to die.”

Tala nodded. “Very well. Everything but that.”

“Let’s get to it, then.”

Tala glanced toward where she was actually sitting off to one side, across the slowly flowing water that surrounded the training arena. Her body rested there, eyes closed, body relaxed in a simple seated position, hands relaxing on her own knees.

I look peaceful.

Alat lunged forward, and Tala was drawn into the fight.

* * *

After about an hour of sparring, they had to stop for a break.

Tala was using as many void-channels as she could maintain to dump power into Alat’s scripts as well as her mental enhancements, and even so, the whole thing was straining Tala’s mind along with Alat’s core magics.

She was *sore.* She knew that the feeling was entirely fake, but Alat had been giving Tala a good beating. Since Alat knew her fighting style and matched her in capacity, Tala found herself on the losing end more often than not.

The alternate interface swore that she wasn't cheating. It was just that Tala had never fought anyone who matched her so perfectly, and Alat had spent months trying to find holes in Tala's fighting style to help her fill them.

Most were, indeed, now mitigated, but Alat was left with an incredible understanding of Tala's knee-jerk reactions, instincts, and tendencies.

Tala, on the other hand, had no idea how Alat fought because Alat never had.

The results had been educational.

That said, Alat admitted that she would probably do worse than Tala against almost anyone other than her. Well, she would do worse unless she pulled from Tala's own experience more heavily, which meant the same thing.

But she couldn't do that now. Now, Alat was exhausted—or whatever the equivalent was for an alternate interface.

-Can I send the diagnostics to Mistress Holly?-

She'll get them next time we visit, right?

-Of course, but if she has any easy updates or enhancements, I want them sooner rather than later.-

Tala laughed. *Sure.*

She opened her eyes—her real eyes—and stood.

There was no unsteadiness, nor disorientation. It simply felt as if she'd been fighting, sat down, and then stood up once more.

The soreness faded as if it were being healed away, Alat mirroring the feeling perfectly.

That really is incredible, Alat. Will it train my muscle memory as well?

-Oh, absolutely. I don't have the power to process every signal coming from your brain, parse it, and enact it at the speed of thought.-

So… what do you do?

-I catch the nerve signals when they try to leave your neural network—which is my domain, by the way—and based on where they are, the intention is clear. Muscle memory is a misnomer anyway, it's really training your nervous system, and that fires just fine through this training.-

Tala grunted. "Amazing."

-I am, aren't I?- There was only a moment's pause. *-Now, please sleep? That was… unusually straining on that very system. I expect we'll sleep longer than usual.-*

It's about six hours until dawn. Is that enough time?

-Yeah, it should be.-

Tala wished to be in her bedroom, and she was. Less than a minute later, she was unclad and in her bed, luxuriating in the comfort even as Alat helped her fall nearly instantly asleep.

* * *

Tala woke as the sun rose, feeling both refreshed and a bit… hungover?

-Mentally sore.- Alat groaned. *-The term you're looking for is mentally sore. Ow…-*

Are you alright?

-I think so. I believe we found a portion of our training that's been lacking: mainly, me. Up until now, we've only found things I could do or things I couldn't. I think this might be the first

task we've come across that I think I can improve in over time, which isn't simply a matter of figuring out a better way.- After a moment's hesitation, Alat added, -*Though, there will be some of that, too.*-

Well. That's good, right? Progress through effort?

-*…Yeah… I'd just gotten used to* you *working hard and being sore for us to improve… I suppose I can start doing it again.*- Alat sighed within Tala's head.

Well, let me know if there is anything that I can do to help.

-*Oh, I can assure you that I will.*-

Tala laughed at that as she stood, her clothing growing over her in a wave.

Breakfast?

-*Breakfast.*- There was a pregnant pause before Alat added, -*Coffee?*-

Tala was sorely tempted, and Alat would know that, but she shook her head. *No, Alat. Bad. Mistress Holly said we need to be done with that.*

Alat groaned. -*This is so much worse experiencing it firsthand…*-

Well, let's go get some good food, then. Simple, full breakfast?

-*Tomatoes, fruit, and sausage? Plus a few layer-pastries?*-

That sounds excellent.

* * *

The next few days passed as before, with the notable addition of Alat working heavily to improve her ability with the alternate experience simulations.

Before Tala really registered the passing of time, she was walking toward the home in which Mistress Aproa was looking after her great grandmother, Mistress Odera.

My former overseer on caravan trips… I still need to drop by the Caravanner's Guild.

-Yes. Yes, you do.-

Tala found them both in the surprisingly large garden behind the small house, which seemed to be composed of a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and a small sitting area.

The garden was immaculately maintained, but in a way that made it feel more alive—more natural—rather than like something wholly artificial or sculpted.

When Tala arrived, the three of them walked to a cleverly designed seating area with three benches.

Tala sat on one, and the two women sat on another, leaving the third unoccupied.

The spot was shaped and situated such that nothing truly man-made could be seen, save the paths and the benches themselves.

Where houses rose over the garden walls, trees were situated and cultivated to hide them entirely even deep in winter, which was impressive in its own right.

Tala could sense magics that blocked outside sounds as well.

Altogether, the results gave the sense of being out in the wilds, even though they remained in the city.

"Thank you for coming to visit me, dear girl." Mistress Odera was hunched in on herself, but she was smiling, and her voice was strong, familiar.

"Of course. I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier."

The older woman waved her away. "You've been through much, and you needed time to acclimate to your return."

Tala smiled and nodded, letting the silence stand as she looked around, enjoying the winter plants. There were a few songbirds flitting around, and Tala saw magically heated birdhouses scattered around the garden.

They wouldn't be warm by human standards, but it seemed that magics would keep their temperature from ever getting below freezing, even without the nests situated within.

"Your garden is lovely, Mistress."

"Thank you. My late husband was quite the gardener. It took him thirty years, but he finally got me to join him." She smiled contentedly. "I don't know why I fought him for so long. Those last thirty odd years, gardening together, were a joy."

"I don't believe you've ever said. When did he pass?"

"Oh, nearly forty years ago or so."

So, she's at least a hundred and twenty, give or take?

-Give or take, yeah.-

Tala paused, letting herself *feel* what the woman had said before she responded, "I'm sorry for your loss, but I'm glad you had so much time with him."

"That's kind of you, dear." Mistress Odera smiled. "You've learned the value of silence and taking a moment to consider. You've paid heavily for it, but that is wisdom many never acquire."

Tala felt herself smile as well. "Thank you."

They chatted off and on about nothing in particular, simply enjoying the time and garden.

Mistress Odera had her legs wrapped in a thick blanket, and Tala could see magical warming stones sewn into the inner lining in a few places, helping to keep the older woman comfortable despite the snow and chill.

They spent a couple of hours together. Mistress Aproa participated occasionally but not very often.

She was mostly there to be with her great-grandmother.

Apparently, other family members dropped by occasionally, but none did so while Tala was there.

Tala finally took a deep breath and asked the critical question, “How are you? Really?”

Mistress Odera gave a sad smile. “I am… fading, my dear girl. I long to be done with this world and join my Torbin and my little ones.”

Through their conversation, Tala had learned that most of Mistress Odera’s family had not been Mages. Only one of her children still lived, and while she had many grandchildren, not many were in better shape than she, herself.

Tala had known the gist of most of it, but it was good to get the details all together like this. It was good to actually ask and hear the answer.

Mistress Aproa’s generation had a larger number of Mages, as well as many, many children, though Mistress Aproa was an exception in that regard. Even so, those little ones were simply too far removed from their great-great-grandmother.

Mistress Odera missed her family, those who had passed many decades earlier.

“It is the curse upon humanity that they don’t warn you of. There are only two options, Mistress Tala. Either you die, leaving loved ones to grieve over your passing, or you live long enough to grieve over their passing instead.”

-That’s a dark way of looking at it.-

True, though.

-Unless you all die together? Score one for ritual, group suicide?-

No. Don't even joke about that.

-Fine… What about this? You could slowly lose the ability to care and to love before anyone dies?-

That is death of another kind, is it not?

Alat didn't have a quick response for that.

"Mistress Odera. While I was gone, I came across artificially created consciousnesses, integrated in and around founts."

The Mage grunted. "I had heard something of that, yes."

"We can also make a copy of your mind. If you hold on, we could bind your mind, as it is now, to your own fount, and you could live on. You could help others and see the next age, whatever it may bring."

The Mage shook her head. "Why would I want that, child? I no longer even wish to claim a portion of this world. I see the folly in that now, bless my earlier foolishness. I have already jumped through the bureaucratic hoops…"—she glanced down at her own legs and gave a mirthful smile—"metaphorically, of course. I have gone through the process to ensure that my fount will be freed from Zeme. I will pass on and be with those I have lost. They have been patient enough, my dear. My time has been long, and full, and good. I am ready when it ends."

Tala shifted a bit uncomfortably. "What medium will your Archon Star be?"

Mistress Odera perked up at that. "Now, *that* is something interesting. Apparently, when it reaches the point of spontaneous creation, I will form it in the water within my own body."

"Like I did with my blood?"

"Very similarly, yes. It was long-theorized, but until you proved a liquid medium actually worked, it was believed that even close observation was missing some critical part. Now, since

you proved it so blatantly, all the data they've collected over the years makes much more sense, and many theories are clicking into place."

"Wait… They knew, but they didn't know?"

"If you saw a stone change into a puppy, would you believe it to be natural? Or would you assume you missed some act of magic?"

"Ahh, I see. So, by proving that anyone *can* use a liquid medium, I showed that there doesn't have to be 'other magics at play.'"

"Precisely."

"If I may ask… why wait? Why wait for the Star? Why not find an alternate method and leave at a time of your own choosing?"

The old Mage huffed a laugh. "Because life is precious. I've no desire to die, but I've no desire to forcefully extend my days. My time will come soon enough. There's no reason to hasten its coming."

Tala nodded slowly. She didn't really understand the sentiment, but she could see that it made sense to Mistress Odera.

"Now, back to happier things. Tell me, what sort of mischief are you getting up to these days?"

That brought a smile to Tala's lips, and she leaned in to chat with her former mentor.

Chapter: 24
A Fragile Peace

Tala left when Mistress Odera needed to lie down for an afternoon nap.

It had been an incredibly pleasant time, even with the morbid undertones.

-Mistress Ingrit has things ready for the enhancement of our Archive access range.-

Oh! Wonderful.

-She has a couple of questions, however. I could have answered them, but I thought you'd want to participate, directly.-

Sure.

-She wants to know what range you were hoping for?-

I'd like to be able to visit the moon one day. Tala glanced up at the portion of the moon that she could see. Even with her incredibly enhanced vision, she still couldn't see the monsters on the moon that Master Jevin had told her about. *Maybe with a telescope? Or maybe he was pulling my leg.*

Alat giggled happily. *-That would be pretty fun. Alright. She's… she's a bit flabbergasted, if her word choice is any indication. She's wondering if that's really wise, and haven't you had quite enough insane adventures for the time being. I'm assuring her that these plans are for the future, and that you just want to make sure to never be out of range again. Why have to upgrade more than once?-*

Tala smiled as she began walking down the street.

-Alright. Apparently, there's a way to give infinite range? Wait, that can't be right. Hang on.-

She took in the sights, not having spent much time in this portion of the living district.

Tala paused, noticing the oddity of two pastry shops, side by side.

What kind of name is the 'Lord Donut'? She shook her head. Apparently, it was the moniker for some insane creation, meant to drive up business. It looked to be a donut, stuffed inside another donut and fried again, several times? The thing was massive and apparently ridiculously fluffy.

Rather than competing directly, the neighboring shop seemed to have decided to go for a different audience. Their advertisement was for a lighter, more delicate dessert.

It wasn't glazed; instead, it was frosted with innumerable strands of varyingly caramelized white sugar. That sugar *almost* looked like hair or fur but not in an unappetizing way. The caramelization process had left the strands white, black, and a deep, almost red color.

They'd dubbed their creation the 'Princess Donut.'

It was quite lovely and well presented. *It just needs a tiara.*

Tala shook her head.

Lord Donut vs Princess Donut. She laughed. *Well, the shops seem to be doing well, so I guess it works for them.*

-Alright, it seems like she was being literal. In her words, this is extreme, but with a few mergings, our Archive ring can be split, with half left with them in the Library. The connection between the two pieces is our soul, so there's no question of distance. If you die, the ring in their possession will dissolve. So, we'll want to update our death clause. Of course, they'll have to move it when this city wanes, but they have procedures for that.-

This is… too perfect. Why didn't we do this earlier?

-That's the thing… the material components, along with the housing within the Library, would run nearly five thousand gold.-

Tala stutter-stepped, physically hitching at the amount. *What the rust?*

Alat continued before Tala could object too much. *-But! With the books you've offered up to the Library, that cost can be covered. We won't have* much *goodwill to draw on from them after this, but apparently, bringing home an entire arcane library made them* very *happy with you.-*

Tala swallowed reflexively. *Well, we'll never be stranded, outside of communication distance again.*

-That's for sure.-

So, how does it work, again?

-She didn't explain beyond simply stating: A soul is always in the same place as itself.-

Huh. Can it be blocked?

-Not without killing us, no.- Alat hesitated. *-Though, Mistress Ingrit did say that she didn't really know how being in the Doman-Imithe or the void would affect it. In theory, there shouldn't be any issue, but she said that, to her knowledge, it's never been tested, specifically.-*

That's fair, I suppose. Wait… why couldn't we just leave the ring at the Library? Why go through all this?

-So, I asked that. Apparently, while any soulbound item is still connected to you, using it at a great distance isn't usually possible. In this case, the item, itself, will be in both places. The part we use will remain on your finger, and the part connected to the Archive will remain in the Library. I'm vastly oversimplifying the already simplified explanation she gave me. Suffice it to say, this is the only real option.-

Huh… alright then. So, to the Constructionist Guild?

-Yes, Mistress Ingrit will meet us there, and she will take the other half of our ring when we're done.-

Less than an hour later, Tala walked out of the Constructionists' Guildhall, waved goodbye to Mistress Ingrit, and found herself standing off to one side, a little bewildered.

It was done. Apparently, five thousand gold had been used, and she and Alat had infinite range on her Archive access.

That went off without a hitch. It was practically… boring.

-It's nice to have something go so easily for us, for once, right?-

Tala lifted her right hand, willing the ring to fade into visibility.

It was now half as wide, turning from a somewhat hefty bit of jewelry to one that was almost delicate. *Not that I ever let it be seen…*

She shook her own head, and the ring faded from physicality; even the sensation of it being on her finger vanished.

This just feels anticlimactic. In theory, that was incredibly *expensive, and our isolation in the arcane cities would have been solved instantly if we had this…*

-But now, it's just done. Is that it?-

Exactly. I feel like I should have had to kill a dragon to get this. Or something equally insane. She sighed.

-Like a Pillar? Or invading a major arcane House and stealing an entire library from their hold?-

Tala grinned at that. *Fair, I suppose. I just don't feel like those things are directly connected to this in any way, but I guess that's just me being a bit silly.*

-I can understand it. You've a bad taste in your mouth because the House of Blood 'just gave' you things, and this feels a bit like that.-

...Yeah. Tala narrowed her eyes. *Are you getting this from Retson?*

-This? No, but he is very insightful.-

I would hope so, being attached to a Hallowed and all. How long has he been around?

-I haven't asked how old the alternate interface is, but I get the feeling that it's been a long *time.-*

Tala nodded to herself, then grimaced. *We should deal with our contract with the Caravanner's Guild, shouldn't we…*

-That would probably be wise, yeah.-

Thank you for not pushing.

-Of course! I am happy to not do things whenever you have need.-

Tala huffed a laugh as she set off toward that guild.

As she walked, she opened Kit and called in to Terry. "Hey, want to come with me to hopefully see Lyn?"

Terry trilled excitedly and flickered out onto her shoulder before hunkering down.

He'd come out every so often over the past days, but he usually declined her offers.

He had refused to come out and see Mistress Odera, and Tala thought she understood.

Animals didn't 'see off' the elderly. It just wasn't a part of who and what they were.

It would have been less than ideal if he decided to attack her in her garden, too.

-I don't think he would have, but, yes, I agree. That would have been bad.-

Terry cocked his head at her and let out a little squawk before headbutting her cheek and hunkering down once more.

“Yeah, yeah.” She reached up and scratched under the feathers of his neck.

He closed his eyes, leaning into her scratches and cooing happily.

“Thanks for coming out. I know this isn’t as much fun as being in the Wilds. Or in the sanctum, for that matter.”

He hesitantly cracked one eye to look her way. He then rolled that eye and began a condescending series of trills and squawks.

“Stop, stop. I get it.” She was chuckling. “It’s not bad to enjoy a time where we aren’t fighting for our lives. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Terry let out a contented exhale, bobbing once before he pushed into her hand once again.

Tala began scratching again and smiled. “You are quite wise, you know that?”

He trilled softly as if in obvious affirmation.

“Well, I’m grateful for it.”

They arrived at the Caravanner’s Guild and pushed in through the broad double doors before closing them firmly behind.

“Tala?”

Lyn was farther back in the large room than she had been when Tala had first met her, but the woman still commanded a great view of the entrance. “Good afternoon, Lyn.”

The Archon leaned over, spoke to Kannis who had been sitting beside her, and then stood to come out from behind the counter. “Please, right this way.”

Tala followed, and as they walked, Terry let out a short squawk and wiggled grumpily on her shoulder.

Lyn glanced back. “Hi, Terry. It’s good to see you, too.”

The terror bird preened, chirping happily.

“We’ll grab a back room. I assume this isn’t a social visit?”

“No… I figured I should deal with my contract.”

“And we here at the Caravan Guild appreciate that.”

“You’ve been more than patient.”

“Tala, think nothing of it. This shouldn’t be a concern.” As they passed an alcove with some food and beverages laid out, Lyn gestured. “Want anything?”

The coffee caught Tala’s eye, but she shook her head. “No, thank you.”

The room that Lyn led them to was reminiscent of the one in which Tala had renegotiated her contract previously.

“Will I have to meet with someone else? To ensure there’s no favoritism or bias?”

“That isn’t necessary in this case. One of the severability clauses will be invoked, and those are always thoroughly reviewed regardless, so we just need to talk through it and make sure you don’t have any questions or concerns.”

“Oh. Well, that sounds much easier than what I was expecting.”

Lyn quirked a smile. “You figured we’d press you back into service, eh?”

Tala shrugged self-consciously. “The thought did cross my mind, yeah.”

The guild representative pulled the door closed, and they both sat down. “Now, the clause that I believe we should discuss is the ‘Act of War’ clause. You were unable to fulfill your duties due to an act of war undertaken by one of the enemies of humanity. Do you agree with that assessment?”

Tala frowned. “I suppose? I mean, he didn’t attack humanity. He targeted me directly. So… actually no?”

Lyn arched an eyebrow. Then she leaned forward and placed her head in her own hands and sighed. “Tala… why not?”

Tala shrugged. “Because? My understanding is that there is a fragile peace between humanity and the arcanes. Wouldn’t using ‘act of war’ to nullify a contract cause some issue?”

Lyn hesitated, lifting her head slightly. “I… I didn’t actually know that.”

“Oh… yeah, apparently, the humans and arcanes uncovered or created enough horrible things while trying to destroy each other that they had to ally to destroy all of those things and lock away those that couldn’t be so destroyed. They just sort of never went back to war after that was done.” Tala shrugged again.

Lyn frowned, blinking slowly as she processed that. “Then… I suppose I understand your hesitancy to agree that it was an act of war…” The woman grimaced. “Banditry?”

“That could cover it. Taken in the line of duty?” Tala grinned. “Payment due for time served?”

Lyn laughed. “Now, that’s one way to think about it. Banditry would be a hard sell, though, because nothing from the caravan was taken, save you. We do have clauses in place in case of extreme injury—which wouldn’t apply—incapacitation—which might actually be the way to spin this—and trauma, rendering you unable to perform future routes.”

“Well, the trauma fits, but I’m definitely not an invalid. I *could* perform future routes, in theory. I was subjected to a magical condition that took me this long to recover and return from. Would that fit?”

“Yes!” Lyn manipulated her slate. “There’s a reference to the table of severity… Hmmm… It looks like they didn’t take into account being unable to find a healer. Cost of healing is covered, but you don’t have any direct expenses to submit for that… Hmm… ‘One obligated trip may be negated per three days of recovery required, at the choice of the Dimensional Mage.’”

Tala frowned. “That could be nine months, give or take, three months, or… a week? More, I suppose, because I’m barred from even sparring. Combat is right out for the time being.”

Lyn nodded. “You performed a total of eighteen trips, sixteen since your renegotiation. You were on your nineteenth when you were… taken. With seventy contracted trips, that would leave you with fifty-one remaining in obligation.”

“So, one hundred fifty days due to the incapacitation and recovery would eliminate that?”

“Yes, and all time from the time of affliction until full recovery is counted.”

“What if the time taken exceeds the number of trips covered by the contract? Am I to be paid out for harm incurred?”

Lyn huffed a laugh. “No. There is no such policy, and quite frankly, there doesn’t need to be. For basically anyone but you, to be taken out of commission for this long would be a death sentence. If you were crippled, we would pay out a severance, but you’re not, not permanently. Such *is* possible, but exceedingly rare. I think I’ve only seen it happen once, and I was a mageling at the time. I don’t really remember all the details, honestly, so I might be mistaken.”

“So?”

“So, I think that that is the right way to approach this. You were magically incapacitated while on the job, rendered unable to perform your duties or take on caravan routes for a protracted length of time. Per the contract, your time incapacitated and in recovery totals more than enough to negate all further required trips. Thank you for your service, Mistress Tala, and we hope that you consider us again for your future employment needs.” Her eyes sparkled with barely contained mirth.

“Yeah, I’ll agree to and confirm that.”

Lyn offered her the tablet, and Tala and the older Archon both confirmed the details. “The branch manager will have to review this to finalize the approval, but I don’t foresee any issues. You are free of any obligation.”

That hit Tala like a runaway wagon, and she rocked backward, eyebrows rising. “Oh.”

Lyn frowned in concern. “Tala? Are you alright?”

“Yeah… Yeah. I just… I just hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve paid my debts. I’ve no active contracts. I… I have absolutely no obligations.”

“Is that… good?”

Tala bit her lip in thought. “I’m honestly not sure. What should I do with myself?”

“What you’ve been doing?” Lyn suggested helpfully.

Tala waved that off. “Until I’m Refined, of course, but what about after?”

“I suppose that’s up to you.”

She looked at her friend, frowning. “That’s… That’s terrifying.”

Lyn laughed. “I’d say get a job, but you’re practically independently wealthy at this point, and you could likely do anything you want. So? What *do* you want?”

“I think…” She thought about the ruins of the previous Arconaven. She thought about where Terry had come from; the plains with their moving villages; the great unpopulated northern part of the continent, supposedly the realm of gods and sovereigns; and of the cities she hadn’t seen, those under construction, and those in new terrains. *I’ve never seen the coast, here. I’ve never seen a city finally fade or one spark to life. There is so much out there*. “I think I want to see the wonders of the world.”

Lyn frowned, seeming concerned, but before she could comment, Tala continued.

“I want to be based here, but I don’t think I want to be locked in here.” She smiled to soften her words. “I don’t plan on taking multi-year expeditions, nor do I ever plan to be out of contact again.”

That seemed to mollify Lyn but only just. “If that’s what you really want… you won’t go alone, will you?”

Tala shrugged. “I hope not. If nothing else, I need some help within my sanctum.”

Oh. OH! She smiled as she realized that she could return to Alefast, Waning, and experience the dying of a city, then offer Adrill, Artia, and Brandon positions within her sanctum.

Two of them were gateless, so they wouldn’t hurt the space at all.

-Hey, that’s an idea… Rane and Master Grediv will be there, as well. It’s too bad that we might have to see Furgal again, though…-

Eh, that could be avoided. Also, shouldn’t it be ‘Master Furgal’? Isn’t he a Mage?

-If so, he doesn’t deserve the honorific… but we’re getting into the weeds. They might work for you, yeah.-

Honestly, now that I think about it, we could offer positions to any gateless. Right?

-So long as we had the space, sure. That would make us much like the villages, wouldn’t it?-

Just a bit, but if we actually get the teleportation pads working? We’d remain connected to the gated human cities.

Lyn grinned, shaking her head. “I can tell your mind is already working at it, but just to clarify, I hope you go with other powerful Archons, not just some people in your sanctum who can’t help you if you get in a bind. Now, be on your way, free agent. I’ll see you for dinner, but *some* of us still have to work for a living.”

Tala stood. “Thank you, Lyn. Truly. For… For everything.”

Lyn stood and gave her a quick, careful hug. “Absolutely, Tala. Any time at all.”

Chapter: 25
Reality Shifted

Tala was sitting in one of the three chairs in Lyn's sitting room, reading an illusory book, while Lyn and Kannis each read physical books.

Kannis's seemed to be a dry text, by her demeanor. She was also taking a lot of notes as she read, which added to the impression that it was a book read out of obligation rather than for enjoyment.

Though, to be fair, I take notes on my favorite books, too…

-Her face says, 'This is a chore to read.'-

There is that.

Lyn had been alternatively laughing and tilting her head in obvious thought. First, it moved one way, then the other, often accompanied by exhalations of interest or surprise.

She also occasionally seemed to be mouthing certain sentences.

Truth be told, Tala wasn't really reading. Instead, she was surreptitiously watching her friend because something *fascinating* was happening.

Lyn was Fusing.

Upon Tala's return, Lyn had been barely halfway advanced from Bound to Fused, but it had been progressing rather well. Now, as Tala watched, the woman's aura color was noticeably sliding from red further and further toward orange, and Lyn didn't even seem to have noticed.

She was nearly all the way to true orange.

-This is fascinating. It's sort of like when you confronted your family.-

But she's just reading a book! This is ridiculous, Alat. How can reading a book be causing her to Fuse? How is that fair? Tala felt a bit petulant, but it did seem rather unequal.

-Well, first of all, you know that some Fuse the moment they become Bound, so this is far slower and less convenient than that. Second, her foundation is 'words are power.' Are you really surprised that reading can help her advance?-

But she's been reading since we both became Bound. Why now?

-When she hits a pause point, or better yet, when she finishes Fusing, why not ask her? Besides, you can see the fluctuations in her magic as easily as I can. She's doing something *more than just reading, and you know it.-*

Tala grimaced, then sighed to herself. *Fine.*

She returned her attention to her book but made sure to focus a mirrored perspective on her friend so that she could analyze what was happening more later.

Nearly an hour later, Lyn seemed to reach the end of her book.

The older Archon let out a long breath, speaking to herself, "Well, that was truly amazing. I can't say that I—"

Lyn gasped, arching backward as power blossomed out of her.

It was instantly contained, channeled, and redirected back into Lyn's body, but both the power and Lyn's sudden movements were obvious.

Kannis yelped, closing her book and notebook and setting them aside, but before the girl could interfere, Tala held up a hand. "Wait. Open your magesight but do nothing else."

Kannis hesitated, but after that barest of pauses, she nodded and complied.

Tala quirked a smile at her obedience and didn't comment further.

A moment later, Lyn slumped down, groaning.

Just like the method of Fusing varied from person to person, the manner and experience of it did as well.

I can't believe that I had to painstakingly crochet my very being together and some people just get to read a book…

Lyn sat up, covered in a cold sweat. "Oh, my. That was… That was intense."

"Good book?" Tala gave her friend a falsely patronizing smile.

The older woman huffed a laugh. "Quite insightful, yes."

"Clearly."

"That's not what I… Well, I suppose so. It was on the nature of power, non-magical power specifically. It had rather detailed, rational treatises on why certain people lead, why humanity as a whole is drawn toward certain decisions, and things like that."

"And that helped you Fuse?"

Lyn's eyes flicked to Kannis, and she frowned. "We can discuss that later, Tala. Kannis, can you tell me what you observed?"

Right… still hiding things from non-Archons… It did make sense, and she'd been foolish to disregard that. Kannis was still of a stage where the wrong information could spoil her potential for advancement, after all.

"Have you seen those mechanical sewing machines?" The girl still seemed a bit shaken by her master's sudden movement, but she also seemed to be settling into question-and-answer mode.

"I have." Lyn nodded.

"Well, it looked like your magic, your power, was working like one of those automated needles but an uncountable number of them, all over your body. I don't know what it was stitching, but it seems like it did the work quickly and thoroughly."

Huh, so she did have to do something similar?

-Yes, Tala. She had to Fuse in some manner to become Fused.-

Hush, you.

"Very good, Kannis. I am glad that you had the presence of mind to watch so closely."

Kannis turned and bowed toward Tala. "Thank you, Mistress Tala, for the suggestion."

Tala shrugged. "Sure. Some things are really helpful to see for yourself, even if you don't have the context yet."

Lyn sighed. "That was… surprisingly exhausting. Even with mental enhancements, splitting my concentration like that was a bit much." She looked to Tala. "I don't understand how you do it."

"Practice? I'm always thinking of a few dozen things."

-No, you simply don't force yourself to stay on task. The most you manage, not including what I *am working on, is two thoughts at any given time. From there, you simply allow whatever those two thoughts are to bounce around randomly and unhelpfully.-*

I… Huh. I suppose I didn't really think about that.

Lyn simply grunted and shook her head. "I need to get some sleep. I'll see you both tomorrow?"

Kannis bowed to her master. "Yes, Mistress Lyn. I hope you rest well."

"Thank you, Kannis, you, too."

"Night, Lyn."

"Good night, Tala."

Lyn went to the back, and Tala stood. "Well, I should get some sleep too. Good night, Kannis."

“Good night, Mistress Tala.”

Tala had tried to get the mageling to drop the honorific, but she hadn’t tried *that* hard. Honestly, Tala didn’t care enough to deal with it.

Thus, without delay, Tala tossed Kit at the nearest wall and stepped inside her sanctum, into her bedroom.

Her bed caught her a moment later as she flopped down, and Alat facilitated an almost instant falling into blissful sleep.

* * *

Tala had about ten seconds of notice as the structure of reality shifted nearby.

It would have been utterly undetectable to her if Alat hadn’t been practicing with the use of voidsight.

The alternate interface began freaking out, drawing Tala’s attention quite quickly.

She’d slept well and spent the rest of the night productively. At that moment the disturbance began to build, Tala had been in her dining area, eating some well-balanced snacks.

Tala lunged to her feet, Flow *snicking* into her hand even as it extended into the form of a void-sword.

She pointed the tip at the bit of reality that was shifting into being.

To her surprise, when it manifested, it was Kit’s door that appeared in her dining area.

There was an odd *shivering* through the sanctum, similar to a stubborn dog being forced into obedience.

What is happening?

The door swung open, and Master Xeel stood there, one eyebrow raised. “Did we not have an appointment?”

Tala’s posture was perfect in her fighting stance, and her sword was leveled at the man’s chest.

He didn’t seem to care in the slightest. “I knocked, but I sensed that you hadn’t heard.” The man narrowed his gaze and panned his gaze around the doorway, staring at the only part of Kit that existed in reality proper. “I could *also* sense that your… sanctum was muffling the sound, so shouting would have done no good.”

Lyn leaned out from behind the man. “I’m sorry, Tala. I’d thought you said you had an appointment with him, so I let him in the house. He did knock on your door, but then magic just started pouring off of him.”

Master Xeel glanced back at the newly Fused. “It’s quite alright, Mistress Lyn. I am sorry for disturbing you. A woman in your condition should get all the rest she can.” He hesitated at that. “Ah, I meant that, a newly Fused Archon should get all the rest that they can.”

Lyn had colored at the implication but simply nodded in response to his clarification.

“Mistress Tala and I have *many* things to discuss, and I will not harm her or her items.” After a momentary pause, he tilted his head to one side, regarding Tala. “May I come in?”

“Of course.” Tala gestured, allowing Flow to return to its knife form even as she sheathed it.

-He’s early. It’s before sunrise, even if it is winter.-

The appointment wasn’t for sunrise.

-No, but it was for the hour, and so, he’s still four minutes early.-

Master Xeel stepped inside and closed the door, giving Lyn a little wave goodbye as it swung shut.

The door vanished with an audible *pop*, which startled Tala as it was the only time she could ever remember *hearing* Kit make a change. She didn't bother searching her memory though, so she *might* be mistaken.

"My apologies, Mistress Tala." Master Xeel turned back toward her and gave a shallow bow. "I despise being late, and in this case, I did not consider the oddities that I might cause by arriving early."

"Oh, it's quite alright, Master Xeel. Please, come in."

You're already here, so it doesn't really matter anyway.

She gestured to one of the two more comfortable chairs. "Can I get you some tea?"

"Thank you for the offer, but I carry my own repast." He took a seat, and with an odd sense of unveiling, a tray appeared in his lap with a scrumptious selection of fruits, vegetables, breads, and even some meat, which seemed to still be sizzling. "Can I offer you some breakfast? It isn't magically attuned to you, of course"—he gave her a friendly, knowing smile—"but it is exquisite for mundane food."

"I'd love some, thank you." She sat and watched a similar unfurling of reality on her own lap, leaving her with a platter of food all her own. It was obviously a larger quantity than Master Xeel had given himself. "Thank you."

"But of course."

They spent a few minutes enjoying the food.

From her observations, most—if not all—of the powerful people Tala had met seemed at once both incredibly crunched for time and utterly unconcerned with moments of quiescence.

It was Tala who broke the silence. "Have you ever seen a Reality beast?"

His eyes flicked to her as he finished his latest bite, pulling a cup from thin air to drink and wash the remainder free before banishing the cup once more. “You do like to get to the meat of things, don’t you?”

“It seems one of the more pressing topics available to us.”

“I’d have thought that the Doman-Imithe would hold that distinction for you, but I can see the overlap. The answer to your question is yes. Do you have any specific questions about them, or were you just curious if I’d had an encounter?” His small smile revealed which he thought it to be.

“Questions, definitely questions.”

“Then, by all means, proceed.” He gestured for her to continue.

“What are they? How is ‘reality’ a type of magic? Does it hurt reality when they die?”

Master Xeel nodded. “All excellent questions. We’ll start with the last one. Does it harm ‘fire’ when a burn wolf dies or a hearth is banked?”

Tala frowned. She hadn’t considered it in that light. “No, of course not.”

“Precisely. Magical beasts of reality add more to the world, and their loss isn’t ideal, but it is also unavoidable at times. But to be clear in my answer: when they die, reality is not directly harmed, no.”

“Why isn’t their loss ideal, and how is it unavoidable?”

“Well, they add to reality simply by existing. They stabilize Zeme and help continue the work of stabilizing our existence. When they are lost, we lose another stop-gap which had been ensuring our continued survival. As to why it’s unavoidable? They hate humanity and all forms of magic other than their own.”

“Because we erode reality, which is what they are oriented around.”

“Precisely.” He popped a slice of strawberry into his mouth and then spoke around it. “But all magic does. Erode reality, I mean. It’s what magic *is*, an altering or stretching or bending of reality. Whether we add matter to existence or shift a fundamental law toward our own ends, magic is a breaking of reality, definitionally.”

“That seems… bad?”

He laughed. “Yes and no. Playing at the oceanside and building sandcastles are a fundamental breaking of the beach and the sand. The creatures who live in the sand—and who function within the ecosystems therein—might not like it, but there’s no danger, so long as it isn’t abused.”

“But Zeme is abused.”

“Oh, quite thoroughly, yes.”

There was another pause as they both ate another few bites.

Tala found herself distracted by just how *good* the food was, but she drew her mind back to the matters at hand.

“Where do they come from?”

“That is an excellent question.” He once again washed his latest bite with a bit of whatever he had in his fleeting mug. “Reality beasts come into being as something of an immune response. It’s a fascinating process, really. They are birthed into reality, *by* reality. Like with magical beasts in general, sometimes mundane creatures are uplifted; rarely arcane creatures are well enough aligned with our world to be so changed. Somewhere between those two in rarity, creatures are simply drawn into existence. My own theory is that they are beings of the Doman-Imithe, snatched and brought through, but I’ve never been able to prove it.”

“So, it’s just a guess then?”

“Let’s call it an educated guess, but yes, it definitely qualifies as a guess.”

“What even *is* reality magic?”

He chuckled. “Aside from the obvious anti-magical applications?”

That stunned her for a moment. She hadn’t *really* considered that aspect of it. “Umm, yes, besides that.”

He gave a half-smile but didn’t comment on her hesitation. “That is another excellent question. It’s also a hard one to answer. In the extreme, some—like god-level reality beasts—can undo what magic has done, which sounds somewhat anticlimactic until you realize that every bit of Zeme was slapped back together with magic. Thus, they can temporarily make where you’re standing cease to exist, and the fact that you go with it is a funny little perk. Zeme comes back, and you don’t.”

Tala opened her mouth, and it stayed that way for a long moment. “There was… There was a lot in that.”

“I know, right?” He smiled and took another bite.

She scrambled a bit to pick where to start before finally just going for it, “Reality gods?”

He shrugged. “A shorthand, so to speak. Think of those that are Transcendent, or Sovereign level, or beyond.”

“Beyond… How are any of us still alive then?”

“Because the creatures are still animals. They have their domains, and they don’t have a drive to conquer or explore. Most hibernate for centuries at a time, and even then, they barely wake to roll over.”

Tala sat back, suddenly feeling the need for more bacon. Thankfully, she’d saved a few pieces, which she began to eat almost nervously.

“There are beasts of that level of all sorts of magic, if that makes you feel better.”

She gave him a level, unamused look. “Really? You think that would make me feel better?”

“No, I suppose not.” He cut off a bit of sausage and took a bite before speaking around the food once again. “But like with the Sovereigns, there is a sort of balance. If the reality gods got uppity, those of other magics would band together to keep them from breaking Zeme too badly. We’d likely not survive the clash, but it’s the potential clash that keeps us relatively safe, not the realization of it.”

When did he get out utensils? It really didn’t matter. “So, now that we have those existential terrors to add to my nightmares, I do actually have a couple of questions about the Doman-Imithe. The first one is rather simple: if the Doman-Imithe only exists behind Zeme, how can Archons come back from within the solar system but not from without? Shouldn’t the distinction be just around our planet?”

“That is actually a fascinating topic of study. We don’t have a definitive answer, but our best understanding is that we are all tied to Zeme, fundamentally. Not quite like a soul or magic bond, but something similar.”

Tala frowned but didn’t interrupt.

“We don’t know if this is only for gated humans or for all beings who live on Zeme.”

That makes sense. If arcanes didn’t have this connection, their understanding of how it all worked would be vastly different, or it could just be varied experiences…

-Listen to the expert in front of you, Tala.-

Right, right.

“Now, the theory states that if that connection is stretched too far, such as by leaving the star system, it seems to break. If it hasn’t broken, a human returning will actually return to Zeme,

rather than to the Doman-Imithe, even if looking back toward our world only shows the Doman-Imithe at any distance."

"So, when approaching the fractured reality, human Archons are shunted toward the one they are linked to so long as that link isn't severed?"

"Essentially, yes, that's the theory. It's obviously an oversimplification, but it is the prevalent notion."

"What's another one?"

He quirked a smile. "There are *hundreds*. But, the one I think is most likely is this: reality is actually broken over a far wider volume, thus much farther out than we generally realize. Specifically, it is cracked to the outer reaches of our star system, which is far, *far* farther out than most can comprehend."

Tala nodded, considering that.

"If someone leaves that area, they enter back into truly solid reality. That might kill them because their access to magic is severed, and space is a hostile place to be without magic. Something might be out there that eats them. There might even be some sort of barrier or dividing line that once you pass beyond it, it's like going over the horizon, and you can no longer see any of this at all." He gestured around himself with a bit of fruit on a fork. "The fracture, the damage to reality, is contained *by* reality to prevent the spread, so it is nearly impossible to return once one has gone past this theoretical horizon."

"Like the mythical edge of the world?"

"In a sense, but on a more cosmic scale."

"That's interesting but obviously hard to prove one way or another."

“Yeah, who knows exactly what event caused all of this, so it’s hard to extrapolate exactly all the repercussions, even though we’re living among them.”

“It all seems a bit… much. Like, we have enough to deal with here, don’t we?”

“True, but if we could figure it out, we could take all of our people, all those we love, and just leave. As it stands, we don’t know if anyone can survive leaving at all.” He shrugged. “But you are correct, that is a long-term issue.”

Tala took another careful bite. There were still so, so many questions to ask. She didn’t bother to hide her almost predatory grin. *This is going to be a long morning.*

Chapter: 26
Until Next Time

Tala took a careful bite of an apple slice. “Since we’re vaguely on the subject, what even *is* the Doman-Imithe?”

Master Xeel gave an exhausted smile, but Tala thought she was learning his expressions enough to know that it was to do with the frustrating nature of the subject, rather than with her. “Simple answer? It’s a conceptual backing to reality. A place where all the messy folds, cracks, and contradictions were secreted away in an attempt to keep Zeme habitable.”

Tala blinked a few times. “That actually makes a lot of sense.”

“Most simple answers do. They are also notoriously inaccurate under extreme scrutiny, but it suffices for most purposes.”

She grunted at that.

“I did enjoy the memories from your journey through that place. I’ve not seen it with my own eyes, and I found your short trip educational.”

“I’m glad to have been of help?” She wasn’t quite certain how she really felt about so many people seeing her memories.

That caravan really has left the city, though. No going back, now.

-It’s also better than the alternatives.-

Yeah, I would hate to have to try to narrate everything.

Master Xeel nodded happily. “Oh, your memories definitely were helpful. It would be better to go to the Doman-Imithe myself, but time being what it is, I doubt I’ll manage for another century or so.”

“So, soon enough, then,” Tala joked.

“Indeed.” He smiled, but he also seemed entirely genuine.

She coughed and changed the subject, “So, world fragments.”

“Oh, that’s right, you went to Croi.”

“So, humanity knows of that world fragment’s existence?”

“Yeah. It’s changed hands a couple of times, but less frequently than you might guess. The arcanes are rather proud of their possession of it. And to clarify, it’s not ‘that’ world fragment, but *the* world fragment. I don’t believe there’s another.” He hesitated. “You know, they might not know it’s the only one?” He shrugged, then. “We’ve hunted extensively, but they have one, so we’ve researched different things.”

“Why aren’t we helping to expand it? To repair the world that was before?”

He shrugged. “Paradise under tyranny is no paradise at all, and a paradise won with an ocean of blood might be even worse.”

She sat back and suddenly felt tears building in her eyes. *What? Why am I…?*

But she knew. She had spilled an ocean of blood to win free, but she knew he was right.

-Tala.-

No, Alat. Not now.

Master Xeel seemed to be nodding to himself. “I see you took something from my words that I didn’t say.”

“What does that mean?” she snapped back.

“What I said was that to go and take paradise from others so that we can have it, at the expense of blood, is no way to live. To fight free of enslavement, doing what it takes to win free? That is what it takes to survive. To do anything else is to subject yourself to the whims of others, and that is no life.”

Tala wiped at her eyes.

“Do not seek conflict, but when conflict comes—and it will come—make sure you are the victor.”

She barked an almost desperate laugh. “It’s that simple?”

“It is.” He smiled. “Why do you think the arcanes didn’t renew their war against us?”

Tala shrugged. “Too difficult? Nothing to gain? Too much else to do?”

He smiled at that. “Those are part of it, sure. But the reason that they haven’t banded together and taken us for the benefit that our captivity would offer, is because we never threaten them, and when they do slight us? We always pay it back in blood ten-fold.” His smile turned vicious. “If you hadn’t exacted such a price in your own time among them, we would be planning a reckoning ourselves for what they did to you.”

Tala didn’t really know how to respond to that.

“As it stands now, us mounting a retaliatory strike would be overkill, not to mention that it would confirm your survival. That might not be the worst thing, but I don’t think you need any more drama or danger for the present.”

She huffed a mirthless chuckle at that.

“By and large, we have made it more profitable for them to kill their own people than to let those people attack us. That results in fewer deaths and less destruction all around.”

Still, he didn’t look happy.

“It might have been a bit too long since their last lesson, though. Their more powerful have long memories, but they still forget. I expect that we’ll need to remind them once again in the coming centuries. It would be irritating if it lined up too closely with the Leshkin, but it will be as it will be.”

She grunted, deciding to ignore the Leshkin Wars tangent for now. “That sounds too simple; keeping the arcanes at bay, I mean.”

Master Xeel seemed to come back from his bloody ruminations. “Oh, undoubtedly. It’s an oversimplification, but that doesn’t make the sentiment untrue.”

“But world fragments. You said that’s the only one there is. How can that be? Why can’t we find one? Or make one?”

He laughed out loud at that. “Oh, we’re looking, but they are among the rarest things in existence.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, imagine placing an earthenware pot on a shelf.”

“Sure.” She didn’t really know where he was going with this, but he was being a fount of information at the moment, so she was paying rapt attention.

“Then, imagine smashing it with a mace.”

“Okay.” That was a bit of an uncomfortable way to envision what happened to their planet, but that wasn’t the topic at the moment.

“Next, you would hire some people to come in and make *something* with the pieces. They just know it has to hold water, and these people can’t have a good understanding of what was there before.”

“Alright.” She was starting to get an idea of what he was getting at, and it made Zeme’s situation seem even worse than she had realized.

“Now, once they’re done, place what they created where the original was. Then, imagine looking closely and carefully at the end result. Your goal is to find a piece of the pot that is exactly where it was before you smashed it, and before the shelf was picked clean by those you hired to help.”

“Oh… Huh. I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“Exactly. It’s a statistical miracle that even a single world fragment exists. By all rights, it shouldn’t. If it’s found, it can be linked to anywhere, but that’s a whole different thing.”

“So, we’re not going to find one. Is that what you’re saying?”

“It’s basically impossible but not *actually* impossible. There are ways, in theory, to create one, but it’s beyond the easy actions of even a Sovereign. Also, as might be noted, a reality beast would want to create and grow such a fragment. It would be the culmination of their entire existence, but even those who could bite a Sovereign in half haven’t. What that seems to indicate is that doing so is likely beyond them as well. That doesn’t mean we won’t ever achieve it, but it does mean that it’s not a question of raw power.”

“Alright, then.” Tala was feeling a bit overloaded with the theoretical nature of the topics, so she picked something a *bit* more grounded. “So, what can you tell me about City Lords?”

“They are a diverse group, with a common—but still individual—goal. Each is incredibly powerful within their cities, but they generally won’t leave because they are seeking bound advancement. The Sovereign of the forest is a great example of one who has followed this path. They basically turn themselves into a magical beast whose power is virtually unrivaled within their domain.”

That is… incredibly enlightening, actually. So, these arcanes set up in cities, and that's why they don't leave? This is what they get out of overseeing the city?

-Yeah, but imagine if they succeed, then people leave. That would be pretty awful.-

Yeah. Without people in the city, you're left with a lot of power over a relatively small piece of land. Imagine having phenomenal cosmic powers with an itty-bitty living space. She shook her head. "And that's the end of arcane advancement, the goal, their path to being a Sovereign?"

"I'm not an expert in that field, but that is *an* end, yes."

She frowned, then. "What about Master Jevin? Doesn't he have something similar to that in Makinaven?"

Master Xeel nodded sagely. "Now, Master Jevin is an interesting case. He doesn't actually have power over an area, not *really*. He has sway over his own body, and because of his oddities, the entire tree is considered him."

"Oversimplification?"

"Oh, yes. Master Jevin has spent millennia studying his own condition, and there is no way I could summarize it accurately in a single sentence. That was—indisputably—an oversimplification, but again, it gets the idea across."

Tala grunted at that. "I can see that. I have a few quicker questions, at least theoretically."

"Go for it."

"Gate-breaking."

"Not a question."

She huffed a laugh. "Did we know about gate-breaking? Why wasn't it used on me?"

"The method you encountered is interesting and might be effective for some Mages, but the concept as a whole isn't new or novel."

“Couldn’t we use it on mundanes, allowing them to use magical items more easily? We could change our whole society with more power at our disposal.”

“Technically, yes, but that would make the maintenance of cities much harder and the degradation faster. It isn’t *really* necessary for Mages, in general. You are an odd case in just how magically dense you are, and how high your throughput is for your advancement. Such things matter less as you advance, but many don’t advance.” He shrugged. “Honestly, those it would help most would never do it willingly.”

“That’s fair, I suppose.” Tala hesitated, here, but finally just asked, “Our society is designed to keep gated humans alive, isn’t it?”

Master Xeel nodded, looking a bit sad. “Yes. You saw the moving cities in the plains. Even that is a concession to their gated citizens. Gates are our strength and our greatest detriment. In the past, Archons have considered culling the gated population, leaving only lineages that have proven able to produce Mages consistently, but that is always shouted down for hopefully obvious reasons.”

Tala blanched, but she wasn’t *really* surprised that the idea had been considered.

I’m just glad it’s never been acted on.

She decided to move on, “Did we know that some arcanes can use animal spies?”

“Yes and no. That is a specialization that has come and gone through the centuries. We didn’t know that one or more of the major Houses had picked up the practice again. That said, those spies would trigger city defenses, so it’s only an issue for those out and about. The warning has been passed through the proper channels.”

“So, speaking of that. They have innate giftings for magic.”

“Of course. So do you, though it manifests differently.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, since their magic is conceptually based, it is easier to implement, at least at the basic levels. They also tend to have natural magics that are bent toward their conceptual base. We humans have certain areas of reality that we understand and grasp the nuances of better. That is our gifting for magic. We are generally *much* more precise and dexterous with our power, even if it does take longer for us to hone it into usefulness.” He hesitated. “Well, that’s not true. Arcanes often don’t reach maturity until their thirties or forties, so Mages might actually be able to use basic magic earlier? But it depends on the specific species.”

Tala grunted at that. She’d never delved deeply into the lifecycles of the various arcane races. Honestly, she didn’t much care. *I might in a few centuries, but not now.* “Alright, I suppose I can understand that.”

It was starting to get late, moving toward noon.

“Just two more topics.”

He nodded. “And we can meet up again, as I assume you have a lot you’ll want more… practical guidance in, once you Refine.”

“Thank you for the offer. Yes, I think I might take you up on that.”

Master Xeel smiled. “Of course. Your next question?”

“They have a lot of amazing travel options. I know why we can’t use them for most of our population, but the gateless could use them, and there have to be some derivations that we *could* use.”

“Ahh, which were you exposed to? I admit that I only processed some of your memories. Did you get to experience the Croi compression lanes?”

“They called them quick-ways, and yes.”

“Ahh, quick-ways? That’s a rather clever name. It fits, too.”

“Other than that, I was placed into a dimensional space anchored to a ballista bolt and fired toward a nearby city, and I stepped through something like a longer range quick-way.”

“Ahh, yes. I’ve not seen the first myself, but the theory has been put forward for cargo transport. It *might* work, but it would be expensive. We’ve not forbidden it, and several groups have tried variations over the centuries. They could never make it financially viable.” He shrugged. “Why force a technology that is less effective for whatever reason? As to long-range compression, that puts a direct strain on reality unlike almost anything else. That, too, would be a rare use-case means of travel, and we have better alternatives for that. Our teleportation network is almost as fast, even if it does require reinscription at the other end. With Mistress Holly’s newest invention, once it’s perfected? That will be hardly an inconvenience at all. Still expensive, though.”

“So, we have better methods of travel than caravans, but we don’t use them?”

He laughed. “Better by what metric? Speed? Sure. There are many faster ways to travel from city to city. Safety for the passengers? Absolutely. Safety for the cities on either end? No. Cost per pound of cargo? Not really. Caravans are *cheap,* and the cargo and passengers they move aren’t time critical.”

Tala supposed she could understand that.

“You had one last topic for this morning?”

“Void-magic.”

He quirked a smile at that. “I assumed we’d get to that after you started with a question about reality beasts. I’m glad that I didn’t have to bring it up myself. What do you want to know?”

“What’s the danger?”

“The same as with any magic, really. You can poison yourself with it or destroy yourself if you wield it poorly.” He shrugged again, waving and taking away their trays.

Tala had her last sausage in hand, so she didn’t lose out on any food. “Yes, but fire can burn me. What does void do?”

“It breaks down that which it encounters and consumes to fill itself. That is a natural void, of course. Natural fire is usually just an exothermic oxidation process, while magical fire can be much more destructive. Similarly, when compared to a natural void, void-magic is a bit more… hungry?” He frowned, seeming to consider. “Ravenous, that’s the word. Void-magic is ravenous, and more than that, it tends to incorporate what it consumes.”

Tala tried to keep a straight face when he used ‘ravenous’ as a descriptor. *It’s a common enough word. It doesn’t mean anything about me, specifically.*

-*Yeah, just keep telling yourself that.*-

Hush, you. “What do you mean?”

“If you could throw a ball of void-magic, and you hit a fire, the void would eat the fire, expanding outward and burning away much that was around the fire. If it hit a block of ice, it would shatter the surroundings, and you would find much less powdered remains than you’d think there should be. This is obviously, once again, an oversimplification fraught with holes, but you get the idea.”

“So, it takes what it consumes and uses it to consume more?”

“It’s more that the void is flavored by what enters it? At least for a time. Void items tend to gain and lose tints to their magic over the centuries. Not that we’ve had *that* many to study, of course.”

“Have you ever seen a void item eat a fount?”

He nodded. “Yes. That is one of the simplest ways to remove a harmful or dangerous fount. Importantly, through extensive research, we’ve found that the fount does still go to the world beyond, just as it does through other methods of removal. So, void-magics are the preferred method for fount destruction.”

So, Flow wasn’t unique in that then.

-We assumed as much.-

Yeah, but it’s good to have it confirmed.

“I am aware that you have… subsumed aspects of void-magic into yourself and your soulbound weapon. I am happy to assist with that as well, but not today.” He slapped his hands down on his own knees and pushed himself to his feet. “Thank you for the engaging dialogue.”

“I mean, I just asked you questions, but you’re welcome, I suppose?”

He smiled. “I rarely get to ramble on about such a wide selection of intriguing topics. I know you wanted to discuss reality nodes, and I appreciate that you respected my wish to wait until after your Refining.”

She made a sour face, but just for a moment. He’d insisted on that when he and Alat had agreed to the meeting. “It’s understandable. I’m a bit… fragile at the moment, and I feel like truly working with my own piece of reality wouldn’t be wise while that is the case.”

“And in that, you show wisdom.”

He turned and looked out the broad windows.

“You really do have a lovely place here. The method of acquisition was unideal, but I am glad that you have it.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I feel quite blessed to have it.”

Master Xeel turned to her and bowed. “Good day, Mistress Tala.”

She bowed in return. “Good day, Master Xeel.”

With a thought, she called the door into the space right beside him, and he smiled as he departed. “Until next time.”

Kit’s door clicked shut behind him and vanished.

“Thank you, Kit.”

The sanctum did not respond.

Chapter: 27
Sacks of Iron

Tala's last big appointment was with Master Cazor. She felt like his magical manipulation of magnetic fields, and thereby iron, might have given him some insights that would be useful to her.

When she'd reached out, he'd been amenable, and so they'd set up this meeting.

Once this was done, as far as she knew, she just had to use her time reasonably, relax, and wait for Mistress Holly to tell her how long until she could Refine. If it was long enough, Tala would consider a trip to Marliweather to see her siblings, but it would have to be *really* long for that to be the case.

She had several letters mostly composed to them, and she hoped to have the inspiration to finish them off in the next day or so.

But that was for later. It was time for her to meet up with the Mage Hunter.

It will be interesting to see what he has to say about the manipulation of iron.

-Undoubtedly, yes. He is barely Fused, though.-

Tala shrugged. *His insights should still be interesting. Most don't work with iron at all, so even a 'less advanced' view will be insightful.*

Master Cazor had asked to meet her at the arena they used to practice in. Thankfully, it was outside the hours they usually had met up to train, so the other Archons shouldn't be there.

Tala still didn't really want to deal with them. As much as she had liked them in passing, it still felt awkward, dealing with people asking about her situation and her time away.

The entrance hallway was quiet, and she greeted the receptionist with a smile.

The young man seemed to recognize her because he waved her through without asking any questions.

When she pushed open the doors, Master Cazor was the only person waiting for her in the large arena.

Good. She had been a bit afraid that the others would be here, too, and was happy to have that fear put to rest.

-That would be unlike Master Cazor. He's an honest fellow.-

That's true enough.

"Mistress Tala, welcome."

"Master Cazor. Thank you for meeting with me."

Something felt off about the sand in the arena, but she couldn't place it.

The Archon sat cross-legged, sealed sacks sitting in a ring around him. "You might have noticed, or possibly not, but I've already stripped the iron from the sand beneath our feet." He patted the sack closest to him. "I thought it might be useful."

Tala felt a pull to claim the iron, as it somehow felt like it might be an option, unlike with things like the iron doors in the Constructionists' Compound. Even so, she knew she had no right to it. *Calm, Tala.* "Good thinking."

She sat down facing him, leaving nearly twenty feet between them.

Master Cazor smiled. "You've a *lot* of iron about you. It's doing interesting things to the magnetic fields of the area."

"Really?" That was good to know, actually. "Do you think that you can control it?"

He tilted his head to the side. “I could try, but it feels like it’s… out of reach? That’s not quite right, but it’s close. I think if you let me, I could affect it, but I don’t think I could wrest it from your control. At least not the portion that’s… not aligned with the physical.”

She grunted. *Good to know.* He was already providing valuable insights.

-We should still probably test to make sure.-

True, but he’s never given reason to doubt him.

“Now, there’s a lot about iron that I’d love to convey.”

Tala held up a hand, giving him a small smile. “So, I obviously asked you here to help me learn about iron manipulation. In that vein, I think it will help me approach what you have to say best if I understand why *you* think you’re up to the task? After all, you don’t actually manipulate iron directly.”

He smiled in return. “Aside from the fact that you asked me?”

She laughed. She knew that he’d have good information, but she really wanted to have context to his own mindset behind what he was going to be sharing with her. “Yes, besides that.”

He shrugged. “The fact that I manipulate it indirectly is precisely why I am qualified.”

She frowned. She hadn’t been expecting that answer. Honestly, she thought that he’d tell her how long he’d been doing this, or how his fundamental understanding related to iron. “Care to explain?”

“Which would be easier, having complete control over my body and then moving me as you wish, or indirectly getting me to do exactly as you wished?”

“Which of the two would be harder? The second would be harder.” Tala huffed. “At least the way you described it.”

“That is what I meant, yeah. So, which would require a greater understanding of me to accomplish?”

She hesitated. “I think I understand. Controlling something indirectly requires a more intimate understanding of the thing than if you have direct control.”

“Precisely. And that is why I am qualified.” He grinned. “But you already knew that, at least in part. That’s why you asked me here.”

She shrugged. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Alright. Let’s get started.”

The next few hours were filled with highly technical discussions and were only interesting on the most superficial level. Tala had to admit that Master Cazor knew his stuff.

In truth, she was surprised; though it wasn’t because she’d doubted that fact. It was more that the depth of his insight was a bit staggering.

She’d read a few books on blacksmithing and metallurgy, and Master Cazor touched on some of that. Blessedly, however, he mostly talked about other things like how iron flowed over itself, how it reacted in different environments, and so much more.

Once they’d covered a large amount of information, Master Cazor twisted, stretching in place. “That’s enough of that for the time being. We should do some practical testing.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Well, that’s partially up to you. Do you want to explain a bit about your abilities with iron? If not, I can just do some generic exercises and tests between the two of us.”

She only hesitated for a moment. “The long and short of it is that I can directly control iron that is mine.”

“Are you alright if I ask questions?”

“Sure.” There was really no point in getting his help if she wouldn’t let him help her.

“What makes iron yours?”

“If it is offered to me by someone who has ownership of it?” She was actually a bit uncertain, and that showed in her tone.

“So, just like owning an item? Or receiving a gift?”

“It seems something like that. I haven’t really explored it extensively.”

He grunted. “That’s fair. You’ve been busy.”

“Isn’t that the truth…”

“So, if I offered you one of these sacks of iron, it would be yours?” He then patted the sack closest to him again. “For clarity, I haven’t yet.”

“I think I could take it and manipulate it.”

He shrugged. “Let’s see. You can have”—he gave her a searching, almost mischievous look—“that sack of iron.” He pointed to a sack behind him on the left.

Tala felt nothing, and she frowned. “I don’t feel anything.”

Master Cazor grunted. “That’s because that one’s filled with oats. Good to know. There is some iron in it, just by the nature of the thing, but I specifically granted you a sack of iron. That’s not a sack of iron, so you didn’t get ownership of what iron there is.”

Now that *was* interesting. “That seems like an oddly specific test.” She gave him a searching look. “How did you already have it prepared?”

“It’s not as specialized as you might think, not really. My master did something similar when I began working with magnetic fields, though it was to test how strong my magnetic fields really were, and how precise.”

“So, similar setup, different tests?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. We use a similar setup to test potential Mage Hunters, too. Though we change the contents based on their magic-set.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“Now, we don’t know if you weren’t granted ownership because *I* knew it wasn’t what I said it was, or if your magic could tell it wasn’t what I said, or something else. We’d need a lot more testing to figure that out, but I don’t think that would be useful at the moment.”

“I hadn’t really thought of it in those terms.”

He grinned. “It’s really important for Mage Hunters, because sometimes one Mage’s abilities trump others’ when it comes to control of an area or substance or the like. Mistress Jean’s weapon is almost inviolable when it comes to commanding the ambient power in an area, often even stealing power from those nearby, Mage and mundane alike.”

Tala’s eyebrows rose at that. “That’s potent.”

“Indeed. Sparring with her is always educational, but it is also almost always rather quick.”

“Good to know. The times she and I sparred were over pretty fast.” She hadn’t noticed that supremacy, herself, but looking back, it made sense.

“Now, you can have that sack of iron.” He pointed at one that was just in front of him and to his right.

Tala immediately felt ownership of the iron, her aura blossoming from the sack of metal dust.

She felt an overwhelming desire to draw it toward her, but she resisted. *It’s mine. It’s not going anywhere.*

Even so, she’d involuntarily pulled it enough that it toppled over to *floomp* on the sand.

Master Cazor looked between the sack and Tala. “It has an aura, Mistress Tala.” His voice was baffled. “The *iron* has an aura, your aura.”

“Yeah, I think it’s technically a part of me, now?”

“That’s… What if someone in another city says that something belongs to you?”

“I have no idea? I imagine I have to hear them or know about it?” She hesitated, then shook her head. “No, there’s a proximity requirement in the claiming. I had a smith who had offered me any of his iron dust that I could collect. I knew of that, and I wanted to go, but it wasn’t until he reconfirmed my ownership that I felt a connection like this.”

“Still, we’ll want to test it through an Archive connection. Have someone send you a sight of some iron and tell you explicitly that it’s yours. Then, we get to see what happens.” He hesitated. “We should start with the iron just barely out of sight. That way, if you are somehow compelled to go claim it as fast as possible, we won’t be putting you in an awkward position.”

Tala grunted at that.

“So, you’ve claimed it. It’s yours; it’s you. What can you do with it?”

She smiled, and the bag was suddenly filled with holes as spikes of iron thrust outward before quickly pulling backward.

Master Cazor jumped up to his feet in surprise, also moving back in the same motion before stopping his retreat and leaning forward to watch the process.

Tala was already feeling a headache, and so she stopped the manipulation, pulling in a ragged breath.

“That was impressive, but it looked like you had a hard time with it.”

“It wasn’t easy, no, but I’ve been practicing.” After a moment, she amended, “Not with that type of manipulation in particular, but in general. It’s much simpler than it would have been even a week ago.”

The bag now leaked black powder onto the surrounding sand.

Tala exercised her strained will to pull it back and keep it together.

“Is that necessary?” He seemed genuinely curious as he watched the iron return to the shape of a bag, without the need for the actual container.

“Yes and no. I’m resisting absorbing it. I’m able to do that in part because I don’t believe it’s going to go anywhere. When it started draining onto the sand, that belief was shaken, even though it is still obviously true.”

Master Cazor gave her another mischievous smile. “Really?”

That was the only warning she had before the iron began to stream away from her, and something deep within her, something bound to her very soul, rebelled at the potential loss.

Tala’s hand shot out in a grasping motion even as she internally snarled, *NO! MINE!*

The iron *shuddered*, slowing and jerking to a stop as Master Cazor continued to attempt to draw it out in a steady stream.

His eyes widened briefly before narrowing. “Oh, so that’s how it is.”

The pressure on the iron built, and to Tala, it felt like someone was wrapping ropes around an arm and trying to pull it off.

That would not stand.

Even as she watched power build around Master Cazor, Tala asserted her will and aura more fully. She pushed his workings further back from the iron, weakening their influence over the iron, even as he pushed more power into the manipulation of the magnetic fields.

He also tried to contest her aura control of the area, but even though it was closer to his body than to hers, it was closer to her iron, and the iron *was* her for this purpose.

More than that, though, she was stronger.

Slowly at first, and then with a violent spasm, the iron dust slammed back into shape where it had been.

Master Cazor stepped forward and stretched out his power once again, this time toward the mass of her iron as a whole.

Oh no, you don't.

With a relaxing of her will, the iron seemed to shatter, exploding into a cloud in her direction before being sucked through the air, and passing into her.

Once it occupied the same physical space as she did, she pushed the iron into the dimensions of magic so that it wouldn't interfere with normal functions.

He let his power fade. "Fascinating. Your iron was, and is still magnetic, but it really functions as a part of you, within your aura." He laughed. "And it seems to be a source of your aura, so it's always within your aura."

She took a deep breath, calming herself. "Yeah, that can't actually be right, otherwise I could just send it off into the infinite distance, gaining sovereignty over any place I got my iron to."

"You could try?"

She shrugged. "Sure, worth a test."

Tala let some of her iron form a glob in her hand and tossed it away from herself.

It stopped with a little jerk at the edge of her aura's current extension, barely three feet from her outstretched hand.

Master Cazor grunted. "Let me try to grab it."

Tala fought the instinct to pull it back to herself. It felt like someone had just brandished a knife at her extended fingers.

Even so, she let Master Cazor magnetically draw the iron outside of her aura.

As it passed out of her area of control, Tala felt a *tearing*, and her ownership over the iron vanished.

Tala gasped, falling to her knees.

She felt *violated*.

She felt like something central to her being had been stolen.

Tala turned and retched, her scripts keeping her from vomiting.

Even so, she heaved and heaved, her whole body feeling wrong.

Master Cazor was beside her before she registered him moving. He had with him the iron she'd lost, hovering in the shape of a ball beside him. "Take it. It's yours."

Tala felt a slight tugging from the iron, but grimaced, echoes of the nasty feelings she'd just worked through making her not really want that iron in particular, at least not for the moment. So, she waved him away. "Not now, but thank you."

"That seems like a pretty terrible weakness, Mistress."

"Yeah, no kidding. If someone manages to pull even a little iron from me, it hits me incredibly hard."

He had an apologetic look on his face. "You know what this means, don't you?"

She groaned but nodded. "I need to practice enduring this feeling."

He gave her a surprised look. "I was going to say you should avoid using the iron in battle, at least away from your body."

She laughed. "There's no way that would hold up. I'd be in some life-or-death situation, and I'd take the risk, some iron would be lost, and I'd get myself killed."

He sighed, shaking his head. Though, he didn't seem surprised. "Well, I suppose, but you aren't going into combat soon, are you?"

“No, but when I do, I’d rather be trained to take the loss as opposed to trying to avoid it.” She hesitated. “But I should probably check with Mistress Holly to make sure that didn’t negatively affect me, physically.”

He grunted. “That sounds wise, yeah. For now, though, there’s one more thing I want to test.” He pointed to another of the sacks. “You can have the iron in that, if you can take it from me.”

Tala hesitated. She felt… something. There was a trembling, a sense of the iron within the sack, but it wasn’t *hers*. “I don’t have a way of contesting you for iron that isn’t already mine.”

But she paused there.

“Actually.” She pulled out more iron and purposely extended her aura outward to cover the iron sack in question. Just her aura covering it didn’t seem to count for ownership, nor apparently for taking it from Master Cazor.

She tossed her iron to hit the side of the sack. There, it stuck because she wished it to. From that anchor, she extended her aura, pushing at the iron that wasn’t yet hers.

Irritatingly, but not unexpectedly, her aura had trouble penetrating the metal.

She felt like she *should* be able to do more, but she couldn’t, not at the moment.

Master Cazor flexed his magic, and the sack jerked away, out of her aura.

Her little splotch of iron fell to the sand, and she drew it back.

“Well, that seems like another thing to work on, eh?”

“It does indeed.”

“Shall we go see Mistress Holly, then get in some more practice?”

Tala nodded, pulling out her cool water incorporator and taking a long drink. “That sounds like an excellent plan.”

Chapter: 28
Don’t Change Your Body

Tala hunched in on herself beneath the ongoing tirade. *Just endure, Tala. It can’t last forever.*

Master Cazor was long gone.

She wasn’t sure how long the stream of words had been going on, but as soon as they had entered Mistress Holly’s warehouse, a bit of magic had tickled Alat’s inscriptions, and Mistress Holly had lost her mind.

Her exclamation of outrage had knocked dust from the ceiling, even as the Inscriptionist stormed toward the reception area.

It was then that Master Cazor had wisely excused himself. “Sorry, Mistress Tala. We can reconnect tomorrow… or whenever works for you.”

He’d closed the door behind himself as he left before Tala could gather a response.

Mistress Holly had stalked out, seized Tala’s wrist in an oddly powerful grip, and practically dragged her back to her private workroom.

It was at that point that the tirade had begun, “Are you incapable of functioning without damaging yourself?”

Things had only gone downhill from there.

Mistress Holly was working incredibly hard to counter the flaws in Tala’s biology, and every new stress, strain, or degradation only made that harder.

Tala gleaned that the severing of iron from her ownership had, indeed, somehow physically harmed her. Though she was unclear on the exact nature of the damage.

Mistress Holly suddenly stopped mid-sentence, jerking Tala back to the present moment. “You aren’t even listening to me, are you.” It was not a question. “Mistress Tala. I am *trying* to help you.”

Tala forcefully straightened herself. “I know, Mistress Holly. I did not intend any harm. I was testing out my new soul-bond in a non-combat setting. There *shouldn’t* have been any chance of damage to me.”

The older Mage grimaced. “The greatest harm comes when it *shouldn’t*, Mistress. I hope this reinforces that lesson.”

“What even happened? All that I did was lose a bit of iron.”

“Iron that was bound to you, just as your body is. The dasgannach has no magical function for losing material, as it *should* be impossible for the thing to do so. It should also never bond, so we’re in the realm of the impossible. In this case, the impossibility was detrimental to you. The loss sent ripples through all your soul-bonds. Your outfit self-repairs on principle, and your weapon is specifically magicked to distribute and endure magical trauma. There are minor fractures in your Archive link, but I can see that it’s been upgraded to a magical weight that is *incredibly* unwise below Refined, but you are an enigma.” She gave Tala a stern look. “Still, I should have been consulted before that upgrade occurred.”

Tala shrunk once again. “I apologize; I didn’t even consider that.”

Mistress Holly waved her off. “I assume Mistress Ingrit investigated it on her own; though she should have consulted me. I will have to have words with her. But, in this case, it saved you. The added weight allowed it to weather the trauma, and it is already nearly fully recovered. Your body *should* be in a similar place with your frankly insane magical density, but you are riddled

with flaws. Each of those is a point of weakness, which allow far greater damage under stress and will never properly recover on their own."

"Ahh… That's less than ideal."

"Indeed." The Inscriptionist rubbed her temples. "We need to do something about the dasgannach. Aside from this new problem, the iron suffusing you—even if only in the dimensions of magic—will hamper Refining. As it is already going to be a complicated, delicate process, any additional interference needs to be avoided at all costs."

"What do you suggest? I can expel all the iron and leave it off to the side. So long as it stays within my aura, it shouldn't cause a problem, right?"

"While that *might* work, your aura is going to be erratic through the process, and we *cannot* allow this sort of trauma to occur in the middle of Refining."

"So, I need to merge it with another of my soul-bonds before I Refine."

Mistress Holly hesitated. "That… That is an excellent idea." Her eyes narrowed. "How do you know of that? Who suggested it to you?"

Tala frowned defensively. "No one suggested it. It seemed reasonable, so I asked if it was a possibility. Master Grediv gave me some information, but not too much."

"Ahh, that does make sense. He would know, too." She shook her head. "But that is neither here nor there."

What did Master Grediv do?

-Well, based on the context, it sounds like he tried to merge two soul-bound items, and it went badly.-

Yes, I got that much, thank you.

“Now, the question would be which you are going to merge it with. I hope you aren’t considering merging it with your body.”

“Noooo.” Tala held up her hands even as she drew out the word in emphasis. “Oh, by the stars, no. I can’t even fathom what that might do to me. Even during the bonding process, it wanted to cause all sorts of changes to my body that I only avoided because of Master Grediv’s assistance. I can’t stomach whatever would happen if it fully merged with my physical body.”

“Good. You do have some wisdom.”

Tala snorted. “I was thinking of Flow?”

“Your weapon?” Mistress Holly looked up to one side, then she started to cackle. “That would be so deliciously ironic, but… hmm…”

Tala felt herself smile. “Yeah, I considered it might make Flow into a truly morphic weapon.”

“I would bet that you will have that option, yes. Though I believe it will be among the lesser options you will have available to you. Don’t let your recent experiences taint what you can become. Even if it would be amazing to take what they intended as your death and use it to finally forge you into what they were aiming at.” The Inscriptionist shook her head. “But you are not an Eskau, not anymore.”

Tala grunted. “You think there will be better options?”

“Oh, undoubtedly.” She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t change your body.”

“I know that, Mistress Holly.” Tala paused for a moment before continuing. “So, you think that’s the right call? Merging it with Flow?”

“I do. But”—Mistress Holly held up one finger—“I am not doing this on my own. Give me a day to consult with the others collaborating on this project, and we’ll see what we can come up with. We’ll arrange for the merging as soon after that as we can.”

“I can do that.”

Her countenance suddenly hardened. “I am still cross with you, Mistress, but I understand that you did not do this intentionally.”

Tala swallowed, hard. “Thank you, Mistress Holly. I will try to be more careful going forward.”

* * *

Tala sat to the side of an incredibly complicated but vaguely familiar spellform.

The ironclad walls of the Constructionist’s merging room were becoming more and more comforting. Though, she wasn’t sure if that was due to repeated exposure or the iron.

It had been three days since Mistress Holly had confirmed the wisdom behind the plan to merge the dasgannach with Flow.

They’d consulted experts and gathered the needed pieces to give the greatest chance for success.

Honestly, there wasn’t really a chance for failure, but there was a chance for things to go sideways.

If this went well, they would only need to wait for the merging to settle, and they could proceed with her Refinement. That should only take a month on the outside, since the greatest remaining barrier would have been removed.

If it went sideways?

Well, no need to focus on the negative.

-Yes, let’s focus on what we can do.-

Mistress Holly wasn't present. Master Queue was facilitating the magics, along with another high-level Archon who hid her aura and rank.

She was a specialist in mergings and soul-bonds, and she'd been in the city to visit family.

Mistress Holly had found her two days ago and convinced her to delay her departure.

While the woman's presence was fortuitous, the worst that would have happened otherwise was a delay of a few more days.

But Tala was distracting herself from the upcoming process.

"Mistress Tala?"

Tala looked up and smiled at the other woman. "Yes, Mistress Aurius?"

"It's time. We need you to place the two items in the same physical space, alongside the other materials."

Tala nodded, standing and striding to the center of the intricate working.

With measured care, Tala set Flow, bare-bladed, on the floor amidst several minor artifacts specifically crafted for this process. Then, with her hand on the handle, she took careful breaths and slowly moved all her non-biological iron down her arm and into the dimensions of magic aligned with the weapon's physical shape.

Tala could see the *weight* of the weapon grow with her magesight. More than anything, it looked like an increasing magical reflectiveness to that sight.

"Are you sure this will work?" Tala asked for probably the hundredth time.

"Yes, Mistress Tala," Mistress Aurius responded with patient professionalism. "While we can't enact magic upon the iron itself, we are essentially creating a net that can interact with the stuff of soul-bonds, and then tightening it down to the point that it forces a merging."

Tala knew this. She'd gotten the same explanation each time, but she still felt nervous. "I know… but are you sure?"

The specialist chuckled. "I do applaud your caution, especially with regard to your own soul. We don't have to do this if you don't wish to, but we are professionals. Experts, even. This will work. Remember, I will be waiting here to add my weight to the process, if you need."

Tala nodded. That was what Master Grediv had done. It was the less obtrusive—and more controlled—version of what had been done during her raising to Archon as well. "Thank you."

"Of course, and thank *you* again for the literature and memories pertaining to arcane fount-linking. It's an intriguing area of study."

Mistress Aurius had been enticed into helping with information surrounding how Eskau were bound to their protian weapons and Pillars to their regalia.

Tala's memories and books on the subject had been limited, but apparently, they were sufficient to trade for a couple of days of this woman's time.

We might need to cultivate expertise in something. That seems to be the best way to continue to gather resources.

-Yeah, that could be useful, but we can also simply continue to go out and gather things the experts want.-

That works, too.

She nodded and smiled. "I'm glad you are getting something from what I could offer. Where do you want me?"

Mistress Aurius pointed to a secondary, much smaller circle in the back of the room. "In the center of that working." She then pointed to the third and smallest. "I will be in that one."

Tala nodded again. "Let's do this."

The two women sat in their respective places, and Master Queue did a couple of final checks. “Ready?”

“Ready,” they each responded.

Power blossomed through the room, suffusing the spellforms, and Tala watched an ethereal power—clearly generated by magic, but not *quite* the same—grow up around Flow and the artifacts, tightening inward and binding them tightly.

There was an odd pinching twist within the depth of her being, and Tala’s consciousness was claimed by the well-known white void.

* * *

Tala opened her eyes and instantly knew.

She was an Eskau.

Pure and simple.

She was everything that Be-thric had tried to make her into once his initial plan failed. Though, she no longer served a House.

Her enemies died around her by the score.

Flow was more in line with its name than ever, barely manifesting fully into any given shape for long enough to deal lethal wounds to the indistinct hordes that she carved her way through.

She didn’t know how, but they were in her way.

The blood was drained with every hit. The iron built within Flow, and the remainder was consumed by the void. That metal continued to accumulate, until it hit a critical level.

Now!

She swept outward, Flow extending as a razor thin line with a heavy weight on one end.

The whole thing was hundreds of feet long, powered by her tremendous strength and the momentum she'd built up so far, and its inertia was massively increased by tremendous magical weight.

With one clean sweep, she decapitated half an army.

What the rust?

Blood fountained into the sky, soaking the ground with a true rain of blood.

Tala, herself, seemed to draw in the blood; her eyes blazed with red power as the void within her devoured the life still in the red liquid even as the iron was siphoned into Flow.

-There's something wrong.-

Tala felt a stuttering, and suddenly, she was outside herself, looking at the scene as she was used to: from outside of the offered form.

Horror overtook her.

Humans. They are all humans.

Uncounted dead lay around her, every one of them human.

She looked around, seeing for the first time that the air was utterly suffused with iron dust, pushed out of the physical dimensions to hover, menacingly, just out of sight.

The iron was a bubble of anti-magical protection, held in place and stabilized by her aura.

It was only then that Tala detected the other magic in the offered form, one that seemed to dominate all the others.

It was a magic that she didn't have, shouldn't have, and had been warned away from.

Reality magic? Alat, where did that come from?

-I have no idea.-

Tala was witnessing one of the paths she could take if she embraced reality magic, even if she didn't understand how it was possible.

Master Grediv was right. I'd turn on humanity.

As she watched, the gates in the humans were winking out one by one. Apparently, the soul took a bit to register death, even in the event of decapitation.

The Tala of the vision seemed enraptured by each additional gate's departure.

Yeah… I've seen enough. NO.

The vision turned white, returning Tala to the void between options.

* * *

In the next vision, Tala was offered a much more traditional merging, in which Flow only became a protian weapon and the other aspects of the dasgannach were somehow stripped away and expelled.

In this case, Flow even somehow lost the ability to take on its void-forms.

There was a… flimsiness to this option, as if it lacked power or would take an incredible stretch to bring into being.

That surprised Tala; in the past, all options had seemed the same to her.

Regardless, this didn't tempt her in the least.

Even without Mistress Holly's warning against taking this option, Tala instinctively knew that it would be a *lessening* of herself.

She would be weakening every aspect of herself if she tried to force this outcome.

NO.

* * *

Tala watched as the next version of her lifted an arcane by the throat.

In a hyper-slowed moment, she was able to perceive spikes lance out of her blood into the man's neck.

They eviscerated her flesh to get to him.

She recognized the magics surrounding the spikes, even as they tore apart the defensive magics that the teal hue-folk man tried to bring to bear against her attacks.

It took less than a minute to empty him of power, and in the instant in which he ran dry, a blade tore free of Tala's hand, beheading the man cleanly.

What is with this merging and beheadings?

Before Alat could respond, they watched the manifested Tala slam her hand downward, a dark void opening in her palm to swallow the body even as the head hit the ground.

This Tala growled, and a chain burst from her leg, lancing through the fallen head before it could roll away, drawing it back to be devoured.

-What the rust?-

At least it's arcanes this time?

This Tala clearly held the merged weapon in her own blood, and that had done something to her.

The manifestation expanded, showing that this Tala stood in an arcane city. Flecks of blood were the only evidence there had ever been people in this otherwise abandoned main square.

It's midday. There should be hundreds or thousands of people.

-Maybe they all ran away?-

They saw a rabbit beast-man scramble out of hiding in a dead-end side alley, trying to bound away while this version of Tala had her back turned.

Her back exploded in blood and chains. The chains wove together, even as they arced through the air, and the manifestation of Tala screamed in pain and anger.

An instant later, the rabbit-man was skewered.

-Alright, I'm going to say it. The mergings involving the dasgannach seem way *worse than options for any other.-*

You're not wrong.

As this version of her turned toward the central pillar that was filled with founts, hunger evident in her eyes, the watching Tala had had enough.

NO.

* * *

Tala was beginning to despair as option after option showed versions of herself that had been horribly twisted in body, mind, or both. She still held onto hope, however, though it was fading.

After dozens of options, she was beginning to think that she should call on Mistress Aurius.

Finally, she saw it: there were some tendrils of power linking Flow to her flesh, and Tala felt a sinking feeling.

Oh, we're idiots.

-The iron in your flesh is still tied to the dasgannach. Is that why all these options seem to incorporate your body?-

I would bet so. She really did feel foolish. This was obviously a problem that should have been anticipated. But there was nothing to be done about it, at least not now.

Or is there?

Tala gathered her will and pushed it out upon the still-forming merging.

Leave my body be. She felt the tremors through the magic as her will manifested and pressed down on her two soul-bonds.

If this doesn't work, I'll call upon Mistress Aurius for aid.

* * *

The latest manifestation formed, and Tala felt a renewed blossoming of hesitant optimism.

There didn't seem to be anything changed within the version of her in this manifestation, at least not physically.

She saw iron moving through the dimensions of magic between her and Flow, though the metal was clearly more tied to Flow than her body, now.

She could move the iron around her body even before this, so that wasn't a change as she saw it.

Tala watched this version of herself cut through arcanous beasts, and it took only a short time to notice the first difference beyond the obvious.

The liquid that came out with each cut was clear, obviously blood that had been stripped of iron.

She was able to see some beasts cut but not instantly killed; the magics didn't utterly strip them of iron.

Even so, those that survived seemed much more affected than they should have been.

So, it's able to strip it out a little ways into their bodies?

-It seems so. The act of cutting with Flow seems to grant some limited ownership around the wound, at least for the short time of the passing.-

Flow usually cauterized the wounds it created, and that did still seem to be happening, but the added ripping free of iron seemed to cause the wounds to seep.

It seemed that the iron didn't *have* to pass out of the body painlessly.

That's… grisly.

-Would you rather strike them down and leave no evidence or damage?-

No… violent death is always ugly. If I could kill that cleanly, I don't think I could keep viewing death as I do. As a necessary evil.

Tala was drawn back toward the vision as this manifestation of her did something new.

Iron passed harmlessly through her flesh, forming a layer on her skin as a massive creature that Tala didn't recognize slammed its claws down on her upper arm.

The claws stopped as surely as they would have on Flow.

Tala felt herself mentally focus. The lethargy that going through so many options had brought on was banished entirely.

Early after discovering aspect mirroring, Tala had tried to mirror Flow's resilience to magical attacks onto her own body.

That had not ended well.

It seemed that the iron now functioned as an extension of Flow for this purpose.

If it worked as it seemed, she should finally be all but immune to purely physical attacks, at least those around her power level.

The iron also added to her own aura in forbidding direct magical action upon her.

She still had no real defense against indirect magical attacks, but this should help with that as well.

And I can take some ideas from the other visions.

Finally, the last portion of this option was displayed for her to observe.

For no reason that Tala could discern, this version of her created a ball of iron and rolled it out of her own aura.

Tala held her breath, but while this version of her grimaced slightly, that was all the emotion she displayed.

On the other hand, Flow almost seemed to ring like a bell, and as the last vestiges of her authority over the iron faded, a pulse of void-magics blossomed from around the metal, and the iron simply vanished rather than being given up.

That's… that's actually an elegant solution.

Tala instinctively knew that it had taken a quite significant amount of power to enact, making it a detriment in the heat of battle, but it was far superior to the soul-rending agony that had previously been the result of such a loss.

I think this is it. Alat?

-Yeah, I think I agree.-

With an inward smile, Tala projected *YES.*

Power blossomed outward, enveloping the whole space and drawing Tala's consciousness back to reality, the merging complete.

Chapter: 29
Not Too Stereotypical

Tala blinked a few times as her eyes opened.

She was in the merging room as expected, and the scripts were gone, burned away to activate the magical integration.

In the center of the space rested Flow, alone.

Not alone. The dasgannach is in there, too.

-The remnants of it. It was never really alive.-

That was an interesting thing that she hadn't considered. Flow was a concept weapon now, at least partially.

Then, she felt like an idiot because she'd seen that exact thing in the visions. Flow had laid claim to so, so much on her behalf. *We'll have to be more careful than ever, in the future.*

-And get a new sheath that can specifically block that aspect as well. We don't want to tear iron out of sparring partners.-

Agreed.

She lifted her hand, and Flow crossed the distance to slap into her palm faster than it had ever moved before.

As it impacted, the massive amount of iron that had been carried along with it rolled into her hand and down her arm, spreading throughout her body, just beneath the surface of the physical world.

By the nature of soul-bond manipulation, there was no transfer of momentum from the weapon coming to her hand. That was an incredibly good thing because Tala felt like it would have thrown her across the room.

She shuddered as the ripple of increased weight rolled throughout her body before settling in and fading as her will began to manipulate it to remove the feel of extra mass.

"Mistress Tala?" Mistress Aurius had stood and was walking her way. "I didn't receive permission to interfere. Did everything go well?"

"I think so? There were a couple of complications." She began to explain the mistake of the biological iron still being bound to the dasgannach. "Does that mean I changed my body?"

Tala couldn't help but brace for bad news.

Mistress Holly would probably flay her if she'd messed herself up even more fully.

"No, it does not appear so. The iron within you is shared between two of your soul-bonds, which is unusual but not unheard of. I do not detect any discernible alteration to your physical body."

Tala let out a *huge*, relieved breath. "Oh, thank the stars."

Mistress Aurius grinned. "Well, I will claim a bit of credit. I couldn't have stopped the bond from leaking through but, because of your general circumstances, I added extra spiritual filtration so that you *could* protect your body."

"You knew this would happen?"

She tilted her head to the side. "Would? No. Could? Absolutely. All bonds are bound. It would have been foolish to assume that you would magically avoid alteration to your body without…" She huffed a laugh. "Without magical precautions."

Tala felt herself smile, too. "Well then, thank you, Mistress Aurius."

“It was my pleasure, Mistress Tala. I do apologize; it is so standard a feature to add in more advanced mergings that I didn’t think to highlight it. I am glad that you noticed the error and acted appropriately. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any need of my expertise in the future.”

“I appreciate the offer, and I’ll remember it.”

Tala thanked Master Queue on the way out, and in less than twenty minutes of fast walking, Tala arrived at Mistress Holly’s shop.

She stepped inside and felt the expected magics brush her.

Tala didn’t hesitate, heading straight back to Mistress Holly’s work room, where the Inscriptionist awaited her.

“So, the merging was a success? I don’t detect any expanded splintering of your body.”

She nodded, then briefly explained how it had gone.

“Well… that is an obvious hangup, isn’t it.” Mistress Holly shook her head, then rubbed her temples. “That should have been taken more fully into account.”

Tala sat down on the chair off to one side, and Mistress Holly pulled over her customary stool.

“We will go back over the proposed Refining process with a fine-toothed comb and ensure that we have everything aligned as it should be.” Mistress Holly grimaced, shaking her head. “We are not used to considering iron or dasgannach, as neither have ever been factors before.”

“We have time. It will take a month for this merging to settle in, right?”

“That’s right. Blessedly, like most things, the Refining process is simple to execute, once you know what to do.”

Tala frowned. “Like most things?”

“Of course. Once you know how exactly something can be done, it is usually trivial to make it happen.”

“I don’t know if that is the case.”

“Then you probably don’t know *exactly* how the thing is done and have to rely on secondary processes.”

Tala opened her mouth to argue, but finally, she just shook her head. *Not worth it.*

-I’m excited to try out Flow.-

Yeah, me, too. It’s hard to remember that what we saw was one branch of the potential that is now open before us, not what we can do immediately.

Unfortunately, like many things, experimentation would have to wait until after she Refined.

Mistress Holly folded her hands in her lap and smiled. “I’ll see you in a month, then. Please keep yourself intact until then?”

“I will do my best. Thank you, Mistress Holly.”

“Take care.”

* * *

Tala was exhausted. While her body wasn’t *really* worse off than it had been, the flaws and contamination were starting to make her feel noticeably less capable than she was used to.

Even so, the month had passed in a blur.

Lyn and Rane had done their best to help fill Tala’s time until her Refinement.

Rane had more free time, though he still went off to train daily. Toward that end, they explored the offerings of the playhouses of Bandfast, Lyn and even Kannis joining them for the afternoon or evening plays.

Mistress Aproa came along as well on occasion, and Mistress Odera even came with them once or twice.

They tried out every restaurant they could find in the city, and Alat helped supply a supplemental set of foods for Tala to eat afterward to keep her consumption balanced.

Aside from a truly dizzying number of plays from the more than two dozen playhouses in the city, Tala and Rane practiced with the magical nest from the arcanes, as well as with the iron spheres that Master Jevin had given her so long ago.

They made it a bit of a game between them, testing themselves against each other, striving for mastery.

Finally, they filled their time with tafl.

Tala and Rane played an immense amount of tafl.

They began with a simple nine-by-nine board, altering who was the attacker and who defended.

In the end, they were battling across nineteen-by-nineteen boards, trading victories back and forth in uneven spurts.

They really hadn't been keeping track, but with her memory—even without specifically counting—Tala knew that they were pretty evenly split.

Terry spent most of his time in Tala's sanctum or riding on her shoulders to the plays. He only tried to cheat at tafl a few times—flickering in and out quickly to move a piece—but Tala and Rane both sternly told him not to help them.

Tala tried not to think too deeply on the fact that Terry somehow seemed to have a better head for the game than either of them.

Alat brought it up fairly often, though, so Tala wasn't likely to forget.

The only real things of note that had happened during the month were: first, the first version of the teleportation array out of Kit was completed; it had eviscerated a test rabbit.

Second, she'd met up with Master Nadro a couple of times, to continue talking through her experiences and working through her struggles.

Finally, Master Queue heard of her search for staff for her sanctum.

He put forward his own assistant, Master Simon, for the position.

Apparently, the man had always had a passion for cooking that his wife and children shared.

While he had ten children, four were at the academy and three more were out on their own in the world.

Thus, he would simply be bringing himself, his wife, and three youngest children.

Tala had liked Master Simon the few times that they'd interacted, and he was a consummate researcher and assistant. He came highly recommended and was actually at the end of his tenure with Master Queue. Thus, he was beginning to search for a new position, regardless.

Even so, she still wasn't sure.

She had a dinner with his family planned in a week, and if that went well, they'd have another dinner within her sanctum sometime after.

But that wasn't pressing at the moment.

At the moment, it was time to Refine.

Toward that end, Tala stood in a new-to-her room within the Archon Compound. It was much smaller than a merging chamber within the Constructionist's Guildhalls, but it was similarly

outfitted with iron on every surface—even the pedestal that rose up to her waist in the center was entirely wrought of iron.

Atop the pedestal was something that looked like nothing so much as a coffin.

Humans rarely buried their dead—and when they did, they were almost always cremated beforehand, regardless—but coffins were still used occasionally.

Tala had never seen one before.

It was made of a beautiful wood, and she had known immediately where it had come from when she'd seen it.

"Master Jevin really made this for me?"

Mistress Holly smiled and nodded. "He grew it from the tree, meticulously forging the inscriptions into the wood fibers."

Just like in Makinaven, Tala could see that the individual fibers of wood had been grown into spellforms that were entirely alien, yet somehow comforting in their composition.

The Tala-sized box seemed to be precariously balanced on the iron pedestal, but Tala had looked underneath and seen that it was firmly attached.

During that same glance at the bottom, she'd been slightly concerned to see drain holes worked into the material at regular intervals. There were also drains in the slightly sloped floor of this chamber, which meant that their use wasn't a unique feature of *her* Refining.

Still, she needed to do this. She needed to Refine.

"Is it stereotypical to say that I'm nervous but excited?"

Mistress Holly smiled comfortingly. "Not too stereotypical, no."

Tala smiled in return. "What can I expect again?"

The Inscriptionist nodded. “A refresher is wise; you are right to ask. You will strip, leaving all your items—even your soulbound ones—on that shelf there.” She pointed to an iron shelf off to one side. “You will then be closed within the box.”

Tala nodded along, moving toward the indicated shelf.

“Once inside, you will place your hands on the requisite activation places and open yourself to the inscriptions, providing them with as much power as you can. You read the book?”

“Absolutely. I appreciate the triple check.” Mistress Holly had provided her with a book detailing exactly what the Refining would do, even if Tala didn’t really understand the results.

That was fine. It was akin to knowing that punching a wolf’s head could cause a messy explosion without *really* knowing what the end results of that explosion would be.

“I read it several times to be sure.”

“Good, good. Being sure is paramount, here. Make sure to leave your iron within Flow.”

Tala already had moved the metal to her weapon, so she simply nodded again.

“Then, that’s it. You’ll have activated the scripts, and you won’t be able to stop the process.”

“The test phase?”

“Yes, the test phase will confirm the concepts of the process. If it fails, *it* will stop the process. You will not have control.”

“Right, right.” Tala shuffled her feet.

“Your body will be purged of imperfections at every level.”

“Which won’t include my inscriptions, because they are perfect.” Tala gave the older woman a half-smile.

Mistress Holly chuckled. “Flattery aside, yes. They are magically aligned and form a template around which the magic will function. In essence, this process corrects the imbalance between how you believe your body works and how it actually does.”

“I still don’t understand why a foundation in biology and physiology isn’t required,” Tala groused. She had that knowledge, and she had been flabbergasted when Rane had told her he hadn’t been asked to learn it.

“I’ve explained a dozen times. The important thing is that you don’t have any incorrect understandings, generally. The point is to align your body with what you believe about your body. If you believed that you were missing a toe, this would remove that toe. You wouldn’t need to know the name of the bones in that phalange to make it happen.”

“Because my magic repairs my body according to my understanding.”

“Precisely.”

“And it also perfects me?”

“*Refines,* yes. You won’t be perfect, but in the colloquial sense, yes.”

“And a teleportation doesn’t do this because…”

The Inscriptionist sighed. “Because you are rebuilt based upon your *soul,* not your mind, when you teleport.”

“Right, right.” Tala glanced at the box again. The drain holes weren’t ominous at all…

“You have filled your reserves, correct?”

“You know that I have.” It had actually been a bit of a chore to eat enough over the last month, given how her ability to store nutrients and calories had grown.

“Good. That is the main reason why most people have to do this in multiple blocks.”

“Which I cannot do because the disjointment would kill me.”

“Precisely.” Mistress Holly smiled, but Tala could see tension in the woman’s eyes.

“Are you alright, Mistress Holly?”

“I am, dear girl.” She patted Tala on the shoulder. “You will be, too. Do you require assistance, or do you wish for me to stay in the room?”

Tala glanced at the coffin-like creation. “Will it bear up under me hopping up into it?”

“Yes. It should bear up to you punching it with all your strength even at the most cantilevered ends, but I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Then, I think I will be alright.”

“As you wish. I will await you just outside the door.” She hesitated. “Do you have anything you wish me to say to anyone if… if it doesn’t go well?”

Tala felt a chill run through her. That was the largest admission of uncertainty that she’d ever heard from Mistress Holly. “No. I will see you on the other side.”

Without another word, Mistress Holly closed the door behind herself as she left.

Tala took a deep breath and let it out carefully.

-Everything will be alright, Tala.-

That’s easy for you to say. You don’t have to experience this directly.

-And I am infinitely grateful for that. Thank you.-

Tala checked once again to ensure that she had moved all her non-biological iron into Flow before setting it on the shelf.

The metal of the shelf creaked under the load, so Tala pushed Flow to the back of the flat surface before adding Kit beside it.

After that, she pulled off her through-spike and stuck it into Kit.

Finally, she forced her Archive link to manifest as the ring and took it off, placing it on the shelf as well.

She was still connected to the Archive while it remained in the room with her, but she couldn't take it into the box without risking the process.

Next, she retracted her elk-leathers into a bracelet, which she removed and set beside the ring, pouch, and knife.

And that was it.

That was all she owned in the world.

-*Don't be melodramatic, Tala. There's an entire estate within that pouch.*-

Tala huffed a laugh. *True enough.*

With an easy hop, Tala jumped up and landed inside the box. Despite Mistress Holly's reassurances, Tala was careful to land where the box was held up and supported by the pillar beneath.

After another deep breath, Tala stretched out within the wooden construction before reaching and closing the lid over herself.

It sealed with a resounding *click*.

She easily sensed where her hands should go, and she rested them down on the contact points.

-*Ready?*-

As I'll ever be.

She forged a pair of void-channels as large as she could create—capturing virtually her entire power flow—and directed one out through each hand, into the waiting inscriptions.

Power slowly filled the spellforms around her, and the wooden box began to glow to her magesight. A moment later, it began to emit light visible to mundane sight as well.

Finally, there was enough power within for the first scripts to activate.

A pulse of power slammed into her uniformly from all sides at once.

Her hair was reduced to dust across her entire body, and she felt like every dead skin-cell was vaporized at the same time.

It rendered her instantly raw and oversensitive, and she tried not to shift.

The next pulse slammed into her, and several layers of skin vanished.

The pain was incredible, and she grunted and grimaced, trying to bear it.

Her regenerative scripts tried to activate to restore her, but they were suddenly, utterly suppressed, the magic of the Refining box superseding everything else.

Blessedly, the next pulse caused fresh skin to blossom across her body, replacing what had been removed.

That didn't last, however.

The next wave obliterated the new skin and all that was underneath.

Tala shrieked at the shock of it.

There was actually very little pain, however, since her nerve endings were simply gone.

She knew that blood was flowing freely from her, though she couldn't feel it.

The lack of pain was incredibly disconcerting.

Then, the magics radiating from the box changed, and she felt her left hand be gripped with incredible pressure.

It wasn't like being locked in a vise as she could still move her fingers freely, at least based on the kinesthetic feedback she was getting.

Instead, it was a grip on a deeper level.

Her left hand was the test case.

Alright, Tala. You can do this. Just breathe.

As that pressure increased, she felt the bones in her hand splinter, even while they were held in shape.

That hurt, and she screamed again, jerking her hand away from the contact point.

It didn't matter; the magic still flowed. The scripts were such that once the connection was made, it could not be stopped by her, and so the pressure increased.

Her bones ground together, turning to powder, all the while staying in the exact form that they needed to be in.

Her soft tissue was next, being emulsified in place even as the pressure increased.

Tala didn't really have time to consider the oddity of her bones breaking down first as the pain continued to build.

Then, when it reached almost unbearable levels, she heard a new, heavier dripping and strained to see her hand.

Something darker than blood, thick and *rancid,* was being squeezed out of her hand.

She barely held in a scream as she tried not to gag at the stench.

Hold it together, Tala. This is just the test section. The rest of you has to be done in one go.

They had set it up this way, so that, worst-case scenario, they only ruined her left hand, and she was trying to distract herself by going over the same information, again and again.

Unless this is wrong?

It felt wrong.

What if this is wrong?

-Tala. Calm down.-

Tala ignored Alat and pounded on the lid with her right hand, suddenly frantic. “Hello? This isn’t right!”

She’d known there would be a stripping away. She’d known there would be the pressure and expulsion of impurities. She’d even known that this was but the first of quite a few steps.

Even so, she had *not* known it would be like this.

“*Let me out!*” She pounded harder, but to no avail.

Finally, desperately, she punched the lid as hard as she could with her right hand, but Master Jevin did good work, and Mistress Holly had been correct.

The wood didn’t mar in the slightest beneath her blow.

Suddenly, the pressure gripped her entire body, and Tala’s panic grew.

No, no, no! She couldn’t take this. She needed it to stop.

But it wouldn’t stop.

The pressure built, and her body was slowly eviscerated in place.

Tala was no longer screaming, as she no longer had the intact parts to scream.

Blood and the putrid black sludge flowed from the coffin in equal measure as silence fell in the room, and the unalterable scripts continued to enact their magics without end.

Chapter: 30
To Learn the Results

Tala couldn't remember when this unending torment had started, and she had trouble remembering anything outside of the ongoing agony.

She definitely knew that she should know what was happening.

She also somehow knew that she probably shouldn't be able to feel anything at all at the moment.

Even so, she could.

-*It's your magical reinforcement and enhancement around your neural systems. They shouldn't still be feeding you pain, but they are. Tala, I'm so sorry.*-

Tala ignored the buzzing sound that sometimes came into her mind.

-*You're being rebuilt, and it's almost done. I'm sorry, but…*- There was a pause in the buzzing before it continued. -*I think the pain is going to get worse when your nerves are actually whole once more.*-

There was a solidity to her, which hadn't existed before, at least not in her memory. A support structure had been forged within her body of pain.

An unknown amount of time passed, and the pain did, indeed, grow to a crescendo.

At the final, ultimate wave of agony, Tala screamed for the first time. *Again? I'm sure it's again.*

The material around her vibrated under the force of the wail.

-*Tala? Tala! Are you with me again?*-

Her mind seemed to have mostly pulled itself back together, and her existence extended beyond mere pain and confusion once again.

Tala lay in a coffin that seemed to be filled so full of black muck that it came around her eyes and almost blocked her nose and mouth.

The horrible stench almost made her gag, but somehow, the ability to smell again was a sweet relief sufficient enough to overcome the horror of the extreme odor, at least for the moment.

Blessedly, she seemed to have tried to throw her head back for her agonized cry, so her airways were lifted up above the level of the viscous liquid.

Even through the sludge over her eyes, she saw a bright pulse of light, and Tala flinched.

Light means magic. Magic means more pain.

Something within the black ichor changed, and it began to rush downward, flowing where it hadn't before.

-*Surface tension and molecular cohesion most likely. The magics made it so this stuff could drain.*- There was another moment of hesitance. -*How was all of this stuff inside of you, Tala?*-

Tala just groaned, trying to keep her mouth closed, even though every breath through her nose brought with it the foul odor.

Soon, the box was mostly drained, and a resonant cracking came from all around her.

The box fell away, one wall hinging the lid up and away from above her.

There was a sickening squelch as the wood fell onto the seemingly coated floor.

The last of the gunk splashed down onto the panels, where the inscriptions on the wooden panels continued to facilitate the liquid's movement through the drains in the floor of the room.

Tala simply laid there, gasping.

The light in the room caused her to twitch, but it was obviously different from the light given off by activating inscriptions. Her utter inability to do anything about the light, and the lack of harm from it, forced the knee-jerk reaction to fizzle out and her aversion to fade.

She felt too weak to lift her arms, and she was utterly drained.

Over the months, she'd gotten to a place where she could sense her reserves, at least vaguely.

They were utterly spent.

She was utterly spent.

In fact, she felt like barely a husk of herself, though she knew that the inscriptions across her body would have maintained her shape one way or another.

Her mind was fuzzy, and it almost felt like over enthusiastic musicians were playing loud, grating, monotonous music, filling the room with incessant noise.

-Tala, that's someone knocking and calling out to you.-

…Oh…

"Mistress Tala?"

Tala groaned.

It was Mistress Holly. "Mistress Tala, can I come in to help?"

Really? Just come in already, woman.

-You told her you didn't want assistance… You aren't in danger from what I can tell, so I wanted to wait for you to be ready.-

…That was before; this is now. Tala groaned again but slightly louder and in an affirmative manner.

That was apparently enough as the older woman opened the door.

There was a pause, then a gagging retch.

“Oh… Oh, child.”

Tala felt magics enact, though she couldn’t quite tell what they were.

Suddenly, a stream of water shot across the room and began to sweep back and forth, presumably rinsing the black remnants away.

The cold water hit Tala, and she flinched—or at least she tried to.

Her body did *not* want to move. So, instead, she just groaned again. This time it was definitely *not* in an affirmative manner.

“One moment, Mistress Tala. I’ve got to get you clean of this stuff before the magics run their course. Otherwise, you’ll find the black discharge more pervasive than tar, and you’ll be finding it *everywhere* for weeks.”

She couldn’t summon the strength to protest, though she wanted to.

Why won’t my arms move?

-You’ve been mostly dead all day.-

Tala didn’t really know how to respond to that, and in any case, it didn’t help her solve her current issue.

Then, an idea came to her.

Alat!

-Yes, Tala?- The alternate interface sounded incredibly tentative.

Send her a strongly worded missive telling her how I feel about her washing.

-…Are you sure?-

Do it!

-Alright… done.-

Good, I'm going to slap that woman if this continues. She tried to move to fulfill the threat, but all that she accomplished was slightly moving one finger.

-You just wiggled your finger!- Alat was elated.

I've always been a quick healer.

The stream of water froze in place for a moment, the Mistress Holly snorted. "Mistress Tala. I am trying… to… help you." The woman grunted. "You knew I'd say that, eh?"

What?

-I ended the missive telling her not to say that she's just trying to help.-

Tala snorted a laugh, slightly shaking her head at Alat's antics. She approved. Then, she tried to grimace in pain. *This is awful…*

-You just shook your head! That doesn't make you happy?-

She sent the alternate interface a deeply skeptical thought. *I just went through something so mind-numbingly painful that I still can't think straight, and you think a little head jiggle is supposed to make me happy? Hmm?*

-You've been… less than cognizant. I even faded through several points. This is a vast improvement.-

The water began moving again, and Tala growled but still couldn't move.

-I was worried about you.-

Tala didn't really have a response. She felt utterly unable to think about the experience that she just went through, her mind shying away from the memories like a whipped dog.

Mistress Holly finally came over and blasted her more directly. "Let's get you clean. I'm sure you feel weak to the extreme. The cleaning should have been automated, but those spellforms were definitely not designed for this much filth. I've never seen so much corruption and rot and

nastiness come from one person before. We'll have to do some tests, but I'm optimistic. This was a resounding success."

Tala managed to roll her head to face the Inscriptionist and forced a partial grimace.

She couldn't say anything, though.

Mistress Holly gently patted her cheek. "One moment." She placed her hand on the back of Tala's neck, and Tala felt the tingle of magic. "You are in no immediate danger, and you'll recover, my dear girl. Nothing is glaringly wrong, except that you are strained to near the limit of your endurance. Let's get you sorted and out of here. We have a place you can rest nearby that's far more comfortable than this."

Ten more minutes of rather embarrassing and awkward cleaning and shifting found Tala propped up in a laid-back chaise in a side room, seemingly specifically made for Archons in this weakened state.

Her elk-leathers had grown back over her into comfortable clothing. Kit and Flow hung opposite each other at her waist, and her ring and through-spike were back in place.

Refined. I'm a Refined.

-*That's right you are!*- Alat forced an unseemly amount of cheer into that statement, making Tala grimace again.

Please stop. You're trying too hard, and it's getting painful…

-*Fine, fine.*- Alat sighed within Tala's mind. -*What do you need?*-

Tala couldn't honestly think of anything but food, and Mistress Holly had already provided that. The side table beside Tala was overloaded with sustenance, and she was taking careful bites as she had the strength to do so.

More than anything, except food, she needed time to recover.

Tala let Terry out, and he happily flickered to her shoulder before curling up and tucking himself in against her neck, providing what comfort and physical company that he could.

It took more than a day of eating and sleeping before she could get up from the reclined seat for more than short stretches.

After a particularly fitful nap, Tala woke up to find Master Nadro sitting in a chair in the corner of the room.

“Oh! Master Nadro.” Despite her surprise, her words were still rather quiet.

“Peace, Mistress Tala. You are still incredibly weak. I assumed that you might want to talk about what you experienced, but we can use our alternate interfaces if you like. That way you don’t strain yourself?”

Can you tell him that he’s welcome to talk out loud?

-*Of course.*-

He smiled. “That is kind of you. I’ll be here for a couple of hours. Feel free to say anything you wish, and I will hear it.”

She slowly nodded. Even so, it took long minutes of silence before she could summon the willpower to begin to convey her perspective on what had happened.

...I was trapped…

* * *

Just less than a week passed before she was up and moving around with relative ease.

Mistress Holly was ready to run the full battery of her tests, now that Tala had recovered for the most part, and Tala had her dinner with Master Simon the next evening.

Bedrest was at an end, it seemed.

As the first lightening of the sky was visible in her sanctum, Tala leveraged herself out of her bed, summoning the door out to the space directly in front of herself.

She came out through the door into Lyn's hallway, walking much more slowly, and with shorter steps, than she was used to.

Her whole body still felt raw and new. Sore and strained.

"Tala? Is that you?" Lyn poked her head around the corner. "It is! Come, come. Let me help you."

The Archon came down the hallway quickly and took one of Tala's arms before Tala could muster a response.

"You still seem very weak. Are you going to be alright?"

"I'm sick of being cooped up, more than anything. Besides, Mistress Holly is expecting me for some tests."

"Do you need assistance getting there?" Lyn was obviously uncertain, but she just as obviously wanted to be sure that Tala was safe.

"No, thank you. I think a walk through the city will help me tremendously."

Lyn frowned, seeming to internally fuss a bit. "Did you stretch?"

"No, Mom. I'll stretch when I get there."

She huffed a laugh. "Fine, alright, I'll leave you be."

Tala placed her hand on Lyn's shoulder. "Thank you for wanting to help."

Lyn patted her in return. "Of course. I'm happy to help however I can."

Kannis smiled consolingly in Tala's direction as Tala passed through the sitting room. It was early morning, and the master and mageling would soon be leaving for work.

Apparently, Lyn had told Kannis that Tala came down with a rare, noncommunicable illness in order to hide the fact that Tala's condition was the result of Refining.

That thought made Tala realize something else. *I've not talked to Lyn about my Refining at all… Does she actually know? Does Rane?*

-She said that Mistress Holly told her you were ill. We assumed that she said that because Kannis was in the room, but what if…-

Yeah, I don't think she knows the truth. Obviously, Lyn would know if she looked at Tala with her magesight, but Lyn was still of the mindset that it was rude to look at others without asking permission first, and since she had to activate those inscriptions for them to provide the sight, Tala was rather sure that Lyn hadn't seen.

That surety made Tala a bit conflicted. She knew that if she'd been warned, she would have struggled to have the strength to go through with it, and quite honestly, the whole experience would have been worse.

Even so, she knew that she felt a seed of resentment toward every higher-ranked person who had failed to warn her.

-Master Grediv, and quite a few others, did say it was a difficult, unpleasant experience.-

Tala grunted internally at that but didn't respond.

She grabbed the door handle and pushed as she moved to go outside.

Instead of opening, the door stood firm, and she rammed into it with a grunt.

Tala felt her eye twitch, and suddenly, it was as if she was back in the coffin.

Her breath sped up.

Calm, Tala. But it didn't work.

She tried the door again, but it wouldn't open.

Trapped. I'm trapped!

She tried to body-check the door open, but she was still incredibly weak, and it did nothing.

Tala heard a whimper come from her own lips.

No. No, no, no, no. She hit the door.

-Tala! Stop!-

But Tala ignored the alternate interface.

"Let me out!" Even though she had tried to scream, the panic in her mind made it come out as barely a croak.

Even so, quick footsteps came from behind her, and Lyn was suddenly beside her. "Tala? Tala!"

Tala couldn't turn away from the door as she continued to futilely push. "It won't open. I can't"—she panted—"I can't get out!"

Lyn put a calming hand on her shoulder, and Tala felt herself shudder. "Tala, I don't know what's going on."

Tala turned to look at Lyn. "I'm trapped. It won't open."

Lyn slowly grabbed the door handle and pulled.

The door opened easily.

"Tala… are you okay?"

Tala shook her head. "No, I don't think I am, but I need to get outside." She was still too panicked to be embarrassed. She needed to get outside. Even so, she managed to get out two words as she stepped outside, "Thank you."

As soon as she was out of the house, it was as if a massive weight was lifted from her, and her breathing slowed.

Her steps became a bit firmer, and she straightened, only having just realized that she was hunching.

She shivered, but not from the cold.

Yeah… that was awful.

-Are you going to be okay?-

I hope so.

-Is there anything I can do?-

Let me focus on something other than that little panic attack?

-I can do that.-

Tala grimaced and found that she couldn't divert her mind too far. *I think I understand now why Master Grediv would be hesitant to move toward being Reforged. I can't imagine it's a pleasant process.*

-It does seem like every step is more difficult in some way or another.-

Yeah. Though, it might be more accurate to say that each step is differently difficult.

Alat snorted a laugh within Tala's head. *-That does sound more accurate, yeah.-*

The cool air was invigorating, and the slight breeze across Tala's minimally clad body was helping to shake loose some of the lethargy that had been plaguing her for the last several days.

There had been quite a bit of snowfall recently, to the point that even her widened tread sunk deeply into the light, fluffy, dry powder, allowing the cool snow to fall inward and dust her bare feet.

It added to the refreshing coolness, and Tala felt a smile blossom across her face for what felt like the first time since her Refining as she turned her mind outward, and to the present moment, leaving her still-fluttering internal flutters and the past aside for the moment.

Pedestrian traffic was beginning to pick up, and there were even a few vehicles about, but the streets were still mostly empty at this early hour.

The sky was still dark, after all. It seemed that her sanctum matched the day-night cycle wherever she was, but as it was spring-like within Kit, the length of the days matched that time of year, rather than that of wintery Bandfast.

Tala almost diverted to get some food, but she still had an overabundance which Mistress Holly, Rane, and Lyn had brought her off and on over the last few days.

So, instead of going to a restaurant, she simply reached into Kit and pulled out a still-warm breakfast sandwich.

The bread, itself, was still steaming, having come straight from the oven to be made into a sandwich. From there, it had been in one dimensional storage after another.

Rane's storage was less preserving than Kit could be, but it still let the food taste like it had been made within the last half-hour, rather than three days earlier.

She stepped carefully as she ate, making sure not to lose any of the incredibly tasty breakfast.

She had an undeniable hankering for coffee, as many of her memories made with these tastes were accompanied by the smooth power of that dark liquid, but she was not going to go down that road, at least not until her body had fully stabilized.

The first sandwich was barely the start of her feast as she walked the distance to Mistress Holly's workshop.

Unfortunately, none of the food was magically special.

Mistress Holly had explicitly told Tala to avoid even endingberries until they'd been able to test her fully to get a sense of how, exactly, the Refining had gone.

Tala pulled out her incorporator for a drink but paused with a sigh.

Incorporated water didn't *really* harm a Mage. All it took was a little bit of their throughput to maintain the molecules in that form until it passed through, and Tala had magic aplenty.

Even so, that would be another strain on her magic and body at this time.

Instead, she put the device back in Kit and pulled out a mug, already filled with clean, clear water.

She drained the mug in one long pull, reveling in the sweet simplicity of the water.

After placing the cup back into Kit, she patted the pouch. "Thank you, Kit. That was a really excellent drink."

Kit did not respond.

The mug sent Tala's thoughts spiraling off in an unpleasant direction, *If I melt down a cup, purify the materials, and remake the cup, is it the same vessel?*

-Obviously not, but that isn't actually what happened. In this case, the cup was separated into individual molecules and held perfectly in place while the imperfections were removed. Then, it was allowed to reconnect to the surrounding pieces, exactly where they had been.-

That sounds like the vessel would be left full of holes…

-Maybe that's why it needs to be Reforged?-

Tala shuddered. *Yeah… I'm not ready to consider that at the moment.*

-As you wish. It will be interesting to hear what the test results are, right?-

Yeah. It definitely will be.

She continued to pull out food to eat while she walked the last few blocks to her destination.

Tala pushed open the door and smiled at the receptionist—yet another Mage that Tala didn't recognize.

She wasn't feeling very restrained at the moment, so Tala just asked, "How many different receptionists are there? I feel like I'm in here all the time, and I don't often see regulars behind that desk."

The young-looking man cleared his throat, straightened his back just a bit, and smiled hesitantly. "Well, this is a testing position for those who want to work with the honored Inscriptionist."

Tala's eye twitched, and she opened her mouth to respond, but Mistress Holly came out into the entry hall before she could.

"Master Adam, I've told you that unnecessary flattery won't factor into my decision."

Huh, that's funny. He shares a name with Adam, the guard.

-Yes, Tala, many people share names.-

"Yes, Mistress Holly." Master Adam lowered his gaze back to the work on the desk before him.

Mistress Holly turned to Tala. "It really is informative, how much you can learn about a person by how they handle such a position."

Tala grunted, starting to slowly walk toward the door to the back.

"How are you doing, Mistress?" There was genuine concern in the woman's voice.

Tala sighed and turned to regard her. "Well, before all this started, I was fine, and I suppose when this process is done, I will be again."

Mistress Holly's eye twitched as Tala tried to keep her smile back.

"You might even say that soon I will be re-fine."

"Out!" The Inscriptionist pointed at the main door. "That was a terrible pun."

"Fine, fine." The smile broke through Tala's features. "Or should I say, 'Refine'?"

Mistress Holly shook her head. “Let’s get this over with. You’re going to strain something if you keep that up.”

Without another word, the two women turned toward the back.

Tala didn’t ask, but she leaned on the older woman—just a bit—for support.

Mistress Holly silently shifted to be of better help.

Together, they went to learn the results of their respective efforts and ordeals.

Chapter: 31
Quite a Few

Tala and Mistress Holly entered the back room of the workshop and sat down at a not-usually-present set of table and chairs.

The table held steaming tea, ready and waiting.

The tea was one that Tala couldn't quite place, but it went down smoothly, and she felt herself relax as the warmth spread through her.

"Now, Mistress Tala, we will be doing basically all the tests we did in preparation for your Refining so that we can compare the results as a way to measure your body's recovery and improvement."

Tala took another sip, sighed, and nodded. "Out of curiosity, shouldn't we wait until I am fully physically recovered?"

"We will need to take another set of measurements then as well, but we need to head off any potential issues now—if they exist. So, we can't wait any longer."

"Very well. I expected as much."

"Good. Do you have any questions?"

"Honestly? Yes, I have quite a few, but not really about this process."

Mistress Holly gave a long-suffering smile. "Well then, let's see what I can do to help with that."

As Tala settled back in her chair, she realized that she hadn't invited Terry to join her.

She opened Kit and called to him. The terror bird flickered to her shoulder, where he headbutted her cheek and curled up.

Tala stroked the avian, then turned back to Mistress Holly. “Sorry. My questions. What was that black gunk?”

“That is actually a subject of some debate. Once it separates from an Archon, it begins to fade. Any attempt to perform tests upon it or direct magical scanning at it either utterly fails or seems to speed up its fading.”

“And if it remains on the Archon?”

“Then attempting tests or scans causes it to retreat back into the Mage, harming the Refining.”

Tala’s eyes widened. “Could my magesight have triggered that?”

“Oh, no. Your magesight wouldn’t have seen anything from it, but you probably already know that. It would be simple dead space to that perception.”

“Are there any guesses on what it *might* be?”

“The most prevalent theory is that the ‘gunk’ is a purely conceptual substance.”

“How does that make sense? Shouldn’t it have to be material?”

“In theory, no. Not that we understand conceptual magics that well.”

“And so, it would be… what? The concept of bodily corruption?”

“That’s as good a guess as any, honestly.”

“Well, in either case, I’m glad that it didn’t retreat and harm my Refining.”

“Quite. We would not have left your magesight active if it could harm you.”

Tala grimaced. “You didn’t seem to mind hurting me.”

“I never claimed differently. The pain, the hurt, was for your own good and was required because of your condition.”

She frowned. “But you just said…”

Mistress Holly sighed and shook her head. “Harm and hurt are very different things, Mistress Tala. I think you know that to be true. For example, a parent’s discipline must hurt to be meaningful, whether that hurt is physical, financial, social, or otherwise, but it should never *harm*.”

“Ahh, I see the difference. Hurt is painful, but that fades, while harm is damaging in the end.”

“Precisely.”

She took a deep breath and asked one of the more important questions, trying to not let her voice tremble with either anger or remembered agony, “So, why *did* you allow me to experience so much pain?”

“Do you remember when I rendered you unconscious to inscribe parts of you?”

“Yes.”

“What happened when you woke up?”

Tala’s eyes widened just slightly as she understood. “The sum total of all the pain I *would have* felt hit me at once.”

“*That,* if done for the Refining, would have killed you, almost without question. The pain you felt was mostly on the soul-level, as one of your soul-bonds, specifically your body, was broken down and stripped of pieces of its makeup.”

“Stripped of who knows what.”

“Well, we know the results, but that doesn’t really help us concretely identify the substance.” Mistress Holly gave a rueful smile. “In fact, us knowing the results lets us extrapolate the connecting concept of what was removed, which is why the ‘conceptual substance’ theory holds so much weight.”

“And those known results are?”

“Refined gain incredible multiplicative increases to throughput, magical density, inscription efficiency, and magical control. An end to physical degradation due to time. An almost total immunity to non-magical disease and poison. A perfecting of your genetic code to be passed down to any offspring. Physical capacity is amplified as well, to an incredible degree. Mental functions are lifted to completely new heights.”

Mistress Holly clearly saw Tala’s confused frown.

“All of this will manifest as your body solidifies in its new state. There are many more, specific benefits, but they all are understood to fall under what I already stated. These are some of the reasons why we implement the reconstruction inscriptions before Refining. Aside from making the process easier, they make the results better, too.”

Tala grunted. Terry seemed to be getting bored, so he flickered to a corner, where he contentedly curled up to wait.

“Do you mind if *I* ask you a question?”

She only hesitated a moment before shrugging. “I suppose not.”

“I didn’t want to ask before because I didn’t want to influence your decision, especially when you had an expert to consult. Now that it’s done, though, what was your reasoning behind binding the dasgannach with your weapon as opposed to your elk-leathers?”

Tala grunted again. She’d actually given it a lot of thought and talked it through with Mistress Aurius. Tala had been inclined to use Flow, and her research and talks had only reinforced the decision. “That’s simple enough. The elk-leathers and dasgannach were too similar. One would have subsumed the other, and I’d have been left with one that could somewhat pretend to be the

other. Flow and the dasgannach were distinct enough, with marginal overlap, that they should now be able to complement each other, rather than overriding or fighting for supremacy."

Mistress Holly nodded. "That would have been my fear as well. I'm glad to know that you got good advice, and it's also nice to confirm that I'm not so ignorant in the field to have missed the mark."

Tala grunted again. She was almost frustrated with Mistress Holly, but she realized that it wasn't Mistress Holly's job to hold her hand in such decisions, especially when they lay outside her expertise. Mistress Holly had gone above and beyond, finding an expert for Tala to work with, after all.

The Inscriber tilted her head in thought, seeming content with Tala's response. "Thank you for satisfying my curiosity. What else did you want to ask?"

"Soul bonds."

"They aren't my area of study, but I'll answer if I can."

"It has been implied to me that I shouldn't have more than eight at any one time."

"That is fairly standard, sound advice, yes."

"I have Flow, my elk-leathers, my Archive link, and my body, right? Does my body count?"

"In almost every sense, yes." Mistress Holly's smile shifted toward a wry grin. "Except toward that limit. While you're Bound? It counts and is like any soul-bound tool, in every basic sense. Once you Fuse, though, you basically do to your body and soul what you just did to your weapon and the dasgannach."

Tala blinked a few times, processing what Mistress Holly had said. "So, because my body is Fused with my soul, it doesn't count as a bond?"

"For soul-strain, no, it doesn't count."

“So, I have five more slots?”

“You? I have no idea. There are *so* many extenuating circumstances that might have affected the strength, flexibility, and durability of your soul in ways I have no clue how to understand nor quantify. Standardly? Yes, I’d say four more tools and a spouse would be the limit.” She held up a finger. “Though, I wouldn’t rush into any of those bonds until you were utterly sure.”

“Absolutely not. So, the dasgannach and Flow are just a single bond?”

“That *is* usually the point of a merging. If you were set on doing all your bonding *now*, I would be comfortable telling you to only add four more bonds, but as the merging settles over time, it will only strain your soul as much as a single bond in the end.” She narrowed her eyes at Tala. “I feel the need to emphasize that this is meant as an upper limit, not a goal. Most Archons end up with four or five tools of various natures.”

“Offensive, defensive, storage, and Archive connection?”

“Generally, yes. Each of those takes a different form, within reason. So, it’s not like it’s a standard set of gear by any means. There are also obviously Archons who end up with a different set entirely, and almost no one who stops before Refining has a soul-bound Archive connection, so it’s only vaguely accurate.”

“Thank you for that clarification. In that same vein, what does it mean for my bonds that I am now Refined?”

“On the surface level, they are going to Refine as well, though it will take longer for them, and it is an automatic process. In the case of inanimate objects, we’ve not observed any of the black sludge, either. When you Fused, the change was mainly in you, and you likely gained greater control over them and simply had more power to grant to them for their usage. Now, however, both you and your bonds will end up altered.”

Tala opened her mouth in shock, but Mistress Holly held up her hand.

"Altered isn't the right word, but it's also the best one I have. You will find them both more efficient and able to handle more power. Your Archive connection will likely allow for faster transfer of information at the very least as well. That is a relatively standard item, so the results are somewhat known. It's especially well studied because very few bond one before Refined, so those that do are watched closely. Master Nadro implied that you are already starting to be able to use that connection for real-time communication, rather than simply for the sharing of notes. Is that correct?"

"It is, yes."

"That would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, before Refining."

-She's right. We could obviously have done it if I stopped backing up your mind, and other uses of the Archive, but it still would have been a strain.-

But, that's silly. Why would communicating in real time take that much informational throughput?

-The Archive is secure, not fast, perhaps? It's also designed as an informational repository. It is much easier to give it information than to relay information through *it.-*

Hmm… That sounds like there's some sort of conceptual backing to it, and that's causing this nonsensical duality of capacity.

-That is in line with our earlier guesses.-

"Alright. I think I understand."

"Now, do you have other questions, or should we get to the tests?"

"Just one more, unless your answer keys off more."

Mistress Holly smiled and took another sip of tea. "Ask away."

“My fusing feels… off somehow. Strained? Tangled? Something in that vein.”

Tala had looked into her inner view of her fusing and found the massive, crocheted field to be rather less ordered than it had been when she had Fused. Specifically, the part which represented her body seemed to have been cut apart and put back together, no longer *quite* fully intermeshed with her spirit and soul.

It wasn’t in a way that made it seem like the whole thing would pull apart, but it was definitely *not* how she had left it.

“Ahh, yes. That is expected.”

“Does it have to do with the changes due to Refining?”

“It does. This is a known result, and not one that you should deal with at the moment.”

“But I could?”

“You can’t. Well, I mean, of course you *could* fix it, but it isn’t worth your time and effort. It would be foolish, so you *shouldn’t*.”

Tala frowned. “What do you mean?”

Mistress Holly sighed. “Because every step from here forward will make the Fusing worse, but it won’t break it. If you aimed to keep it perfected, you would need to fully undo it and start over to make it right, and then you’d have to redo that for every single step between Refined and Paragon, then again for each major progression toward Reforging. And then yet again when you headed toward Ascending.”

“And then toward Transcendent, too?” Tala finished for the woman with a sigh.

“Well, no.” Mistress Holly smiled knowingly. “While, to my knowledge, we don’t have definitive proof, the most prevalent theory is that moving from Ascending to Transcendent is simply a matter of doing precisely this, meaning re-Fusing. At that time, your body, soul, and

spirit will have been cleansed, and it's just a matter of aligning and interweaving them. Thus, the final step is simply to recombine them into a coherent, perfected whole."

Tala felt her mouth hanging slightly open. *She just… told me?*

She blinked a few times, uncertain if she'd misunderstood.

Alat… did she just tell me how to reach a certain, future advancement?

-*Well, yes, but to be fair it was a theory, and still an* incredible *distance from where we are.*-

I have to test this. What else will she tell me? "Does that mean you can tell me what the other advancements take?"

"Yes, but no." Mistress Holly's smile turned wry. "Paragon? Yes. Reforged? Yes, but I *highly* recommend that you wait to learn that bit of knowledge for at least a year, if not until you are a Paragon. Ascending? Yes, but it is recommended that you wait until you are a Paragon, otherwise you will make the process of reaching that advancement *much* harder."

Tala frowned. "Aren't we set up to hide these secrets, to make progression easier? Isn't that the point of the previous secrecy?"

The Inscriptionist snorted. "No, not at all. We hide the things that would make advancement basically impossible. These bits of information will just make it much harder, so we allow the individual Archon to decide."

"I see… Well, I'd at least like to know what it takes to become a Paragon."

"Of course. Like Refining, it is incredibly simple in concept but difficult to enact. Blessedly, it is an internal process, as Fusing was, not one requiring exterior assistance or intervention."

Tala nodded, waiting expectantly.

"Becoming a Paragon simply requires releasing a mortal view of this world and your experiences within it."

What now?

-What now?-

Tala scrunched her face in confusion, but no clarity came with a moment's thought. So, she asked, "What now?"

Mistress Holly smiled. "You must allow yourself—and your spirit—to let go of a limited view of reality. You must allow your thinking, along with your emotional responses, to become that of the next world, thus allowing your spirit—and the half of your soul that remains here—to better align with the half of your soul that is in the next world."

Tala's scrunched face became a grimace as her parents immediately came to mind and anger built within her. *So, I have to acknowledge that, in light of the next world, their betrayal is rather meaningless? There. I did it. Are you happy?*

-Tala, I don't think that's what that means, and I don't think you do either.-

Mistress Holly sighed. "I know you have much to work through. I will tell you one thing that my master told me when I had reached this step. 'This is not about freeing those who have wronged you. It is about freeing yourself.'"

Tala looked over to the other woman in confusion. "I might still be a bit fuzzy, but I don't think I understand."

"Let me tell you a story as an analogy."

She nodded and leaned back, continuing to enjoy her tea.

"Long ago, there was a group of Mages who avoided iron entirely to prevent any tainting of even their mental foundations for magic. It was a core tenet of their group and an unthinkable breach to have any interactions with iron."

Tala huffed a laugh. "They'd have loved me."

Mistress Holly smiled in return. “Quite. But you understand the setting?”

“I do.”

“Important to the story is that this was when humanity lived in the countryside, moving around in smaller groups. This is before the cycle of cities was established.”

“Alright.”

“So, a master and mageling of this group were walking through the countryside, and they came across an overturned cart. It seemed that a wheel had broken, causing the contents of the cart to fall out onto the man who had been walking alongside, prodding the oxen.

“Now, the cart had been loaded with long iron rods, each two inches thick, and the cartman was basically unhurt but utterly pinned under the jumble of rods.”

“I think I can see the conflict of the tale.” Tala’s mouth quirked up into a half-smile.

“Shh.” Even so, the Inscriptionist smiled in return. “The master, without hesitation, rushed forward, grabbed the iron rods, and with tremendous strength brought on by his magics, he freed the man. Less than a minute later, the two Mages were on their way, and the cartman was already working to repair his vehicle, no longer needing their help.”

Mistress Holly paused to take a sip of tea before continuing.

“The two continued walking after that, and the mageling was understandably conflicted. His master had violated the strictures of their group and had touched iron. More than that, it wasn’t a simple accidental brush with the metal. He had purposely grabbed it over and over, even utilizing magic to allow him to effectively work with it.

“Finally, when they had nearly reached the end of their trip, and the day was drawing to a close, the mageling couldn’t take it anymore. ‘Master, how could you do something against our

ideals?' the young man asked. 'You willfully touched iron, endangering your mental foundations.'"

"The master turned to his mageling and gave a sad smile, 'My boy, I touched the iron for but a moment; you have been carrying it all day.'"

Silence fell in the room as both women enjoyed their tea.

Mistress Holly seemed content to wait for Tala to fully process.

Finally, Tala nodded. "So, it isn't about what happened, it is about your mindset?"

The Inscriptionist sighed, setting her teacup aside. "Yes, and no. Let me try a more 'real' example: your Refining was traumatic."

Tala felt her eye twitch at the change in topic. "Yes, it was."

"And I led you into it."

She gritted her teeth but responded again, "Yes, you did."

"You could hate me for that. You could leave and refuse to ever see me again. There is no question that your view of me *has* changed, but you are still here, listening to me and willing for me to still help you. Either response makes perfect sense given what you have gone through."

Tala didn't have a response.

"So, let me ask you this: if you chose to hate me and avoid me, who would be harmed? Would your hatred—your avoidance of me—cause me any lasting harm?"

After a moment's thought, Tala had to concede, "No, it wouldn't."

"But would it harm you?"

"Probably…"

"That is what I mean. Few things are so clear cut, even the situation surrounding your Refining, but it is a good analogy."

“I’m still not sure I quite understand.”

Mistress Holly smiled again, more softly this time. “That’s understandable and more than fine. If you truly understood, you’d already be a Paragon. You are young, yet. Give it time. Master Grediv is a wonderful resource, too. He will likely have a slightly different perspective and might convey it in a way you would understand better.”

Tala grunted. Then, she gave Mistress Holly a side-eyed look. “So, your master told you that tale?”

“Yes.”

“When you were in my position, Refined and looking toward the advancement to Paragon?”

“Yes.”

“And yet you are Refined? As basic and pure a yellow as I’ve ever seen?”

Mistress Holly smiled mischievously. “Am I? I don’t generally think on such things.”

Tala opened her mouth to comment further, but Mistress Holly stood up.

“Now, we should really get to the tests, Mistress Tala. I have much else that I need to do this week.”

Chapter: 32
Assessment and Consideration

Tala stood, and Mistress Holly gestured. There was a ripple of dimensional magic, and the chairs and table that they had been sitting at vanished.

It was time for the more extensive testing.

Tala glanced to Terry who was still curled up in the corner. “Do you want to wait this out in my sanctum or out here? I’m not sure I’ll be able to let you in during the middle of the tests.”

Terry lifted his head, regarding her. Finally, he huffed out a reluctant squawk. A moment later, he’d flickered up to her shoulder to headbutt her cheek.

“Alright then. Thanks for coming out.”

He trilled and looked down toward Kit.

“We’ll find something to hunt out in the wilds soon enough. I’m getting a bit stir crazy, too.”

She opened Kit, and Terry flickered inside. Through the opening, Tala could see one of the grassy hills from the perimeter of her sanctum.

“Alright. Let’s do this.”

The series of tests were no faster this time around, and Tala entered an almost meditative state, not even really coming out of it to follow Mistress Holly’s occasional commands.

She used the time to work on her mental flexibility, reading a book that Alat was able to project for her in the air, turning the pages with a thought.

What made this special was that Tala, not Alat, positioned the book and turned the pages. She didn't create the image herself, nor the look of the page turning, but she did cause the page to turn.

-I know it seems like a small thing, but it really is a big step.-

I know, I know… Still, she was more focused on the content of the book than the mental tasks related to the book figment.

As before, Mistress Holly worked through the day and well into the night, facilitating the various assessments, scans, and measurements.

Finally, the long set of processes was complete, and Mistress Holly sent Tala home.

The Inscriptionist seemed content with the results. "Nothing stood out as being wrong or broken. We'll want time to assess and compare in more detail, however. That, along with the next set of tests when you're back to one hundred percent, should give us all the information that we need to offer a clean bill of health."

"Thank you. Am I still limited in what I can do?"

"I think so, but not for much longer. You can add back in physical exercise, if you haven't already. I'd avoid covering yourself in iron—or anything that could potentially lead to the need to heal—until your Refining has fully set. From these initial readings, I think one month should be plenty for that, so just more than another three weeks."

Tala fought off a grimace and simply sighed and nodded. "Will do."

She left without another word to Mistress Holly, and the Inscriptionist seemed to already be engrossed in something else.

Tala did say goodbye to the new receptionist on her way out. She was new in the sense that Tala had never seen her before, not in the sense that it was the *same* new receptionist from the day before.

Mistress Holly really does go through these Mages quickly… She hoped that the young man from before got his chance, whether here or elsewhere.

But she put that from her mind as she stepped out into yet more new-fallen snow. The fresh air and cloudy sky allowed Mistress Holly's words to finally sink in, so that Tala felt a huge weight lift from her.

We did it. We are Refined!

She kept herself from jumping for joy in the somewhat crowded street so as to not disturb the morning traffic—but only barely.

Her body was her own once again. It was healing, but it was *right*. She was no longer at odds with her own flesh and blood.

Breakfast. I need breakfast.

She'd eaten through the previous day and even through the night while Mistress Holly ran her tests as she was still trying to bring her reserves back up to acceptable levels. Even so, she wasn't there yet.

She still had a long way to go, and she was *hungry.*

See if Rane's available. I want to go to that omelet place on the east side of the southern market. They have good, big tables, too.

-*Sent. Do you want to head that way? It might take him a bit to notice the*—- Alat paused for only a moment before continuing. -*Or, he could respond almost immediately. He'll meet you there.*-

Thank you, Alat!

Tala had a huge smile, resting gently across her features.

She no longer had a short fuse on her lifespan.

As she thought about it, she almost giggled. *I no longer have* any *limit on my lifespan.*

-So long as you survive. I feel like you haven't thought this all the way through yet.-

Tala waved that comment off. *Of course, but that's true for everyone. Old age will never affect me, and if I am not killed, I will exist forever.*

She blinked a few times even as she continued to walk.

Her smile slowly faded.

I'm going to exist forever, or die in blood and pain.

-And there it is.- Alat sighed. *-All that you've done is remove the possibility of a slow degradation into a chaotic, biological death.-*

And a death with dignity, at a ripe old age, surrounded by my family: children, grandchildren, and more.

-Do you want children?- Alat obviously knew the answer, and she was likely just asking to help Tala process through her current turmoil.

Yes? It would be silly to never *have children. But do I want to keep having them forever?*

-Are those the only two options?-

No, of course not.

-You do want children, I know that you do.-

Of course, I do. Didn't I just say that?

-Not really.-

Well… I do. Tala sighed, still walking toward her breakfast with Rane.

-*You should talk through this with Lyn.*-

Yeah, not Rane. That would be… unkind. Her stance hadn't changed, even if she could see the general state of it changing in the coming decades. She couldn't imagine still wanting to be single through the long centuries. Even so, now was not the time. *Not yet. I don't want that sort of attachment yet.*

She let her mind wander through the whirls and corners of the potential of a family in the distant future.

It took her less than an hour to get to the restaurant, even walking relatively slowly as she snacked along the way.

Rane seemed to have arrived a bit ahead of her as he had a table for them off to one side.

She felt a smile pull at the corners of her mouth as she saw him just finishing the set-up of a game of tafl.

He glanced up and saw her, waving her over.

She sat across from him, and he smiled. "I ordered you a spinach and sausage chef's special. I thought it would be a good start, and you can get whatever else you want after."

She opened her mouth to grumpily protest, but then she realized that that actually sounded pretty good. She shook her head and sighed. "Thank you, Rane. That sounds great."

He shrugged. "Defend or assault?"

"You know what? I feel like attacking right now."

He seemed to hesitate, tensing up for a moment before he simply shook his head and smiled, gesturing at the board. "Well then, after you."

They stayed at the restaurant until just before noon. Tala ordered enough food, often enough, that the servers didn't seem to mind the two of them dominating a table for hours on end.

When lunch was approaching, Rane needed to go do his daily training, and Tala wanted to go home to sleep for a bit.

That evening, she had her meeting with Master Simon and his family. After all, it was never good to approach such things while short on sleep.

* * *

Tala laughed so hard that she almost choked. *OH RUST!*

She covered her mouth to keep from spitting out her food.

Master Simon put his head in his hands with a groan, while his wife, Mistress Petra, hid a smile behind her hand.

The older two kids had looks of horror as they stared at the youngest, Metti.

The six of them sat around a table in Master Simon and Mistress Petra's home, with the dinner spread out before them.

Finally, Tala was able to get herself under control enough to respond. "No, little Metti. I am not trying to marry your father."

The little girl had a frown of confusion. "But Mama and Papa said that we might all move into your house. Why would we live with you if you aren't our mama?"

Tala smiled again and nodded. "That is a very reasonable question. I need some help around my place, and your parents were recommended for the position."

Metti opened her mouth, confusion still evident across her features, but her brother, Segis, covered her mouth with his hand from his chair beside her. "She means well."

Tala waved away the concern. "She's fine. How old are you, Metti?"

The little girl glared at her brother as he pulled his hand back. Then, she sat up straighter, clearly quite proud of herself. “I’m five.”

“Well, you are quite well spoken for a five-year-old.”

“I am, aren’t I?” Metti wiggled happily as she turned back to her food.

Master Simon groaned quietly again.

Tala just smiled, turning to regard Mistress Petra. “I have a brother a little older than her, and a sister a little younger.”

She felt a twinge of sadness and resolidified her resolve to go see her family. It had been nearly a year since she’d seen her siblings, and she hadn’t really let herself consider all that she’d missed in that time.

I’m going to see them as soon as I’m stabilized enough for the trip. Alat? Can you help me compose a message to them, letting them know when I’ll be able to come?

-Absolutely. They have been eagerly awaiting your visit, by the correspondence back and forth.-

Exactly, and now, we have a solid timeline to convey.

-Consider it done.-

Mistress Petra smiled in response. “I’m sure they are lovely. Do you get to see them, often?”

Tala barely kept herself from grimacing, but something must have shown, because the older woman’s eyes softened.

“It can be a great source of joy, reconnecting with family after a time apart.”

Tala was able to smile at that. “That is quite true.”

The remainder of the dinner was actually quite enjoyable, and they even provided Tala with a reasonably sufficient quantity of food, much to the children’s increasing awe.

After bellies were full, dessert was eaten, and conversation had wound down to a certain extent, Mistress Petra took the kids off to get ready for bed, and Master Simon led Tala to a sitting room.

"Do you need to help put the kids down? We can talk later."

"Oh, that's kind of you to offer." He smiled. "I usually help when I can, but they're a well-oiled machine these days. Petra is quite capable of watching over the little ones, and they do the rest themselves. In truth, they'll be up reading or working on personal study until it gets later."

"Even little Metti?"

"Well, she won't be studying. I've installed sound isolation scripts, otherwise you'd hear her practicing her singing." The man had an expression that was an almost perfect mix of joyful contentment and resignation. "She is… improving."

Tala chuckled. "Such are children."

Master Simon settled into his chair with a contented sigh as Tala sat across from him. "Indeed."

There was a small pause, and she decided to turn to the matter at hand. "So, what do you think about all this?"

"I'm honestly interested. I've done quite a bit of personal research into dimensional storage items, and I'd love the opportunity to study yours long-term and up close. I love cooking and baking, but I don't sell my end results, so there's only so much I can justify producing while I'm a practicing Mage."

Ahh, the blessings of form-maintaining inscriptions. "So, you're interested. What would you need for that interest to be enough?"

He nodded. “Honestly, it would mostly depend on what you would expect of us.”

That began the discussion in earnest. Tala had discussed what sort of duties she should arrange for an assistant family to take care of with both Lyn and Rane.

In the end, they came up with a potential list of duties for both Master Simon and Mistress Petra.

Mistress Petra had come back by that point, taking a seat next to her husband in a chair that she was clearly used to. She had added her thoughts as they discussed duties and the like, but mostly, she listened as they finalized the various aspects of the potential arrangement.

Tala had been concerned that one cook would tire of cooking the massive amounts of food that she often needed, so it was a decided boon that they both loved to cook and bake.

As it turned out, they both also liked to garden, and Mistress Petra had grown up in a farming family, specifically one that raised livestock of various varieties. She said that she’d always regretted not letting her older children experience what it was to raise up animals for sustenance.

For payment, Tala had to provide Archive access and tablets for the whole family so that the kids could continue their education. Additionally, she had to cover the cost of a visit to Bandfast once every six months for the whole family. The visit would be at least one week in length and at most three.

If that required travel time, they would be given that time off as well.

Certain special events could allow that trip to come earlier than otherwise, in essence using up the upcoming sojourn in the case where it was necessary to do so.

Then, obviously, she was providing them with food and board. Unfortunately, with basically everything in her sanctum imbued with magic for her consumption, that meant that they’d have to plant other things for the family, and she’d have to supplement those harvests.

Though, she wouldn't *dream* of taking any of Terry's pigs.

She gave an unconscious shudder at the very idea.

Finally, there was the actual salary.

As it turned out, Master Simon was happy with most of his compensation coming in the form of access to the inside of Kit and the impressed magics that made the arcane-added systems work.

His wife, while a Mage, used her magic as ancillary to her work as a wife and mother. Thus, it was also perfectly suited for Tala's needs. The two of them *loved* to cook—they emphasized that quite often—so the main thing that Tala needed was easily covered.

Between the two Mages and what they offered her, Tala agreed to two gold and forty silver per month.

I really commanded an insane *salary as a Dimensional Mage.*

-Well, danger pay factors in, and food and housing. Plus, don't forget that you're also paying for transportation for them back here twice a year. For five people? That's no small amount. Even if we get the teleportation inscriptions up and running, that will be a minimum of three gold each way, give or take.-

That's true enough. And if we use that method, we'll have to pay for reinscribing for the two adults.

-Though, that's a worst-case scenario. We'll be in this city pretty often, and the trips could easily line up.-

That's true, too. Tala sighed but nodded once again. "Tentatively agreed. We should meet up in my sanctum next week, so I can show you around, and we can make the final decision as to if this will be a good fit."

“That sounds excellent.”

Now that they’d discussed duty and pay, Mistress Petra cleared her throat. “Mistress Tala, if I may, what sort of living quarters do you have for us?”

Tala opened her mouth, then closed it. “Well. I have the room where my last adjunct stayed.” She frowned, trying to recall if she’d actually ever been into Thron’s room, situated on the other side of her library. “We will have to look at it, together, and we can commission some work to enlarge or modify it if you would like. There is no precipitation within, so even if the children wish to sleep beneath the stars, there wouldn’t be an issue. The temperature is moderate to promote the continued growth of the crops as well, so that’s not an issue either.”

The two looked at each other and shrugged. Master Simon was the one to respond. “It’s definitely worth having a look.”

Tala considered the idyllic setting of her sanctum from the perspective of young children and felt the need to add a few things. “Just so you know, it is a full ecosystem in there. Though there are no untamed apex predators, there are deer and other wild animals which can be aggressive if provoked. There is also open, flowing water in quite a few places.”

Master Simon’s eyes widened with obvious glee, while his wife’s narrowed as she frowned with concern.

He spoke first. “Just how large is your sanctum, Mistress?”

But she spoke at nearly the same time, “Why, under the stars, do you have such things in a dimensional space?”

Tala cleared her throat. “Well, Master Simon, the space is nearly three miles across. The footprint is roughly a circle, and its three-dimensional profile is that of an ellipsoid, at most a third as tall as it is across.”

Master Simon looked positively giddy, and he nodded to acknowledge her response.

Tala then turned to his wife, folding her hands in her lap and smiling reassuringly. “Mistress Petra, those things are in there to help make the space a fully functional, self-sustaining ecosystem, as I stated. Without a full breadth of life, it is harder to maintain in perpetuity. And I do mean in perpetuity. This system is meant to last for centuries, if not longer.”

Tala opened her mouth to continue but realized that she hadn’t actually told Mistress Petra that her space was expanded and outfitted by arcanes.

Now was *probably* not the time for such. Especially because Master Simon had likely already told his wife.

Still, I don’t want to rock the boat if he hasn’t told her, yet.

Instead, she decided to be a bit vague. “Those who outfitted it knew what they were doing, and they aim for extreme longevity of that which they create.”

Mistress Petra grunted but seemed somewhat mollified. Master Simon looked positively enraptured.

There wasn’t really much further to discuss, so Tala stood, causing the other two to rise as well. “Thank you for your hospitality, the wonderful meal, and for taking the time to discuss this with me.”

“Of course!” Master Simon gave a bow. “Thank you for considering us to assist you.”

Mistress Petra bowed as well. “We look forward to seeing your sanctum next week.”

Tala gave a shallow bow in return. “I look forward to it as well. Good night.”

Chapter: 33
Considering

Tala stepped out of Master Simon and Mistress Petra's modest house. It stood near the center of an affluent, residential block.

It seemed to be a great home in which to raise children.

She was rather pleased with how the evening had gone, if she were being honest.

They were a sweet family, and while Tala would prefer no one, she needed help.

The next best would be one, or at most two people, but it would be difficult to truly find people who would be so unattached.

She glanced back toward the house as she stepped from their very small front yard out onto the street.

It was a bit bigger than her own family home, but not very much. It was also set back a bit, hence the small area of front vegetation.

To be fair, they don't have an alchemy shop in it either. It was purely a residence, rather than being a mixed-use building.

-Just one more benefit of Magehood.-

Decidedly.

It was yet another beautiful winter evening, and Tala decided to focus outward and enjoy the walk back to Lyn's house.

Rest and recover. Sadly, her conviction didn't last for more than ten seconds.

-And get an improved sheath for Flow. You asked me to remind you about that.-

Right, that too… Should we merge it with the weapon?

Alat was about to respond, but Tala continued.

No, no, that's silly. We need to avoid permanent solutions to a temporary problem.

-Exactly.-

She realized she was focusing inward again and intentionally closed down her rampant thoughts so that she could enjoy the ambiance around her.

There was still a good number of people bustling about, but they were all moving relatively quickly. In all likelihood, their speed was aimed to get them home and out of the cold or to facilitate the rapid completion of whatever their current errand was, in order to head home as soon as possible afterward.

There are probably some people going to pubs, taverns, or restaurants to meet up with friends, too.

Snow had begun to fall once again, and Tala looked up toward the sky, closing her eyes and letting the flakes fall on her face.

She used her mirrored perspectives through her bloodstars to show her which way to go so that she didn't trip or run into anyone.

It sparked a bit of childish joy within her, and she was soon unconsciously grinning into the dark, cloudy sky.

Even taking her time, Tala still arrived at Lyn's home in less than an hour.

She wasn't quite ready to go inside. So, she sat off to one side on a little bench that she never really considered. It was tucked behind some bushes from the perspective of the street, parallel to the front walk but set a few feet away in the shadows of the surroundings.

The result was that Tala was hidden from the road, looking toward the short path to the house, simply able to gaze at a small patch of garden that she almost never considered, day to day.

There she stayed, content.

She didn't really get cold or sore.

She wasn't bored, though she didn't allow her mind to wander.

Tala simply sat, reveling in the stillness and peace of the moment at hand.

It was close to midnight when the front door opened, and Lyn walked out, seemingly heading out to the street.

When she was right in front of Tala, she squeaked and jumped back, landing facing Tala. "Tala? What are you doing out here?"

Tala shook herself out of her revery. "Hmm? Oh. I was just enjoying the evening."

"You're covered in snow."

She looked down at herself and saw that she was, indeed, dusted with newly fallen flakes. "This is hardly covered."

"Either way, you've clearly been out here for a while."

Tala shrugged. "It was peaceful, and I could use a bit more peace."

Lyn seemed to hesitate, considering. "Do you want to stay out here?"

"That's not necessary. Where are you off to at this hour?"

"I was going to see if I could see you coming, and if not, I was going to send you a message."

"Ahh. Well, I'm here."

"I can see that." A smile pulled at her lips. "Do you want to come inside?"

Tala shrugged again and pushed off her knees to rise to her feet. "Sure. Let's go."

The two women entered the comfortable, warm house.

As the door closed behind them, Tala locked it. “Did you really stay up, waiting for me?”

Lyn paused, then finished tucking her sandals into a small cubby off to one side. “No. I woke up and noticed that your sanctum door wasn’t in place in the hallway.”

“I’m sorry, Lyn. I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

The older woman shrugged. “You don’t make me. I choose to because I care about you.”

Tala smiled at that. “Thank you.”

Lyn narrowed her eyes. “Don’t go disappearing on me, again. I’ve even bought a personal Archive device, I’ll have you know. There is no reason you can’t keep me in the loop of your goings on.”

Tala huffed a laugh. “You really are trying to be my mom, aren’t you?”

Lyn turned and walked deeper into the house. “Well, someone has to look after you. You don’t have to go it alone, Tala, and you can’t be careless with yourself.”

“I know, I know. I’m not really in a place for a talking to, though.”

“Oh?” She settled into one of the chairs. “What are you in a place for?”

Tala thought for a moment before grunting and just asking, “What is the point of having children? I mean, I know the utility of children in general, but why would anyone want to choose to have them, specifically?” She groaned. “I’m not wording this well. I want children, eventually, but on some level, even that doesn’t make sense?” She rubbed her hands across her eyes. “Maybe, why would someone put having children before working for the betterment of society? Having children means you have to focus inward, on your own family, more than outward, at least for a time… I’m not saying this well. Do you know what I’m asking?”

Lyn chuckled. “I think I do, yeah, and I assume you aren’t asking about the motivation of those who feel genuine pleasure in the rearing of the next generation.”

“Yes, aside from them, yeah.” Tala knew of such people, but she believed that she wasn’t one.

Lyn quirked a smile. “Well, I’ll try not to think too deeply on why this is coming to mind.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll tell you what my mom told me.” There was a light of pride in the woman’s expression.

Tala sat down in another chair, leaning forward to listen with interest.

“Imagine that I am absolutely amazing and could contribute greatly to society with my time and energy. That is one hundred percent of what I am capable of.”

“Alright.”

“Now, imagine I have three children, and that I am a terrible mother. After years of raising them, they each are only capable of contributing to society at fifty percent of my capacity.”

Tala chuckled. “Alright.”

“Then, if I did nothing for the rest of my life, I would have contributed to society, indirectly, one hundred and fifty percent of my original capacity.”

She blinked at that, leaning back in thought.

But Lyn wasn’t done, “While I am raising the children, I am still doing other things for society as well. Additionally, as a Mage, once the children are out in the world, I can then get back to my full capacity without really having lost that much in the grand scheme of things. Even for mundanes, though, the incentives are heavily in favor of having children, if you think about it.”

“Wouldn’t that apply to men, too?”

“Of course?” Lyn frowned, clearly confused. “Why wouldn’t it?”

Tala grunted. *I suppose that makes sense…* “But couldn’t that be used to justify having as many children as you could possibly squeeze out?”

Lyn practically snorted. “Lovely image, that. But I suppose? For me, there’s the fact of diminishing returns. I also don’t feel particularly called to motherhood, though I know that I do want children one day. Even so, I can’t imagine hundreds of years of rearing one child after another, no matter how much it would arguably benefit society.”

“I can see that.”

“This isn’t a mandate, nor an argument to convince you to do something you aren’t willing to do otherwise. It is simply another way to think about something that we often take for granted.” She shrugged.

“Yeah…” That brought something to mind. “Lyn?”

“Hmmm?”

“Where does your family live? I can’t say I’ve ever really heard you talk about them, at least not much.”

Lyn briefly stiffened, but it passed quickly. “They aren’t around anymore.”

“A schism? Argument? Something like that? It sounds like you hold your mom in high regard.”

Her voice was soft as she responded, “No. Though, I’d give anything for it to be something so fixable.”

Tala hesitated, reconsidering the line of discussion. It was clearly something heavier than she’d really anticipated.

Lyn continued before Tala could change the subject, “I was one of the youngest, the pride of the family, the first potential Mage in a few generations. As a potential Mage, I was off at the Academy when our city began to wane.”

There was a long silence, and Tala allowed it to rest.

“They decided to leave Audel—the previous one, not the current one, obviously. My parents, my siblings, in-laws, nieces, nephews, everyone. To them, the dangers of a waning city just weren’t worth it. They paid extra to all be in a single caravan. Their reasoning was that they would all feel awful if one of the other caravans was lost, taking some of their family from them. This way, their fates were bound, and they only needed to make one roll of the dice. Unfortunately, they were unlucky.” Lyn shrugged slightly, water shimmering in her eyes even though it was clearly an old, well-known sadness. “No trace of their caravan was found. Nothing but churned earth and the scars of an intense battle.”

“Lyn… I… I don’t have words. I’m sorry that I didn’t know, that I didn’t ask about them sooner.”

Lyn shrugged again, waving Tala’s words away even as a few individual tears traced paths down her cheeks. “I still remember their faces, even though that should be difficult. I can hear their voices in my mind. It’s not like they talk to me, but I can imagine them so clearly.”

Tala stood, shifted a chair next to Lyn, and sat again, taking her hand in her own.

The two women sat in silence for long minutes as Lyn seemed to lose herself in memory.

Finally, the older Archon shook herself free of the reminiscence. “But, it’s been more than twenty years. The pain is mostly gone by this point.”

Tala huffed, reaching out with her free hand and wiping away one of the newer tears from her friend’s face. “That’s obviously not true.”

“Oh, I still miss them, Tala, but it’s not a raw wound. If I live a millennium, I’ll still miss them.” Lyn gave a sad smile. “But they loved me, and they knew I loved them. We had no silly arguments waiting to be resolved. We were at peace, just like they are now.”

Tala squeezed her friend’s hand. “I’m so glad. That is worth the world.”

Lyn nodded before huffing a laugh and pulling out a handkerchief to clean her cheeks and blow her nose. “It really is.”

Tala looked back at Lyn for a long moment before sighing. “I know. I’m heading to see my family as soon as my Refining settles.”

“Good.” Lyn reached out and squeezed Tala’s shoulder. “Love those you have, while you have them.”

They sat in silence a while longer.

Eventually, Lyn nodded and let out a long breath. “Well, that’s enough introspection for one night.” She smiled as she stood. “Are you feeling better? Whatever that was, it seemed to hit you pretty hard.”

Tala stood as well but glanced away. “Yeah, it did.”

“It didn’t hurt your magic, did it? Shouldn’t your inscriptions be keeping you in functional shape, even if they couldn’t directly expel whatever that was?”

“No, not hurt, but my magic is still settling.”

“After that thing with the door…” Lyn frowned in concern. “I know you’re in a bad way and need to Refine, but I didn’t know it was that bad.”

Tala blinked at her a few times, then colored. “I… I am Refined.”

Lyn’s eyes widened, and there was only a moment’s pause before power flowed through the woman’s magesight inscriptions. “Oh!” Her eyes widened further. “That’s amazing, Tala!”

Tala found herself grinning as Lyn gave her a huge hug. *I suppose it’s a mixed blessing that having the through-spike makes my magic obvious. I know I can suppress it, but I almost never think about it.*

-It doesn't harm you within human cities. You could start taking it off when you're in the wilds, though.-

Yeah, that's an interesting thought.

"I had no idea." Lyn lightly smacked Tala's shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me? Is that why you went to see Mistress Holly? Was it that easy? I won't say quick because you were there for nearly a day."

"Hold on, one question at a time." Tala felt a bit of Lyn's excitement infecting her.

"Is that what you did with Mistress Holly?"

Tala opened her mouth, then paused. *Will Lyn choose to Refine if she knows how painful it is?*

Was Tala willing to let her friend miss out on immortality because of fear of pain?

She was undoubtedly angry with Mistress Holly for hiding the extent of the pain, but in truth, when looking back, Mistress Holly had been explicit in what would happen. Tala had not asked about specifics of fallout or pain levels.

Could Mistress Holly have warned her? Yes.

Would it have helped?

Tala had to think about that.

No. For me, it would have made the pain so much worse. Really, for anyone it would have made it worse. If Tala had been told it would hurt, the very fact that she had in her mind that the working would be painful would have emphasized the painful nature of the spellform in her own mental framework, activating the spell.

And more pain would probably have killed me.

The pain she had experienced was simply a side effect of the working, not a part of her mental model of the process at all.

And once the working started, my change of mindset was irrelevant. All that mattered was that I didn't expect it to be overly painful when I began.

Even with the knowledge that she was frustrated at Mistress Holly for hiding things, Tala couldn't do differently. She internally shuddered. *There is no way I'm going to tell her something that would increase her pain. Not one bit.*

Lyn was patiently awaiting an answer, and Tala realized that she had only been standing there with her mouth open for a couple of seconds or so. "Sorry, sorry. Yes, Mistress Holly helped me Refine. It was difficult for me because of my particular circumstances." Tala smiled reassuringly. "From my understanding, your own Refining should be much easier, plus you can take your time, doing it over the course of multiple sessions rather than doing it all at once like I was forced to do."

Lyn cocked her head to the side. "Hmm… I can see that." She shrugged then. "But I'm barely Fused. It isn't a concern for the moment."

Tala grimaced. "I still can't believe all you had to do was read a book."

Lyn chuckled. "That is a gross oversimplification, but yes, I did have an easier time Fusing than many. Regardless, I'll likely start getting the pre-Refining inscriptions in a year or two. I'm in no rush."

"I suppose I can understand that. Your job isn't *that* dangerous."

"I do want to go see Alefast, Waning, though. That trip can be dangerous." She gave Tala a mischievous look. "You'll protect me on that trip, won't you, oh brave Mage Protector?"

Tala laughed, placing a hand over her heart. "Alas, I am retired. Though, for one such as you, I could be convinced to take up the sword once more."

“I wouldn’t dream of dragging you out of retirement.” Lyn shook her head with mock severity. “I suppose I will simply have to throw myself at the mercy of the burn wolves.”

Tala huffed. “Fine, fine. I’ll take you with me when I go to Alefast, and it won’t be too hard to take a short trip to bring you back after your visit.”

“Oh?” Lyn perked up. “You were already planning on going?”

“Yeah.” Tala shrugged. “I need time to consolidate everything that’s changed, and I want to see a Waning. I learned about them at the Academy, but I want to see one for myself. Toward that end, I think I’ll use Alefast, Waning, as a base of operations for a while.”

A different type of mischievous light entered the older woman’s eyes. “I hope you won’t be alone until the city finally fades. That would be… what? Twenty-one years without a *good friend* nearby?”

Tala shrugged. “I made a couple of friends there, and Rane will likely be in the area.”

“And what brought your mind to the thought of having children, again?”

She gave Lyn a withering look. “I don’t need any of your sass.”

Lyn laughed. “Fine. Come on, we both need sleep.” She glanced Tala’s way, then gave a mock, deep bow. “Refined Tala, please allow this lowly Fused to depart from your presence.”

Tala sighed, shaking her head. “You’re in rare form, aren’t you?”

Lyn gave a wan smile. “Well, it’s better than focusing on the negative.”

That sobered Tala a bit. “Yeah, I can understand that.” After a brief pause, Tala continued, “Are you going to be alright?”

“Yes. I’ve cried myself to sleep over their passing enough. Tonight won’t add to that count.”

“Lyn…”

“I’m alright, Tala. We all lose people, now or later. It’s the way of the world.”

“That doesn’t make it better.”

“But it does make it necessary to bear through, to look past, and to move on from.”

After a moment’s thought, Tala found herself nodding. “I suppose you’re right. So, you’re really going to be okay?”

“Yes.” Lyn rolled her eyes and smiled. “Sleep. You have a Refining to recover from, and knowing you, more besides added on top.”

Tala huffed a laugh. “You’re certainly not wrong. Alright. I’ll leave you be.”

The older woman smiled gratefully. “Good night, Tala.”

“Good night, Lyn.” Tala watched her friend walk down the hall and close her bedroom door.

We are surrounded by the wounds and scars of this world, aren’t we?

-It’s easy to forget at times, isn’t it?-

Far, far too easy.

Chapter: 34
Anti-Magical

Even though Tala didn't need much sleep, in general, she slept long and hard that night.

The talk with Lyn had been relieving but also particularly emotionally draining at the same time.

She finally awoke when the sun was well over the horizon of her sanctum, showing that it was midmorning, practically halfway to noon.

She didn't fade into wakefulness, instead coming fully to consciousness in an instant.

Tala found herself staring up at her ceiling, the light falling gently on the side of her face as she enjoyed the warmth of her artificial sun.

Her first thought was an odd one, as she *really* should have had it before. *Why did an arcane carve that pattern into my ceiling?*

-Good morning, Tala. I see you're feeling contemplative this morning.-

Morning, Alat. Do we have anything pressing today?

-Just eating, probably some exercise. Also contemplating ceilings, it seems.-

Those tasks sound quite doable. As to the carving, I guess I never really thought about it. Tala sat up, stretching as she sat on the edge of her bed before she stood.

-We could pursue Flow's new sheath today, too. Unless you plan a thoroughly exhaustive investigation.-

Tala decided to ignore Alat's poking. *Ahh, right. The sheath would be a good center point to our tasks, today.*

She moved through her stretching routine before doing a basic exercise set.

Tala felt like her morning was incomplete because she couldn't really do her magical or soul exercises.

Soon. It had obviously been weeks since she could really do those exercises, but it still felt *wrong* to leave them undone.

With her somewhat unsatisfying morning routines complete, she left her bedroom by way of the exit door. *You know, I wonder how much control I can give to someone like Master Simon?*

There had been tokens of access that the arcanes had given to her when they finished the outfitting of the space, but Thron had let her know that it hadn't actually seemed to change what he could do.

He hadn't been able to summon the door to himself or enact changes within the space.

He was never attacked, even when he entered through the welcoming bunker, though.

-That does seem to be their primary function, yeah.-

So, the tokens allowed safe passage through the defensive bunker in which the door to the outside usually waited. That was something.

Blessedly, Tala had to key each to a specific person, so even in a standard sanctum they wouldn't be too much of a weak point, since they couldn't be stolen and used by others.

Kit, though… Kit would likely just eat anyone that wasn't supposed to be there.

I'll have to have a talk with Kit about that… To be fair, none of the animals had gone missing, at least none that she could tell.

There was a total of ten tokens, and Tala remembered there being a template for the creation of more. Those she had, she could reset, but Thron hadn't actually given his back. *Huh… I did not think of that… at all.*

-Well, I'm glad we didn't give him a weapon of tremendous power or anything.-

Tala directed an internal glare at Alat. *You know, Mistress Ingrit hasn't commented on the concept weapon at all.*

-Oh, that's because I didn't include it in the memories I sent to her… I thought that's what we agreed?-

She blinked a few times. *Oh… huh. Did we?* She frowned. *Why didn't she notice the discrepancies?*

-Because there weren't any? All I did was remove the weapon being identified as a concept weapon, shifting the memory slightly to make it seamless. It was actually very much like what I did for Tali, though I had to complete the alterations to a much higher standard.-

And there were other things you didn't include or modified, like my dreams and other things of a purely personal nature.

-Precisely.-

Well, in either case, that's probably for the best that we didn't mention that weapon. Humans can't even use it, after all.

-Yeah, we don't want our bad decisions scrutinized, nor do we want to cause kill-squads to be sent after someone we parted with on at least reasonable terms.-

Tala grimaced. *You're just a bundle of fun this morning, aren't you?*

Alat simply sent the impression of a beaming smile.

I need breakfast before I deal with this kind of thing…

She had stepped out into Lyn's hallway within the obviously empty house.

Lyn and Kannis would be at work, and Rane knew better than to drop by without at least announcing himself via Archive message.

-Oh! About that—-

"Tala! There you are."

"*Gah!*" Tala jumped backward in surprise, jerked out of her inward-focused thoughts.

Rane had been sitting in one of the reading chairs, a book propped open on his lap. He stood and tucked the book away with a practiced motion. "Good morning."

Tala felt her eye twitch as she struggled to pull her mind back together.

-Rane communicated via the Archive nearly two hours ago, saying that he'd brought breakfast over, whenever you are ready to eat. He'll go train just before lunch, as usual.-

She took a deep breath and directed her fiercest internal glare at Alat.

The alternate interface simply returned the equivalent of a shrug. *-It wasn't important.-*

Until it was.

-Until it was,- Alat agreed.

Rane had obviously noticed Tala's surprise. "I apologize. I didn't mean to startle you. I can leave the food on the table and let you have the rest of the morning to yourself?"

Tala sighed, then shook her head. "Food? Yes. You leaving? Not now. But I would appreciate the opportunity to eat in peace, undisturbed."

She still wasn't awake, and it was too soon after waking for social interaction.

At least until I've had some food.

"Of course." He grinned, going over to the dining table and pulling out a small pile of breakfast sandwiches. They weren't *quite* as warm as they would have been had they been kept within Kit, but they still looked amazing.

"Thank you, Rane. That is incredibly kind. What do I owe you?"

He pulled an expression of long-suffering before shaking his head and told her. “Three silvers”—his eyes narrowed—“and that includes the ‘delivery fee.’”

Tala rolled her eyes but smiled in response. “Fine.”

-Transferred.-

Over the last weeks, Rane had been picking up food for her quite often, especially while she was recovering from Refining, and Tala did *not* like the idea of accepting charity.

Rane had refused repayment, not even telling her what the food had cost him. He had been staunch in his refusal until she began transferring a full gold for every meal.

Even then, he only grudgingly told her, and she’d started insisting on paying him for the time.

Was it a bit petty?

Yes, yes it was, but Tala didn’t want to build up any other debts now that she was free and clear.

-Right, because paying a Fused some silver for a personal food run is a fair wage. He’s but a common servant, running to and fro at your beck and call. Absolutely. Yes, no social credit being accrued, here.-

Hush, you. Yes, it’s kind of him. Yes, it’s nice. That is all.

Rane sat back down, pulling his book out once more and continuing to read, giving her the silence that she’d requested and had been expecting.

Now, food.

All told, the remainder of the morning passed quickly.

After Tala finished her breakfast, she and Rane played a quick game of tafl, but that was all the time they had before Rane left for his training.

Tala had taken the defensive position, and Rane ended up maneuvering her king into a wonderfully executed trap, sealing his victory.

This time. "Good game."

He smiled and gave a small nod of his head. "To you as well. I was sure that you saw the positioning and were just waiting to spring a counter-trap. Even so, I can't say I'm sorry to have been wrong."

She chuckled. "Not this time, I'm afraid."

They both preferred the hard-fought games, where it was anyone's game until the very last moments.

This time it had appeared that Tala was running away with the victory… until the trap manifested.

I need to be more watchful, I suppose.

-Are you sure you don't want me to help?-

Absolutely not… though it might be fun to play against you some time.

-Sure. That would be nice.-

She saw Rane to the door, and when it clicked shut, she simply stood there for a long minute.

Well, I need lunch, and we need to go by the Constructionists for a new sheath.

-Sheath first, so that they can get started, in case it takes a while?-

Sure. That would probably be wise.

Half an hour later, she stepped through the magical field which kept the guildhall warm, noted the scan of her magics, and heard the familiar *ding* resounding from the back.

"Mistress." The attendant rushed out with smooth steps, stopping two paces away and bowing deeply. "How can the Constructionists serve the Refined Archon?"

Tala frowned slightly, then realized that this was the first time she'd come in since her advancement.

That was hardly surprising, given her lack of need for new magical items, along with her physical state since, but she hadn't really considered that she'd be treated any differently.

-And you provided a lot *of insights into arcane artifact-craft to the Constructionists as a whole. If Mistress Ingrit's tallies are accurate, and they seem to be, then nearly every senior member of this guild, in every city, has acquired one or more of your memories. It isn't unreasonable that they'd have added special dispensations for you.-*

Well, there's one way to find out. "Do you know who I am?" She made sure to make her tone confusedly curious, rather than cutting or arrogant.

"Not specifically, Mistress, but we are notified when friends of the guild enter. Many do not wish their names to be known widely, so we get a generic alert that such an Archon has entered the building." He bowed again. "I meant no offense. Would you prefer I change the indicator?"

"No offense given. I think it is fine as it is, I was just curious."

He straightened, a relieved smile on his face. "Certainly, Mistress. How can I assist?"

"I wish to acquire a sparring sheath for my soul-bound weapon. This branch made one for me when the weapon was less powerful. It has seen some significant upgrades since then, and I am concerned that it will need something a bit more comprehensive when I get back to sparring in a few weeks."

"Absolutely. May I scan the weapon?" He pulled out a stone that positively blazed to Tala's magesight.

"Certainly." She drew Flow and held it out on her palm.

Magics from the stone passed through every part of the weapon as the attendant passed the stone over Flow, carefully keeping it from touching the knife.

After a brief moment, the attendant frowned. “Pardon the question, Mistress, but do you hold a part of the weapon within your body?”

She was almost irritated by the question, but she quickly realized that it could be critical. “Yes, at this moment.”

“Understood.” He bowed again, a professional smile firmly in place across his features. “While I do not need to scan you, the senior Constructionist who assists you will need to be aware of this added complication.”

“Certainly.”

He finished up the scan in short order and tucked the device away. “With that done, I can find which Archon would be best for this commission. Is there a timeframe in which you need it completed?”

“I would prefer within the next few weeks. Sooner would be preferred, but not required.”

There was obvious relief in the young man’s eyes. “That is certainly workable, Mistress. Have you acquired an Archive connection?”

“I have.”

“Then, we can reach out to you through the Archive when we have a Constructionist available to meet with you and begin the commission.”

Right, they scanned me when I came in. They have my aura-signature, and that would make it trivially easy to grant me access to a missive within the Archive. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

“Expect a message within the week. In the worst case, it will simply let you know that we are still searching. Even so, I do not expect that to be an issue.”

Tala smiled and gave a small bow. “As you say. Thank you. Good day.”

“Good day, Mistress.” He bowed much more deeply in return, and they parted ways.

* * *

It only took two days before Tala received a missive from the Constructionists, stating that an expert could meet with her that afternoon.

Thus, she returned to the guildhall, where she was greeted by the assistant on duty and led down a different set of side hallways than she’d ever traversed before.

They were constructed in the same manner and design, seemingly exactly like all the other hallways within the complex.

The only distinguishing characteristics were signs at the cross corridors that used symbols Tala was unfamiliar with.

Blessedly, it wasn’t actually that long of a walk before she was ushered into a smaller workshop, and the attendant bowed her goodbye.

Smaller, in this sense, meant roughly the size of Lyn’s entire house, rather than the merging rooms, which were often two or three times larger.

The sole occupant of the workshop waved over her shoulder and called out. “One moment, please, I am just finishing up.”

“Of course,” Tala replied amiably and took the brief moment to look around and take in the well-organized but cluttered space.

There were dozens of weapons in various stages of construction—and from the looks of it, deconstruction—on worktables and racks, each giving off various auras of power.

More interestingly, there seemed to be *heavily* magical tokens tied to each weapon, giving off slightly different auras to her magesight.

Each was clearly hooked into the city grid for power, but the magic they emitted, while flavored, was more akin to that coming from various Mages, rather than power designed to create a specific effect.

Are those… magical teabags?

-Really? That's the analogy you draw? They seem to be translators, changing the pure city power into a mimicry of that of the mages who first empowered each weapon.-

That… Well, she knew it was possible. That was what her through-spike did, in a sense. She'd just never considered this application of aura signature matching.

Along with the weapons, there were countless sheaths and materials that were clearly in various stages of progress toward being made into finished sheaths.

There were quite a few magical tools as well, seemingly for the working of the various materials from metal and stone to wood and cloth.

In all honesty, there was more on each table than Tala could easily identify with any rapidity, and the Archon who owned this space had finished up what she was doing and turned around.

"Greetings. Mistress Tala, I presume?"

"Yes." Tala smiled, giving a slight bow. She couldn't see the woman's aura at all.

"I am Mistress Airim."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mistress Airim."

“‘A pleasure,’ hmmm? Well, that’s kind of you to say, even if such flattery is not unexpected. You do come to ask me to create something for you, after all.” A happy twinkle sparkled in her eye. “I can see that you are at the beginning of Refined. Congratulations on that progress, whether it was recent or long ago.”

Tala saw a flicker as the woman allowed her own aura to show through for a moment. *Late Bound… That’s it? Really?*

“Was I correct in identifying your magesight inscriptions as always active?”

“I… Yes.” She found herself blinking in surprise. “You can see past my through-spike’s illusion?”

“Yes, Refined, but only within this space. I am heavily connected to my workshop, and here, I can see the true nature of things.” She smiled. “The effect is magnified the farther you come inside, which is why I am highlighting it now. If you don’t want to reveal hidden truths to me, I suggest you stay just inside the doorway.”

“That’s… Thank you for the honesty.” Now that it was mentioned, Tala could see that there was a magic in the air, hiding in plain sight due to its pervasiveness. More than that, the weaponry and sheaths toward the back of the space seemed, in general, more complex, magically speaking.

“Of course.” Mistress Airim waved the comment away. “It is only polite. Now, I understand you want a sparring sheath?”

“Yes.”

“May I see the weapon?”

Tala drew Flow and held it out, handle first.

Mistress Airim took the few steps forward and took the handle with respectful gentleness. “Bound to you, obviously.”

The Bound’s eyes widened.

“You have advanced three stages while it was bound to you.” She looked up. “You bound this weapon while still a Mage?”

Tala simply nodded in mute astonishment at the woman’s ability to discern such.

“Fascinating.” Mistress Airim turned and walked deeper into her spacious work area. “A limited, morphic weapon. Three forms. Merged with arcanous harvests, Leshkin weaponry—” Her head snapped up, and she spun to face Tala once again. “The void? What’s the matter with you?”

Tala opened her mouth to respond, but Mistress Airim was already paling.

“My apologies, my apologies. That was not appropriate.” She looked back down at the weapon, turned away, and walked deeper. “What is this?”

She seemed to have already forgotten her own outburst.

“There’s somehow a conceptual weight to the weapon. Was this passed down through your family?” But the question was obviously not directed at Tala.

“I could just tell—”

Mistress Airim held up a hand. “No, no. It is better that I learn it from the weapon without the taint of your perception.”

Tala shrugged and leaned against the wall, listening and waiting. She kept her focus on her magesight, trying to determine if the ambient magics were shifting, but they didn’t seem to be.

“No, this doesn’t have conceptual weight, not really. So, what is it?”

Mistress Airim was pacing side to side by this point.

“No… Really? It imparts an enhanced conceptual alteration?”

The woman seemed utterly baffled if her tone was any indication.

“Ownership? That’s a weighty concept, indeed, but it’s tied to a single element… iron?” She looked up at Tala. “You have an item that magically manipulates the concept of ownership… over iron.”

“Yes.” Tala smiled, feeling rather proud of herself and what she’d been able to bring about.

“Are you insane?” The woman did not sound impressed. In fact, she sounded genuinely concerned.

Tala blinked at that. “I… What?”

“Iron. It’s anti-magical.”

“I am aware, yes.”

Mistress Airim shook her head. “No, no, no. Do you know *why* it’s anti-magical?”

“Why?” Tala frowned. She’d never really considered that. “No? I can’t say that I do.”

“It’s fundamentally tied to the powers of reality.”

Tala felt her eyes go wide as *so* much clicked into place.

Well, rust…

-Oh… I see it now. No wonder Master Grediv was suspicious.-

Yeah, no joke.

Chapter: 35
I Do Try

Tala and Mistress Airim stood in silence for a long minute before Tala cleared her throat. "You know, I am not a reality Mage."

The Constructionist frowned. "Of course you aren't, Mistress. Reality and void-magic don't really mix. Well"—she laughed self-deprecatingly—"reality and *any* magic don't really mix."

"Then, what did you mean?"

"I meant, why have you exposed yourself to the powers of reality?"

"I didn't really have a choice." Tala didn't elaborate. Part of her wanted to, but anything short of a full retelling would create more questions than it answered, and she had no interest in imparting such, even if Mistress Airim was interested in hearing it.

After a moment's pause, Mistress Airim simply nodded, clearly understanding that Tala wasn't going to say any more. "Very well. I can see that you aren't *really* influenced by reality." She snorted a soft chuckle. "I, of course, mean that in the best of ways. Let's finish the analysis."

-*Hey, that was a good one. You should remember it for later.*-

Tala simply sighed, not really interested in laughing at the moment.

The Bound nodded to herself, focused on Flow once more. "Bound and bound and overlaid and merged." She looked at Tala. "Part of the weapon is within your body as well?"

"…All my iron."

“Oh.” The woman hesitated, then her eyes widened. “Oh! Oh… oh, my. That sounds like…” Her eyes suddenly narrowed. “I don’t mean to pry, but did you somehow find the corpse of a dasgannach?”

“I… No? Are they even special after they die?” *I have the gold one in Kit, somewhere…*

-No, you left that behind.-

Involuntarily…

Mistress Airim was obviously unaware of Tala’s inner griping, so she simply answered, “I’ve never seen one myself, but I imagine it would retain some magic.”

“I suppose… but we’re off topic. Is the ‘what’ that important?”

She made a non-committal noise. “For this? Probably not. For you? Undoubtedly. I hope you have some *very* knowledgeable mentors, whatever caused this tangle.”

“Is it that bad?”

“A well-knit sweater can be called a tangle, Mistress. This makes that look like a child’s drawing beside an ancient masterpiece. It was not meant derisively.”

“Oh… so, is it good?”

“Absolutely! If you can make it work for you, and it seems like you can. At least you’re still alive, so that’s something.”

Tala huffed a laugh. “I suppose that’s true enough.”

Mistress Airim looked back down at Flow. “I think I’ve sussed out most of what I need, here. It really is a fascinating weapon you’ve nurtured, Mistress.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled. “The fact that this beauty will need a morphic sheath actually makes the whole process easier on us both, as I don’t need to keep your weapon with me for the construction, and I’m not constrained based on size.”

“That’s good to know.” Tala could understand how having the sheath need to reshape would give a lot more flexibility in the original construction. *I hadn’t actually considered that as a positive.*

“So, what timeframe do you need this by?”

Tala shrugged. “I can’t spar for another couple of weeks, so I don’t *need* it before then. Even so, I’d prefer it sooner rather than later.”

“So not a rush job, but not a ‘take my time’ project either?”

She shrugged again. “That was my thinking, yes.”

“Alright.” Mistress Airim nodded, mostly to herself, as she continued to contemplate.

“So, you can do it?”

She gave Tala an odd look. “Of course.”

The woman’s instant assurance made Tala a bit nervous, so she asked another question to verify a key point, “Will you be able to block the conceptual manipulation?”

The woman barked a laugh. “No, not at all, but for your purposes, yes.”

Tala frowned. “That makes no sense.”

“Oh, but it does.” The Constructionist grinned. “Nothing that I know of could block this conceptual manipulation if it tried to enact. What I would *normally* do—if such an insane project had come across my worktable before—is add a layer of iron, protected between two layers of the sheath, sealing the conceptual magics away. You can probably guess how well that would work in this case.”

“Ahh… I see.”

“Exactly. Your weapon would claim the iron, and it would cease to be effective almost immediately.” She hesitated. “Most likely. In any case, I wouldn’t trust it in the slightest, as it would either fail instantly or be unnecessary.”

Tala grimaced. “So, that’s just a no.” *Well, that’s frustrating.*

“It is, but your real purpose in asking, I assume, is to ensure that you don’t harm your sparring partners, correct?”

“That’s right.” She felt a bit of hope returning. She did *not* want to have to spar without Flow.

“Then, that isn’t a concern. Your weapon’s conceptual nonsense should only act on that which you cut—or intend to cut and contact… maybe. It might not be enacted in that second case.” Mistress Airim hesitated, narrowing her eyes in thought. “It might also work if you simply… no, no. Forget that. The manipulation of ownership is decidedly tied to what is cut.”

And I can manipulate iron that I own, now.

-That’s what it seems like, yeah.-

“Alright, I think I understand. So, just having *any* sheath over it will protect against the conceptual danger?”

“Well, any effective sheath? Yes. Remember, though, this weapon is still growing into your new advancement. I wouldn’t trust a mundane sheath, nor any made for you before you were Fused. I am obviously biased, but that is my professional opinion. Anything weaker will risk shattering under the magical weight of your strikes.”

“Good to know. I assumed as much, actually.” Tala bit her lip in thought. “What will be the implications for the portion of the weapon in my body?”

“Well, as long as you don’t somehow turn the iron in your body into a cutting or piercing… something, you should be fine?”

Tala opened her mouth, then closed it, frowning. *Oh… I did not consider that.*

“You can actually do that?” The woman’s eyes widened slightly, but then she shook her head. “Of course you can.” She sighed. “I don’t know that I have a solution for you, there.”

“No suggestions at all?”

“Well, if you can find a way to keep the attacks sheathed? It won’t blunt the hits, like the sheath I’ll be making for this lovely weapon, but it would keep the concept of ownership from being altered.”

I could maybe add a layer of the white steel over anything I try to create with the iron? It’s not like I’ll be throwing my iron around. Tala shuddered internally at the very idea of losing another bit of metal. *Though, I suppose it will just vanish, now, rather than being severed. So, that’s a plus?*

-Definitely a plus.-

Tala nodded. “Alright. I think I can make that work.” A thought came to her, and she was suddenly unsure. “Mistress Airim?”

“Yes?” The Constructionist seemed to hear the uncertainty in Tala’s voice. “What did you just think of?”

“How can you make a sheath capable of containing a weapon above your advancement?”

Mistress Airim snorted. “That’s like asking a tailor: ‘You’re short, how can you make clothes for people taller than you?’”

Tala opened her mouth, then closed it, tilting her head to one side. “Those aren’t the same… are they?”

“Well, I’m not going to be using the sheath myself. You’re the one who will be powering it; well, your weapon will, anyway. I just need to make the magics capable of operating under that level of power, just like a tailor making a bigger set of clothing.”

“Oh… I guess that makes sense, I suppose.” Tala cleared her throat. “So, what does it look like to you, time wise?”

“I can fit it in over the next week.”

“That’s very workable, thank you. What will this cost?”

“A baseline sparring sheath for a bound weapon would be ten silver. Double that for a morphic sheath, unless it is for a Paragon or above, in which case double it if it *isn’t* a morphic sheath—those things are incredibly complicated and fitting into a small space is more expensive and difficult than just making a morphic sheath.” Mistress Airim seemed to realize she was rambling because she paused, cleared her throat, and continued back on the matter at hand. “Now, increase that cost by a factor of ten per advancement, so that’s an increase of one hundred times in this case. So, ten times two, times one hundred. That’s two thousand silver, which is twenty gold?” She thought for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, I can do this for twenty gold.”

Tala considered the price and offered item for a moment before she finally agreed. It was stunningly expensive, but honestly, it was less than she’d feared it might be. “Would there be any negative from making it for a higher advancement?” *That would be only five times the price, and the result would be a bit future-proof. Better than buying this now, then having to buy the more expensive one later.*

Mistress Airim hesitated. “As the sheaths I make are designed to mesh with the weapon, the strain will fall mainly on the weapon, but you will still bear the magical load. Unless you have a

rusting insane throughput, I'd say absolutely not. Even if you do, is that really where you want so much of your power going?"

Tala thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. "No, you're right. I'll match the grade."

"That does seem wiser. You should be fine for early Paragon usage as well, unless you *really* hate your sparring partner and plan on putting a truly insane amount of power behind your attacks against them."

Tala huffed a laugh. "I suppose that makes sense. Is an Archive transfer acceptable, or do you need hard coinage?"

"Archive transfer is fine. Let me get a contract all set."

Mistress Airim walked to a side table and picked up a slate. After a moment of manipulation, she brought it over to Tala, the contents now a simple contract of creation as described, for the agreed-to price.

This specific contract would hold the funds in escrow until the item was delivered or the time elapsed, in this case two weeks to give a buffer for unforeseen circumstances.

They both confirmed the agreement, causing the slate's surface to shift to a green stone for just a moment.

Mistress Airim bowed, a smile plain on her face. "Thank you for your time and patronage, Mistress Tala."

"Thank *you* for fitting in my project." Tala bowed in turn and left.

Mistress Airim waved her out with a smile, and Tala closed the door behind herself.

With her near perfect memory, Tala walked out through the mazelike system of hallways without issue.

She thanked the attendants in their side room as she passed by and walked back out into the city streets.

You know, as nice as this is…?

-Yes?-

Simply being *in a city is getting really old…*

-You've gotten too used to danger and adventure, it seems.-

Is that a bad thing?

-Only if it causes you to make foolish choices. Remember, many people spend their whole lives trying to achieve what you have, now. That doesn't mean you have to like it or settle, but try to see it for the value this life has, even if just to others.-

Tala only grunted.

A couple of minutes passed as she walked before she broached a new topic. *I think I want to go to Marliweather on my own.*

-Not with a caravan or any travel group?-

No. Once I'm fully settled, I'll be fine, and I can go faster, too.

-That should work. Terry would probably like a romp in the wilds, too.-

Less than three weeks, and I'll be set.

-Beat up Rane before you go?-

Tala chuckled at that. *He's a squirrelly one in the ring, but I think I can pin him down.*

-You'll finally go see the Guards before you're on your way?-

She grimaced. *Yeah… I really should visit them…*

-You really should.-

Tala's thoughts were interrupted by a man who was walking in the same direction as her, having just turned to walk parallel, coming from a side street.

He didn't address her. In fact, he seemed to be utterly engrossed in the book he was carrying.

Besides, he was a good ten feet away.

What drew her attention was the fact that he was humming and singing to himself, snapping his free hand to the beat of the song.

Tala didn't really know why that drew her attention to that man in particular; people often made unconscious sounds when thinking, and with her enhanced senses, she heard far more of it than she'd ever realized was possible.

Even so, something had Tala on edge, so she paid attention by way of a mirrored perspective.

Maybe it's the environment? The feeling of oddity was *building before he arrived.*

-Could be. You're just focusing on him because he stands out in a situation that already has you on edge.-

Maybe…

The young-looking man occasionally pointed in random directions in conjunction with the lyrics sung by whatever minstrel he was mimicking.

Tala felt a sinking feeling she couldn't explain as he sang the next verse.

"No matter where you hide, I'll find you, you, you. I see what you really are and that's the truth, truth, truth."

She didn't have time to ponder the awful rhyme, because he pointed straight at a nearby building seemingly at random.

As he uttered the last words and pointed, something seemed to *click* in the world around them, and Tala *immediately* recognized the feeling: magical taps on her mind, now that she was focused on that building.

Tala's eyes widened in dawning alarm as the rhythm of magical taps changed, speeding up and becoming more focused on her.

The young man had already moved on with his singing, clearly not actually focused on the magical creature that he'd accidently drawn her attention to.

It tried to invade her mind and push her attention away, but it was weak, and she held her concentration and resisted with basically no effort.

What is this? A syphon for ants? Surely, no mundane would actually fall to this weak power. It had to be directed toward animals or insects.

-*No, you've just gotten a lot sturdier, mentally.*-

It was then that two small eyes opened, high up on the walls of the little shop. They looked around, searching, and stopped to stare directly at her.

Oh… that's a syphon, and I stared at it too long, so it knows that I know it's there. What were the chances of that happening?

Before an answer presented itself, the street *exploded* with power as tendrils shot out in all directions, knocking people from their feet.

Only Tala and the odd man managed to keep their balance.

Tala drew Flow and bisected a flailing syphon appendage down the length, sweeping her weapon to the side to cut it off completely, even as the blood around her surrendered its iron to her weapon.

Thick, clear liquid sloshed onto the ground around her.

Wow, that was quite effective, actually. The single attack seemed to have drained a disproportionate amount of energy from the young syphon as well.

In the same second, the man drew and slammed a mace into the attack that had been sent his way, resulting in a destroyed syphon tendril with gore and blood showering the street.

The guy looked around, seeming a bit aghast. “Oh… oops.”

Tala glanced his way. “Oops? You didn’t expect the blood? Have you never fought before?”

He glanced back. “Well, of course I expected the gore. I hunt all the time. I just didn’t think about coating the mundanes.” His face scrunched briefly before he just shrugged.

They continued deflecting and cutting apart attacks as his rapid-fire words just kept coming.

“Little known fact, though: syphon blood is good for your skin. So, they should be fine. Better than fine, actually.”

Tala blinked at him a few times. “What? Why does that matter?”

They jumped away as more attacks slammed down. Each of them snatched up a prone pedestrian, moving them from the path of impacts.

Now is hardly the time for questions, Tala. Get down to business. “I’m Tala. Clear the civilians. I’ll keep it occupied.”

“Pavrimax. I can help!”

“Getting them to safety is a help. You can fight after.”

Pavrimax grimaced briefly, then nodded decisively. “Fine!”

The syphon was barely orange to Tala’s magesight, now that it had unveiled itself. Even so, it was physically powerful, and she really shouldn’t let herself be harmed, bodily.

Well, stab to gain ownership, eh?

-Tala? I don’t think—-

Tala didn't let Alat finish.

In a single motion, she powered Flow into the form of a sword and threw it with all her might into the syphon-building's center, just a half-dozen yards away.

The blade whirled in sharp circles, slashing deeply through the outer reaches of the beast to stick firmly near the center.

As the blade embedded into the creature, Tala threw her magical weight behind a newer aspect of the magics that she found within her soul-bound weapon.

Unfortunately, it did nothing special, mainly because her efforts were rebuffed.

The claiming of iron wasn't a question of magical weight, at least not in a way that she could enhance.

Even so, she could feel iron being claimed from the beast's ichor by the second, and the whole building shuddered, seemingly pulling in on itself.

Clear liquid was streaming out of the slashes that Flow had made before landing, and Tala could *feel* her power overcoming the vastly lower magics of the magical parasite.

The tendrils of the syphon were still flailing about, but they now lacked power, bouncing off buildings, the street, and even mundanes who were still trying to get farther away.

The hits to buildings caused rumblings but no cracks.

The impacts with the road sent up plumes of snow but didn't upset the pavement.

Even the people who were hit only stumbled, most not even falling to the ground.

Pavrimax came sliding back through the slush, taking up a runner's stance, seemingly about to lunge at the building.

"Stop." Tala held up her hand. "It's dying. Don't go in where it has more strength left to use against you."

“But there are people inside.”

Tala frowned, taking on a mindset *close* to the one she used as an Eskau. “I don’t see anyone, nor do I hear them. Did you see anyone, and could they have been illusions?”

He shrugged. “It’s more a hunch.”

Tala opened her mouth to say more, but the man, the Archon, was already gone in a burst of power.

Immaterial Creator?

-Or Guide. Hard to tell, but I’d say momentum or kinetic energy focused, outwardly aspected.-

Yeah, clearly.

Master Pavrimax slammed through the remaining walls, eliciting a subdued roar of outrage from the struggling beast.

To her surprise, Tala heard a few exclamations of overwhelmed relief before the Archon blasted back out, carrying three precariously balanced people.

As he jerked to a halt beside Tala, the people went tumbling away, and Tala heard some pops and *cracks,* which might have been bones breaking. This elicited more groans from the three people.

“One more!” Master Pavrimax vanished once again, even faster this time, and returned with a man who also tumbled from the Archon’s arms to land in a heap with the others.

There were ongoing whimpers of pain from all four.

Tala turned a confused glare on the man. “Why weren’t you more careful? Couldn’t you have—”

The syphon let out a last pitiful gasp and crumpled in on itself, utterly crushing everything still within the building.

She hesitated only a moment before letting out a sigh and shaking her head. “Ahh. Well, good job, I suppose?”

“Thank you, Mistress Tala. I do try.”

Chapter: 36
Expensive Food

Tala's magesight confirmed that, while power was still flowing from the body of the syphon, it was dead.

The threat addressed, she finally had a moment to really take a look at Master Pavrimax, using the mirrored perspective from the base of her skull.

The strange Archon—who had inadvertently brought this about—was dripping blood from his myriad small cuts, but even so, his focus was moving toward those he'd saved.

While she did examine the odd Archon more closely, she walked forward, intending to grab the entirety of the syphon's corpse to feed to Kit. *These things are rather great Kit-ty food.*

She chuckled at her own joke, and Alat groaned.

Her mirrored perspective had a lot to show her as it seemed that Master Pavrimax was an even more interesting character than she'd realized.

First of all, he already had a book in hand once again, somehow keeping it clean despite the dust, snow, and blood all around. He kept it out, even as he knelt beside the four whom he'd hurt as he pulled them from the syphon.

Can't really fault him for the results. I don't know that I could have moved fast enough to save them, even if I had sensed them.

-Yeah, a few broken bones are better than death.-

Tala frowned as she considered. *Why didn't I sense them?*

-*Well, you did. At least you heard them* and *noticed other indications, but nothing stood out among everything else. We have great senses, but that doesn't mean we automatically, instantly know exactly what we're sensing.*-

I suppose… She turned her attention back to the Archon as she neared the now-empty alleyway.

Master Pavrimax was of average height and very slender. As a Mage, he was obviously not fat, but his frame was barely in the healthy range on the other extreme.

He didn't look stick-like, instead showing some muscle, but he wasn't bulky by *any* stretch of the imagination.

Tala had caught a light brown, almost caramel color to his eyes, and his wavy, dark brown hair indicated that his inscriber used Mistress Holly's needles.

She hadn't noted it in the moment, but when she looked back on the short fight, his mace had looked *almost* like it was carved of emerald.

-*Doesn't look quite right for that.*-

The mace now hung at his belt when it hadn't been visible before the engagement.

-*It's wise of him to keep his weapon ready for further issues, though they are unlikely because, well, this is Bandfast.*-

True enough.

Tala took Kit off of her belt and dropped the pouch on the ground just beside the edge of the building. "Eat up, buddy."

The pouch opened, the yawning blackness expanding under the building, somehow altering dimensionality to get fully under the parts that it maneuvered around.

There were no visible teeth, though Tala felt like they wouldn't have been out of place.

Instead, there was simply a blackness that led Tala to believe that it was an opening into somewhere deep within Kit, under the ground, in the bedrock of the sanctum.

All the better to digest you with, my dear.

-That's pretty dark, Tala.-

Exactly. I can't see anything in there.

-You know what I mean.-

When Kit had opened under around a quarter of the dead beast, it started to collapse into the hole, dragging the rest inside.

Kit contracted around the rest of the remains as they slithered down in, leaving the pouch sitting at her feet once more, in front of an empty alley.

It was closed and utterly still, magically speaking. All that was going on within was in the separate dimensional space.

Tala looked closer at the alley, shaking her head. *I forget that the syphons can manipulate dimensionality, too. It seemed* much *bigger than that alley would have allowed.*

-Yeah, it seems like it expanded the space to make a shop facade fit in more naturally.-

"Good job, Kit." She picked up the pouch and hung it from her belt, giving Kit a comforting pat.

Kit did not respond.

Tala was about to turn back around when something odd happened. The perspective she had watching Master Pavrimax almost seemed to hitch, or that was how it seemed, at least.

One moment, the Archon was kneeling beside those he was helping, alone as he worked, and the next moment, a black cat was sitting in his shadow, licking its paw and staring straight at her bloodstar with too-intelligent, caramel-colored eyes.

Tala spun, locking her own eyes on the cat.

It had a heavy aura, which was obviously connected with Master Pavrimax's.

The little beast's magic had *deep* connections to shadow and dimensionality, making its appearance make a lot of sense.

Does it live in his shadow?

-Could be. It seems to be an actual familiar. Is that right? Those are at least a bit rare. I don't know that we've actually come across any, at least not that we've noticed.-

Tala walked over, and Master Pavrimax glanced her way. "Good, you're done. Do you have any external healing scripts?"

"I do not, but the city defenders should be here soon."

"We are here," a voice came from behind her, along with a Refined aura that gently blanketed the area, seemingly calming the mundanes who had scrambled away.

That's a use of my aura that I've never even tried to master.

-Well, to be fair, that aura has defensive, healing, and perceptual magics as fundamental parts of it. I'm sure all of those things feel nice when people are exposed to them.-

Tala sighed. *Where I have gravity, selfish-healing, and death?*

-I wouldn't put it that way, but you aren't wrong.-

Her mirrored perspective had seen the man arrive just as he spoke, indicating that he'd been able to perceive the area before he arrived. *You know, I bet the city's grid somehow facilitates their movement. It's probably expensive, though, so they don't use it unless required.*

-They probably have some sort of tiered system, too. They appeared immediately when the arcane stepped out of Kit, but they've had slower responses to other threats.-

Yeah, that makes sense. Master Grediv had implied that she should be able to move quickly, once she Refined, and it hadn't *sounded* like it was tied to a city's grid, but she'd have to ask him to learn more. *I could ask Mistress Holly, too, but I might just get myself stuck in a wall.*

Alat huffed in response to that, not deigning to respond.

Besides the Refined man, there were another half-dozen Archons who were immediately spreading out to the surrounding mundanes, checking for injuries and treating what minor scrapes and sprains there were.

Two went toward the four more damaged rescuees that Master Pavrimax had saved before the syphon collapsed. One of those placed a hand on Master Pavrimax's shoulder, and the Archon's cuts and scrapes closed almost too quickly to watch.

The man who had spoken already glanced toward the alley briefly then focused on Tala. "Mistress. I am Gerard. Is there any further threat that you are aware of?"

Tala shook her head. "No, Master Gerard. I believe that the young syphon was the only threat here."

"And you have disposed of the remains?"

"I have."

Master Gerard frowned slightly, waving over Master Pavrimax.

The young man came over—seemingly happy to leave his charges in the care of another—and stood beside Tala, his cat jumping up and landing on his shoulder with ease. The cat continued to stare at Tala without breaking its gaze.

"By our estimation, this Master contributed at least ten percent to the effective response to the situation. He is entitled to compensation. Since you have harvested the results, yourself, that requires you to buy out his portion."

Tala grunted, grimaced, sighed, and nodded. “Very well.”

Master Pavrimax held up a finger. “Usually in this situation, there would be a lottery between you and me, with you having nine in ten chances to claim the full bounty, as I did not contribute sufficiently for a guaranteed dispensation. In all likelihood, you would have received all that you took, regardless.”

She blinked at him a few times. “Is that… supposed to be helpful?”

“I’ve no idea what’s helpful to you, but it is interesting.” He scratched his chin with his free hand, while the other maintained hold on his book. “We could do the lottery now? If you win, nothing is owed. If I do, the full value is paid.”

Tala frowned, turning to the city defender. “Master Gerard, what is the value of a Fused-level syphon?”

“One hundred gold.” His answer was immediate, and Tala wasn’t sure how she felt about the regularity implied by such quickly recited knowledge.

One hundred gold was still a lot of money for her as well; her eye twitched. *There is absolutely no way I’m paying out one hundred gold.*

-Yeah, if something is bad for you, a ten percent chance happens half of the time.-

Tala smiled ruefully. *And if it’s good for you, a fifty percent chance might occur one time in ten.*

-Precisely.-

She shook her head. “I’ll pay out the percentage.”

Master Pavrimax shrugged. “As you wish.”

“Is an Archival transfer acceptable?”

He tilted his head with interest. “Ahh, Refined, right. So, you’ve availed yourself of the standard Archive connection?”

“Something like that…” She shrugged.

“Then that is acceptable.” After a moment’s pause, a grin spread across his face. “Did you know that the Archive is, in fact, *not* free to operate?”

Tala hesitated. “What?” She shook her head. “I mean, I suppose that’s obvious. It takes magic to empower access, which is, in a sense, a payment.”

“Oh, I mean more than that.”

Alat transferred the money, and a clip on the man’s belt let out a single chime, prompting him to look down at it.

Master Pavrimax touched the item, and his eyes unfocused for a moment before he nodded. “Thank you, funds received. But what I meant was: of the power we send out toward the Archive, only ninety-nine percent actually affects the changes within that cognitive space, even accounting for Mage inefficiency. Moreover, every bit of information stored there has an accessor that most don’t consider.”

-*What now?*-

Tala turned her full attention to the man. “What now?”

Master Gerard shook his head. “I’ll leave you to your discussion. I’ll see to the fallout, here.”

She glanced his way, smiled, and bowed slightly. “Thank you, Master Gerard. Take care.”

“You as well.”

Master Pavrimax bowed to the departing Refined as well, before turning back to Tala. “Think about it. Everything stored in the Archive can be modified and accessed”—he paused for dramatic effect—“by the Archive itself.”

Her eye twitched again, violently. “That’s…” She rubbed her face with her hands. “That’s like saying a locked box isn’t perfectly secure because the *box* has access to the contents.”

“Precisely! I knew you’d understand.”

She closed her eyes for a long moment. *What the actual rust?*

-Well, I suppose the point is that we all assume the Archive is inert, just like a locked box. But what if the locked box is, in fact, a syphon or one of its carnivorous cousins? Then this distinction would be very *important.-*

So, his point is: what if the Archive is sentient or even sapient?

-Possibly.-

Tala sighed, opening her eyes to find Master Pavrimax grinning at her.

He spoke as soon as they made eye contact, “Fascinating, right? What does it take to develop intelligence? Information processing and time!”

So, we guessed right on his meaning. Still, she shook her head. “I’m pretty sure it takes more than that.”

He nodded, tapping the side of his nose. “So, you subscribe to the soul theory of sapience?”

“What?”

-Nothing without a soul can be sapient. It is the soul which changes a thing from a reactor to an actor within the web of causality that makes up reality.-

“Oh. I guess so?”

“That is a reasonable line of thought, I suppose.” He glanced around. “But this is no place for a true discussion. Shall we away, to find our repast and enlighten each other on the mysteries of the universe?”

“What?”

He gave her a longsuffering look. “Do you want to eat and talk about fun thought experiments?”

Tala hesitated, but honestly, she felt like she needed *some* sort of change. The fight with the syphon had only highlighted how much she was beginning to feel caged. *Worth a try, I suppose.* “You know what? Sure. Let’s chat.”

Either way, I get food and learn some odd bits of information.

In the end, the meal was interesting enough.

Master Pavrimax was full of esoteric facts and a willingness to share them.

His mace had seemed to shift to a ruby hue when they had entered the eatery, before he put the weapon away. Tala didn’t want to pry, though, so she didn’t pursue the topic.

Thus, while she learned lots of odd facts about everything from shoe construction and spice availability, to utensil evolution and the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow, she didn’t really learn much about the man, himself.

That was fine. They simply shared the meal and parted ways as temporary acquaintances.

They might cross paths again, but only time would tell.

Tala passed by the place where the syphon had been slain barely two hours after the incident, and there was no remaining evidence of the short fight.

They really are good at keeping these things contained.

-Yeah, as safe as they make the cities, there are still some truly horrifying dangers.-

Isn’t that the truth…

It was mid-afternoon by the time she got back to Lyn’s house, which she found blessedly empty.

The short fight had left her with a *hunger* that food couldn't satisfy, and the time since had just seen that hunger grow, despite the meal with Master Pavrimax.

She'd gone just more than two months since her last real fight, and that had been with the Leshkin as she had rampaged her way through the forest to get home.

-It was actually precisely two months as of yesterday.-

Huh, really? She thought about it and was instantly able to confirm. *That's a long time…*

-To not have killed anything? I suppose so… for you.-

Tala grimaced. *That's not really a charitable way of wording it. I meant that that's a long time to go without sparring or fighting at all.*

-Sure. That, too.-

She sighed, pulling out the magic nest in order to occupy her over-hyped mind.

Her body felt like running a thousand miles, but she stretched instead, slowly calming her twitchy muscles.

Soon. We'll be able to test ourselves again soon.

She was exceptionally glad that no one was around, because she was having much more difficulty than usual with the magic nest.

Rane would be absolutely destroying me right now if he was here…

She'd been getting better and better with the magic nest as well, unraveling it nearly half-way with a fair degree of consistency.

At the moment, she kept losing focus around the one-quarter mark.

Finally, she growled and put the thing away in Kit.

-We could spar?-

Tala huffed a laugh but smiled. They had been figment sparring a lot of late, and she quite enjoyed it. Even so, Tala didn't feel up for the mental strain that came afterward for both herself and Alat. *Not right now. Maybe this evening, before we sleep?*

-Or when you calm your mind a bit?-

Maybe.

Tala turned her mind entirely to dynamic stretches, moving through increasingly complicated and convoluted motions to expand and strengthen her movements.

Even so, her thoughts were still running rampant despite her best efforts.

While the stretching occupied and calmed her physically, her mind did its part and was still all over the place and in need of extra distraction.

Toward that end, Alat presented Tala with the next book in her queue, and Tala began to read.

In that way, she passed the remainder of the afternoon until Lyn and Kannis got home from work.

When the two women got home, Tala met them in the entryway. "Out! Let's go. Dinner's on me."

The two had actually looked a bit bedraggled, but they both perked up at Tala's offer. Lyn was the first to respond. "Oh? What's the occasion?"

"I killed a syphon today, and I need to get out of this house for a bit."

"You what?" Lyn immediately looked toward where the massive, powerful syphon had set up shop more than a year ago.

"No, not one like that. This was practically a baby, just in the Fused range."

Lyn gave Tala an unamused look.

Right… she's Fused.

Kannis cleared her throat. “What’s a syphon? I don’t think I’ve heard of such a creature.”

Lyn turned to her mageling with a puzzled frown. “Kannis, we’ve discussed them quite a few times. Tala and I helped deal with one just a few days before you became my mageling.”

“Huh, I don’t remember…” Her eyes took on a far-off look before she shook her head, seemingly clearing her mind. “What were we talking about?”

Lyn had frozen in place, eyes widening in horror.

Tala, with her enhanced perception, could see the edges of Kannis’s mouth fighting to remain neutral. *She’s messing with Lyn?*

Lyn seemed to notice something because her eyes suddenly narrowed. “You’re trying to rust my metal, aren’t you.” It wasn’t a question. “Is that how you want to treat your master after the day we’ve had?”

Kannis broke out in a grin. “Oh, but your face!”

She laughed, and Tala felt herself smile along.

“You were like, ‘Oh, no! One of them is right here, keeping her from remembering.’”

“That is not what I was thinking.” Lyn frowned. “I was wondering if you were hit in the head somehow, and I didn’t notice.”

Kannis huffed a laugh. “Sure you were.”

Tala cleared her throat. “So… dinner?”

The two women turned toward her, wry smiles growing on both of their faces.

Lyn shook her head. “Yes. There certainly isn’t anything worth pursuing here.”

Kannis turned on one foot and strode back out through the front door. “To expensive food! Mistress Tala’s treat.”

Lyn froze for just an instant before grinning broadly and following her mageling. “To the best restaurant in the city!”

Tala blinked a few times, fully processing what they were saying. She frowned, following them as quickly as she could while closing and locking the door. “Hey, now! To reasonably priced food in large quantities.”

Lyn glanced back. “We can vote on where we go?”

Kannis grinned happily. “I’d agree to that.”

Tala shook her head. “If I pay, I pick.”

Lyn laughed. “Fine, fine. Let’s get some food.”

Chapter: 37
How to Host

Tala spent the next four days back in her old pattern, greatly looking forward to the upcoming visit from Master Simon, Mistress Petra, and their children. *I'll finally get some help in here!*

As much as she liked eating out, she was getting a bit tired of 'restaurant' food. Additionally, Mistress Holly had reached out to say that she could start adding some of the magical foods grown in her sanctum to her diet.

At the moment, that meant a couple endingberries with every meal or snack. She even ate the seeds, flipping their natural magics to properly meld with her own.

She still didn't use her iron to amplify her inscriptions, not yet, but that would be possible soon.

She desperately needed someone to come and cook for her. *Or I'll have to learn how to cook myself...*

She wasn't bad, all things considered, but she *really* didn't want to add one more thing to her plate at the moment.

All this came together to make her incredibly excited to finalize things with the family of Mage cooks.

When the day arrived, however, Tala had a dawning realization.

She had absolutely no idea how to host people for dinner.

"Lyn!" Tala came out of her sanctum in the early morning, but not so early that Lyn or Kannis should be asleep.

Lyn's voice came back from the living room and kitchen area, still slightly groggy. "What? Tala, are you alright? What's wrong?"

Tala strode out into the living room, orienting on her friend. "I have people coming to my sanctum for dinner tonight."

Lyn frowned. "Master Simon, right? And his family?"

"That's right."

"So… what's the issue?"

Tala gave an exasperated sigh. "How do I have people over for dinner?"

Lyn was obviously still not awake. "I mean… you open the door and let them in? Or do you mean scheduling? That can't be the issue, they're already coming…"

"No, Lyn. How am I going to provide food? I don't have a table big enough for seven people. What do I *do*?"

"Oh." She blinked at Tala a few times. "I mean, you either do it yourself or hire someone?"

Tala grimaced, giving Lyn a baleful glare. "The point of this dinner *is* to hire someone…"

Kannis huffed a laugh, joining in the conversation. "Mistress Tala, it isn't that hard. Make or purchase a spread of good food; yes, from a restaurant is perfectly acceptable in these circumstances. At least three dishes, one or two vegetables, a protein—usually meat—and if you want, add a grain like rice or pasta. Ensure you have enough, so maybe half again as much as you want to eat? If your aim is to do it 'right,' you should have a dessert as well."

Tala grunted, turning toward the mageling who was obviously more coherent this morning than her master.

"Then, you have it either on the table in the center to be passed around family style, or on a nearby table or counter so that each person can get up and serve themselves like a buffet."

Tala obviously knew how dinner with a lot of people worked, but Kannis *was* saying some useful things, so she chose to ignore the obvious oversimplifications, “So… meat, veggie, grain, dishes?”

“…Yes, you will need dishes and utensils sufficient for everyone who will be present. With children, it is reasonable for you to have a few extra utensils, just in case one is dropped or something like that happens.”

Tala was familiar with the eating habits of children. “I understand that… Gah…” She rubbed her face in frustration. “Why are these things so complicated?”

“This is literally as simple as can be, Mistress Tala. You do this all the time, just with people that you know or in a restaurant. Are you really this out of sorts?”

She grimaced again. “It needs to go well… Oh… I don’t have a table that’s big enough.”

Kannis gave her an odd look. “Wait… how do you not have these things? Wasn’t your sanctum outfitted for you to be some high-level important figure? Why wouldn’t you be able to host?”

Tala glanced at the mageling. “It was a sanctum, not a celebratory venue. I was a local figure, not a traveling leader. If I needed to host, I could do it in the main hold or just have servants bring over what I needed for the short time that I needed it.”

“Oh… Yeah, I can actually see that. Huh.” Kannis nodded her head in thought. “Well, then, it sounds like you need a table and chairs?” She was starting to sound uncertain. She’d seemingly picked up on Tala’s nervousness and was struggling to figure out if there was something else going on.

Tala hesitated. “I don’t want to buy that stuff, then have them want something different when they start working.”

“That makes sense.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh… that’s genius. It doesn’t help right now, but it’s worth asking.”

-Tala… I’m not sure having Kit eat their house is a good idea.-

Why not? If they own it, what’s the issue? They get to keep what they’re comfortable with, and then they can sell off a prime city lot, already cleared and ready for new construction.

-…It doesn’t hurt to ask… Can Kit even do that? That seems way too big to eat all at once.-

Might have to knock it down and have Kit eat the pieces?

Alat groaned, having no further comments regarding this latest madness.

Tala shook her head, refocusing. “But I guess that’s not important now.”

Lyn had narrowed her eyes. “What insanity did you just come up with?”

Tala shrugged. “Not important right now.”

Lyn set down her spoon and turned fully toward Tala. “Tala.”

Tala shrugged. “It’s really not important. I won’t do it any time soon, regardless.”

The Fused grunted. “Fine. I won’t press… for now.”

Tala rolled her eyes before her gaze fell on Lyn’s table. “Can I borrow that? It’s only really for four people, but I can put it beside the small one I already have?”

“Fine, but please don’t take it until after we leave for work?”

“I can do that.”

With at least a plan in place—

-That’s not a plan, that’s a list of obvious things that are needed to eat food. You even had to add ‘food’ to the list.-

Hush. I’m on track now.

With at least a plan in place, Tala was able to actually focus on what was going on.

The two other women were eating what looked something like oatmeal but smoother.

"What's that?"

Kannis gestured toward the pot in the kitchen. "Cream of grains with heavy cream and bourbon-barrel maple syrup."

"Cream added into cream of grains?" Tala frowned.

"'Cream of' usually just means a milk base and thicker texture."

Tala frowned. "Is that… true?"

Kannis shrugged. "Sounds about right, but what do I know? I'm no professional."

"Fair enough."

There was a long, building silence as Lyn and Kannis ate. They were obviously hiding smiles as Tala looked back and forth between them and the pot.

Finally, Tala sighed. "Can I have some?"

Lyn glanced her way. "Of course. Thank you for asking."

Tala huffed a laugh and helped herself, joining her housemates for breakfast.

After the two others left, Tala took a moment to dip the dishes into Kit for an easy cleaning before she returned the cookware and sundry to their places in the kitchen.

That accomplished, she decided to prepare for the dinner.

I can't just buy any old food, now can I?

-…Tala, you eat mountains of food every day. You don't need an excuse to go taste testing.-

You're right. Off we go!

The day passed with little incident, and she had everything ready to the best of her ability when dinner rolled around.

* * *

Tala melded Kit with Lyn's front door, so that when the family knocked, she was able to let them directly into her sanctum, thereby not disturbing Lyn and Kannis, who were eating their dinners in the reading chairs.

She had put a lot of thought into the choice of where she should let them into her sanctum, and in the end, she settled on the dining room itself.

A tour could take place after food, and the dining room was one of the far more 'normal' spaces she had available. That should help to remove some of the mystery and mystique of her sanctum.

While Master Simon, Mistress Petra, and their family arrived after the sun had set from over Bandfast, it was still a bit before the end of daylight within Kit.

Thus, the first thing the kids did when they arrived was run to the massive windows and stare out, exclaiming loudly at the view.

Their parents exchanged looks before joining their children to see what they could see.

"This view is lovely, Mistress Tala."

"Thank you, Master Simon."

"Is it an illusion?"

"Mostly no. The land was arranged so that the topography allowed for a natural, untainted view. Those hills at the edge of what you can see mark the border, however. And the sky is an illusion—as you might imagine." She smiled.

"That's… You are powering it yourself?" He looked at her with incredulity.

"Yes, though indirectly."

“The requirements…” He shook his head. “This is more than I imagined. Though, it’s exactly in line with what you described; I have to admit.”

Tala smiled in return. “I had hoped to convey it properly.”

Mistress Petra interjected. “It is stunning.”

“Thank you.” Tala gestured to the two tables pressed together and to the food laid out atop it. “Shall we?”

They all sat around the table and served the food family-style, passing the serving dishes around so that everyone could grab what they wanted.

Segis and Karsa helped the youngest, Metti, so that she didn’t slow down the process.

Once everyone was served and the initial round of pleasantries had settled down, Tala cleared her throat.

“I do apologize for the cobbled together table and cutlery.” She’d pulled from Lyn’s kitchen for plates and utensils, along with the table and chairs.

Mistress Petra waved her off. “It is more than fine. I imagine you don’t often have this much company.”

Tala smiled at that. “No, never.”

“Well, then this is above and beyond. Thank you.”

After that, the meal passed with relative ease.

The topics were light and the food tasty.

Soon enough, everyone had eaten their fill.

Tala glanced around at the family. “Is everyone finished?”

A round of smiling nods greeted her.

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

That caused them to pause, and the children each grabbed another quick bite or two before confirming once again.

“Alright. This is the first demonstration. Lean back.”

Everyone leaned back in their chairs.

Tala could have just thought the command to Kit, but she wanted to make it clear what was happening. “Kit, can you eat the remnants?”

There was a bending of reality, which manifested almost like a heat-haze over every speck of food not near a person.

An instant later, the distortions vanished, leaving utterly clean plates, utensils, and serving dishes in their wake. Even the tables were clean of drippings and crumbs.

Wide eyes greeted her as Tala looked around at her guests once more.

“Kit will happily eat anything allowed.”

Master Simon’s eyes were gleaming, but it wasn’t for the reason that Tala initially assumed.

She would have thought that such a demonstration would stoke the fires of his desire to explore the sanctum, but instead, his words showed her that she still had a lot to learn about him.

“We can cook, bake, and experiment… and there won’t ever be dishes to do? We won’t have to clean up the results before we can do it all again?”

Tala tilted her head to the side, then shrugged. *I suppose that is pretty nice.* “Yeah. Kit eats the remnants, not even leaving bits stuck or baked on.”

His eyes were positively glowing with barely restrained glee as he and Mistress Petra asked a few more follow-up questions.

The sun had mostly set when they stepped out of the dining and kitchen area into the central circle of her sanctum.

What followed was a tour very reminiscent of the one she'd given to the Archons right when she got home.

There were, of course, exceptions.

Firstly, she didn't take them underground. Honestly, she didn't think she'd be allowing them underground at all, at least not in the near term.

Second, the children showed the expected level of exuberance for *everything.*

Finally, the group looked in on the other rooms of the sanctum.

To Tala's surprise, while there were a few, they were all decked out for visiting Eskau. Thus, the furnishings were simple, elegant, and obviously *expensive.*

I never had use for these.

-It was about the potential more than anything.-

That's true enough. She felt an odd weight. *I'd have used them eventually, in the coming years, if I'd stayed.*

-Blessedly, that never came to pass.-

Yeah.

One room had clearly been Thron's. Even though he'd kept it free of any personal effects, the smaller bed and the less embellished décor made it obviously his.

All in all, the rooms would *not* be a good fit for a family, and even if it had been a reasonable fit for them, Tala was a bit loath to fill up her guest rooms, just in case.

-Yes, it would be a travesty for all the guests you have over to be without a place to sleep.-

Hush you. Things change, and I am *trying to be more sociable.*

-You just want to have Kit eat a house.-

I am curious if it would work… but it would also be nice to have some more consistency with my relationships, even while traveling.

-If only we could fix the issue of gates degrading dimensional spaces.-

Oh, I'm sure there are solutions, they are likely just expensive.

-Master Simon would likely know.-

That's fair, but it's hardly time for that topic.

As they realized that the rooms she had wouldn't work, long term, Tala decided to simply ask, "Do you all own your home, here in Bandfast?"

The two adults looked at each other, seemingly confused why she'd asked. After a moment of seemingly silent communication, they nodded. "We do."

"What about putting it in here?" She pointed to the eastern side of the central circle. At the moment, the ground dropped off to give a view in that direction to watch the sun rise. "It wouldn't be difficult to place it there."

"Move our house… in here?"

Tala shrugged. "Give me the plans, and throw everything into Kit, and it will be there by the time we walk inside."

Master Simon stood with mouth agape for a long moment before he asked a seemingly unrelated question. "Can that work with anything?"

"What do you mean?" She frowned.

"I mean, can we toss a log in here, and it becomes a statue? Or a bunch of boards and come in to find a wagon?"

"Oh! No. Generally not. Kit can move things around, so putting your house back together would just be like a puzzle in that sense. No manipulation of the materials, themselves. The only

real exceptions seem to lie around the removal of impurities or grime from objects, but even that isn't *really* a manipulation of the object."

"Oh… I see. But we could drop a bunch of parts in, for a complex machine, and they would be able to be assembled?"

"I mean… in theory? I've never really tested it."

"Fascinating. If it worked for a house, I don't see why it wouldn't work for something smaller."

Mistress Petra was giving her husband an incredulous look. "You're considering it?"

He shrugged. "We could sell the empty lot. I'm not agreeing, but it's an interesting idea."

"Exactly!" Tala grinned and pointed at him triumphantly. "I figured that might actually be better than us trying to build something new in here, and you having to sell your house out there."

Mistress Petra turned to Tala and gave a slight bow. "Honestly, Mistress Tala, we weren't planning on selling the house at all. Additionally, moving the structure in here seems… rather permanent."

"Oh…" Tala felt herself deflate.

"It's not that we aren't interested in the positions," Mistress Petra quickly added. "It's just that doing this would effectively trap us in your employ for the foreseeable future. That would be problematic if it didn't work out on our end, *or* if you decided we weren't a good fit from your perspective."

"Ahh… I hadn't thought of it that way, actually."

Master Simon nodded. “But before we get too lost in the weeds of housing, we need to discuss security. My understanding is that you want to be out, away from the cities much of the time. Is that correct?”

“That’s right.”

“What would Archive access be like while we are out and about?”

Tala opened her mouth and closed it. *Well… rust. I didn’t think about that.*

-Yeah, Archive tablets without Archive access are rather… Oh!-

Yeah, that might work. “There exist Archive tablets with the ability to create datasets that are local to the slate, is that correct?”

“There are, yes.”

“We could have those be what is provided. It isn’t the same as constant Archive connectivity, but it would allow much of the same functionality.”

He frowned. “Pardon if I overstep, but what about pairing it with your own Archive access? Certainly, you have greater than average range?”

“I… do, yes. Can that be done?”

“Absolutely. The power would come from you, yourself, just like everything in here runs on your magic, and it would be a lower throughput when outside of standard range, but it is a relatively common feature commissioned for private caravans.”

“That is an interesting idea, yes. We can look into it.” *The Constructionists do owe me quite a bit more, and that could be useful… well, forever.*

-So long as you travel with others, you mean?-

Like I said, forever. Tala’s response was firm and full of conviction.

Master Simon simply nodded, moving to the next topic. “The wilds are more dangerous than ever. More caravans than usual are going missing, and I think you know that Alefast, Waning is accumulating magic far more rapidly than it should be. There is trouble brewing in the wilds.”

“I’ve heard some rumors but nothing concrete.”

“How stable is this sanctum? What happens if you die on the outside, while we’re in here?”

“Well”—she frowned, choosing her words carefully—”if I were to die, the sanctum would slowly lose power. You could exit through the bunker I indicated, but that would just let you come out where I… died.”

“I see. That’s good to know. Aside from that worst-case scenario, would the door out always work?”

Tala shook her head. “Yes, and no. If I am nearby and Kit isn’t in the form of a door, I will effectively have the ability to stop Kit from opening. If there is already a door? Yes, you can leave easily. If I’m not nearby, or if I don’t stop it, a door will form, and you will be able to leave.”

“Could we get back in?”

“The door should remain until I cause a change in form.”

“That’s good.” He glanced to his wife before turning back. “How is the progress on the teleportation inscriptions?”

Tala scrunched up her face. “Progressing, but not complete.”

“I see.”

She swallowed and straightened up just a bit. “That said, Kit should be unbreachable. If I were to die, you would know immediately. Under those circumstances, with the token I can provide, you should be able to look outside and determine the best time to make your escape.”

He nodded. “There are a few features that I would like to discuss with you, which would make us more comfortable with you going into danger with us in tow.”

“Oh?” Tala tilted her head slightly in interest. “I’d love to hear what you have in mind.”

Chapter: 38
Arrangements

Tala listened as Master Simon started to go over a number of rather interesting ideas.

Apparently, there were quite a few explorer-type Archons who wanted to be able to get their findings back to the cities in case they died, so there was a plethora of plans for doing just that. They ranged from the insane to the possibly reasonable.

Even so, before they could delve too far into it, she had a realization. *Wow. With all the other stuff, I can't believe I dropped that.*

-Yeah… that's on me, too. Your stress is really bleeding through.-

Well, I need the help, okay?

-I know, I know.-

Tala cleared her throat, causing Master Simon to pause. "My apologies. I figured he would have shown up by now, but there is someone you should meet."

"Oh?" Mistress Petra looked around. "Is there someone already living in here with you? I thought this space was yours alone."

"Yes, but it's best if you just meet him and see for yourself. Terry!" Tala infused a little extra power into the inscriptions around her vocal cords and lungs, allowing her voice to carry farther without the need to scream, shout, or even raise her voice. In essence, the magic gave her words more weight, allowing them to propagate further before fading.

She'd used the technique only a few times before, and she had been satisfied with the result every time.

Terry flickered into being on her shoulder a moment later.

He squawked questioningly before headbutting her cheek and looking around.

The children's eyes widened, and they crowded close with wonder evident across their faces.

Terry glanced to Tala. Clear questions were carried in that look.

Tala smiled and nodded. "Friends, mundane."

He trilled in acknowledgment and flickered down to appear on Metti's head.

The little girl froze in surprise, looking up without shifting the terror bird's perch. "Mom… Mom! It's on my head!"

Her voice was uncertain as she tried to determine if this was cause for concern.

Mistress Petra looked to Tala, and Tala smiled. "He won't hurt them."

The mother relaxed but still seemed quite ready to interfere. "He's fine, my little love. Be gentle and try not to startle him. Even the gentlest creatures can lash out if they are surprised or hurt."

"Yes, Mama."

Having broken the ice a bit, Terry began flickering around, poking and prodding the children. It didn't take long before they understood that he wanted to play a game.

From there, he easily nudged them into understanding the rules.

Master Simon and Mistress Petra came closer to Tala, eyes fixed on the developing situation.

He leaned in close and whispered, "He seems much too intelligent to be a baby terror bird and much too… tame. Is he some dwarf-subspecies?"

Tala shook her head. *No cause for, or benefit in, hiding the truth.* "No, his magic lies in dimensionality. He's actually rather massive, but he does his best to choose his size to fit the situation."

Mistress Petra gave Tala a startled look. “So… he’s as big as you or me? Isn’t that dangerous?”

Tala shook her head. “No, he’s actually much bigger. As to him being dangerous?” Tala shrugged. “Obviously he is. He’s a predator. But no, he is not dangerous to us, and I have never seen him harm a child. Not even when that child did her best to poke him in the eye.” She shook her head with a small smile, remembering her sister, Sella, chasing after Terry all through the park near her childhood home. “Regardless, his intelligence is *at least* equivalent to most people you could meet, and while he can be… inhuman in his hunting practices and idiosyncrasies, he and I are partners, and he has never harmed anyone or anything without cause.”

The two parents continued to watch the playing quartet with hesitation.

She sighed. “He often is out and about with me, but he does live in here, too.”

Terry let the children get incredibly close, even occasionally brushing his feathers.

When he allowed the contact, he would let out a trill to indicate that he would be pursuing. What followed was ten short chirps, in perfect cadence, before he flickered after the children, herding them all together, and only when they were clustered into a group would he touch all three at once, making them the chasers once more.

“He is terrifyingly effective.” Mistress Petra still sounded nervous.

Tala nodded. “His species hunts in packs and hunts herds. Even by himself, he is a truly peerless hunter.”

Terry glanced her way, straightening and preening. He then flickered away just as Segis would have fallen on him.

They watched in relative silence for quite a few rounds of the game.

Finally, Master Simon tilted his head to the side. “He only lets them touch him when they are balanced when they would make contact…”

Mistress Petra nodded. “I noticed that. And he also seems to reward them when they work together… is he teaching them how to hunt?”

The parents looked toward Tala, and she shrugged.

Even so, she smiled encouragingly. “I’m not sure, but that does sound like him, yeah. It looks like he likes them.”

The two nodded slowly in response.

A few minutes later, Metti sat down to take a break, laughing and breathing heavily. Terry seamlessly shifted the game to focus only on the older two, now solely allowing contact when they worked together and didn’t overcommit.

Master Simon glanced toward Tala. “Well, they seem well taken care of.”

She quirked a smile in return. “They do. I’d love to hear more of your ideas.”

The family didn’t stay too much longer, and Tala and Master Simon made an appointment to meet up the following day to continue the discussion for features to add to Kit.

Most of those they’d already discussed were simple enough enhancements, like tying any Archive connection through her own link if she was closer than any other Archive node, and they weren’t in a city.

Master Simon also stated that he would want to research the specifics of the sanctum a bit more before putting together a blueprint for their living space.

Tentatively, Mistress Petra agreed to come the next morning to start working. The kids had school and would continue attending it until Tala left Bandfast, and the family wouldn’t move in until the quarters were complete, but they tentatively agreed to come under her employ.

YES!

-Hey, see? That didn't go so badly.-

Terry. Terry is the master, here.

Alat huffed a laugh but didn't argue.

Mistress Petra smiled at Tala's apparent glee, even though she obviously couldn't hear her thoughts. "I'll start with something rather simple for your breakfast and try to familiarize myself with your facilities tomorrow. Let's plan on my providing you with breakfast and dinner?"

Tala nodded. "Unfortunately, I am still not quite ready for meals made with the food in here. My advancement hasn't fully settled as of yet, but I should be able to eat meals with ingredients incorporated."

Mistress Petra nodded. "I'll want to gain access to the Culinary Guild's new treatise on the preparation of harvests for human consumption."

Tala brightened. "Oh! They have it widely available already?"

"They do. It is on the expensive side…" Mistress Petra frowned.

Tala waved that away. "I'll see to it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Consider it handled. I'll get it to you along with your Archive tablet—" She looked to Master Simon.

"Tomorrow. There are several standard models in stock at the guildhall, and I can initialize them for our family." He glanced toward his youngest, who had once again joined in the fun with Terry. "There's even a couple… robust versions, meant to take harsher environments, rougher treatment, or…"

Mistress Petra smiled. "…Children. Never were there creatures more able to find the weak points of any object."

He snorted a laugh. "Isn't that the truth."

Tala turned toward the playing group. "Alright, you four, time to wrap it up."

The kids turned, immediately groaning and starting to complain.

Terry flickered to each, bumping them to fall into a startled pile before he appeared on Tala's shoulder with a decisive trill.

Segis opened his mouth, obstinance clearly painted across his features, but Terry simply leaned forward and repeated his trill, a light of utter conviction in his eyes.

Segis closed his mouth.

Mistress Petra looked back and forth between her son and Terry. "Well. That is quite something."

Tala caused the doorway out to come into being just beside them as the children obediently scrambled to their feet.

Goodbyes were exchanged all around, and the guests thanked Tala again for the meal.

Then, they departed, the door closed and vanished, and Tala was left alone in the now oddly quiet sanctum.

Terry looked around, seeming almost forlorn.

"Do you like them?"

He chirped a couple of times, seeming to feign indifference.

"It will be nice to have some more consistent company."

He let out a grumpy squawk and headbutted her.

Tala laughed, scratching his neck under his feathers. “You are a blessing and a half, Terry, but it’s nice having others around as well.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, then let out a huffing honk of resignation.

“Yeah.” She hesitated a moment before looking at him once again. “You know, we need to talk about us at some point.”

Terry met her gaze and tilted his head to the side.

“My advancement should be able to sustain a bond with you quite soon, and such a bond could give you a lot of benefits.”

He settled down, shimmying to get comfortable.

“It’s only if you want, but it would link us effectively forever. It would *definitely* extend your lifespan, at least so long as I survived, and it might actually allow you to become stronger.”

In an instant, he flickered away, and Tala didn’t even have time to register his movements as he somehow tripped her up and pinned her to the ground, sitting on her chest. He then let out an obviously mocking series of soft trills in her ear.

“I never said you were weak.” She laughed. With a quick motion of her own, she launched herself up and regained her feet. She probably could have foiled his demonstration, but she knew he wasn’t going to hurt her, and she was still not supposed to be fighting. *Soon.*

Terry was already back on her shoulder, snuggled down against her neck.

“It’s up to you. I like you how you are, but I wouldn’t say no to making our bond stronger.”

He opened one eye to give her a long look. After an almost uncomfortably long time, he exhaled long and slowly. Finally, he gave a decidedly affirming chirp.

“You’ll think about it?”

Another chirp.

“That’s all I can ask for.”

Tala lowered herself to the ground, and together, she and Terry stared up at the fake night sky.

“I wonder… is this real, somewhere?”

Terry huffed, clearly disinterested.

“No, it *is* interesting. Did this night sky come from the arcane artisan’s imagination? Or did they somehow divine a night sky from elsewhere in reality?”

He did not respond, instead snuggling closer and gazing upward.

In the end, the origins didn’t really matter.

All that mattered at that moment was that the stellar vista was stunning and expansive in a way that filled her mind, body, and soul with peace.

* * *

Lyn looked up at Tala with an incredulous expression. “Why now?”

It was the morning after the dinner with Master Simon and his family.

Tala had awoken bright and early to let Mistress Petra into her sanctum, finished the breakfast she brought along, and come out to find Lyn and Kannis about to head off for work.

It was then that Tala remembered something as she lamented her lacking bank account despite all the favors she was owed. “Well, I have been rather busy with other things, and it just hadn’t come back to the forefront of my mind.”

Lyn was staring at the list that Alat had compiled of all the mundane treasures that Tala had absconded with when she’d raided the House of the Rising Sun, among other places. “This is a ridiculous collection of items. Why do you even have these things?”

Tala shrugged. “Well, I didn’t have time to identify every item, so I just grabbed everything.”

“Clearly.” Lyn looked at the list and read something off. “‘One slightly broken mantel clock’? Why?”

“When I scooped it off the mantel, the glass cracked against a little statue.” Tala shrugged again. “It’s still got some worth, and I wasn’t going to take the time to take it back out.”

Lyn just shook her head. “And you want me to sell this for you?”

“Yes, please.”

“Wait… Tala, there’s a massive table on this list here… Why didn’t you use that?”

“That one?” She glanced at the indicated line-item. “That was too big.”

“You could have eaten outside?”

“I have a dining room, Lyn. I’m going to dine in my dining room.”

“Fine. What about this one? …How many tables are in here?”

“Only two dining tables of proper height. Most people forget that arcanes come in all different sizes. One of the tables is ridiculously large, and one is far too small. It’s a miracle I got *four* dining tables in my rampant pillaging. Everything else is a side table or some other odd thing. Of the two that *are* properly proportioned, one was too big—as already mentioned— and the other’s a big circle. Who wants to eat on a massive circle? It’s like ten feet across!”

Lyn sighed, shaking her head. “Are there dishes on this list, too?”

Tala gave her a flat look. “I didn’t raid a kitchen, Lyn. I went through a living area, not a dining area.”

Lyn still looked utterly baffled, even if she did let the matter of the tables drop. “I don’t have time for this, Tala.”

Tala grinned triumphantly. “No, you have a mageling for this.”

“Hey!” Kannis had stayed out of the conversation, but she clearly had a stake in the results now. “I have better things to do than sell off a pile of…” She trailed off as she looked over Lyn’s shoulder at the list she had in hand. “Did you rob some merchant? Just take everything from his house?”

Tala tilted her head. “Sure? I mean, they’re from an arcane House we were raiding, but near enough.”

Lyn grimaced as Kannis’s eyes widened. “By ‘House…’ The way you said it… that’s something important?”

Tala shrugged. “Yes. Think of it like a guild, here, but more insular and less focused. They control sectors, cities, and production trains rather than a specific function in their society. They don’t work together, as a rule, but they aren’t hostile to each other, except for surface level rivalries.” She hesitated. “With some exceptions. Some Houses hate each other for whatever reason.”

-We never did ask.-

We got books on it as part of our training, but even Tali didn’t care very much.

-If it wanted to hurt ‘Master,’ she’d kill it. She wasn’t overly concerned as to why *they hated him.-*

Isn’t that the truth…

Kannis seemed to be struggling a bit. “So… you raided one of these Houses?”

“Well, a main hold of one, yes.”

“And the equivalent would be if you decided to assault the Caravan Guild and take their stuff?”

Tala hesitated. “Does the Caravan Guild actually have a high-level Archon?”

Lyn nodded. “Not always in Bandfast, but yes, we have a few Refined.” She glanced toward Kannis, then seemed to shake her head in resignation. “The gap between Refined and Paragon is as vast as it is seemingly simple to cross. Most upper members of the various guilds fall in that range.”

Tala cocked an eyebrow. “That’s good to know. I can never get a straight answer.”

Lyn shrugged. “It’s mostly what I’ve pieced together from meetings with upper bureaucrats.”

“Good to know…”

Kannis cleared her throat, clearly still a little shaken. “But all that to say, these things are from the arcane ruling class?”

Tala nodded. “That’s a reasonable assessment, yes.”

Lyn sighed, glancing over and presumably manipulating something work related on a slate beside her food. “That will complicate things, too. Do you want to sell them for what they are, or what they were?”

“Huh?” Tala frowned.

Kannis was nodding, however, clearly understanding what her master meant. “You could sell them pretty quickly just as fine furnishings and oddities, but you would get *vastly* more if you sold them as items stolen from arcane lands. You’d have fewer buyers, though, so it might take longer?”

Tala thought for a moment. “Well, I need *some* money now, but I’d prefer the biggest payout possible.”

Lyn frowned. “This doesn’t include anything magical, right?”

“No, I told you that this was just the mundane items.”

“Are you going to sell the magical ones, too? Or have you already done that and spent the money?”

Tala hesitated. “Yes? Yes, I am going to; no, I haven’t already done it; and no, I definitely haven’t spent the money already.” Alat had put together that list, too, and it was far shorter. Arcanes didn’t really leave their magical items laying around. “I haven’t gotten to that, either.”

Lyn huffed a laugh and shook her head. “Well, I guess I can understand, with all the work you’ve been doing.”

Tala gave her friend a narrow-eyed glare. “Hey! I have been recovering.”

“You could have taken a nice refreshing walk to the Constructionist Guild and sold that stuff off. Or you could have done the selling one of the numerous times you were there already. Right?”

Tala grumbled. “Fine. You’re right…”

Lyn shook her head. “So, you want our help selling your non-magical loot.”

Kannis interjected, “Booty?”

“She’s not a marauder, Kannis.” Lyn shook her head. “This is not a fictional tale of flying ships and sword duels amidst storms.”

Kannis grimaced. “It would be better if it were.”

“Only according to some.”

Tala cleared her throat. “Anyway. Yes. I’ll be going by the Constructionist Guild today, and I can sell the magical stuff, then.”

“Alright then.” Lyn tilted her head to the side. “Twenty percent.”

Tala blinked at her in shock. “What? Last time you only took ten!”

“Last time we were both working for the same guild, and it was a simple job. If you want us traipsing around to find people who will value high-end, pilfered arcane decor, it will be much more work.”

She groused a bit, but finally, Tala agreed. “Alright, you win. I need the help.”

“Great!” Lyn pulled out a slate with the contract already built out.

Tala narrowed her eyes. “How do you have that ready?”

“It wasn’t hard to put together while we talked.”

Well, that explains what she was doing… So, not work related? “I didn’t think you had an Archive slate for home use.”

Lyn shrugged. “I’ve been bringing work home for the last couple of weeks, so I had it ready to hand. I can use it for various tasks when I have it checked out.”

Tala was still suspicious, but finally, she sighed. “Fine.”

She looked over the simple contract, and they both confirmed it.

“Thank you, I suppose.”

Lyn smiled in return. “It is always a pleasure working with you.”

Chapter: 39
Counter-Spell

Tala was utterly at a loss.

Somehow, she'd been immediately recognized when she walked into the Bandfast Culinary Guildhall.

She'd been whisked into a side room, where servant after servant brought her food of unquestionable quality.

It had been less than half an hour, and yet even she was starting to feel full.

-What's going on?-

I have no idea. Maybe they're grateful for connecting them with Mistress Ingrit?

-This seems a bit… over the top?-

Tala continued to eat and store food within Kit.

A full hour had passed, and Tala was getting ready to demand answers when an elderly woman bustled in.

Wait. She looks familiar. Oh! The guild-head? Valry, right?

-That's what your memory shows, yes.-

She bowed deeply. "Mistress Tala. I deeply apologize for the wait. I trust that you have been well taken care of?"

"I… Yes? Thank you, Guildmaster Valry. What's going on?"

"I once again apologize. I was inspecting a farm to the south as a possible new source for some of our ingredients when I got word of your arrival. I got here as soon as I could."

Tala frowned, then realized what the woman meant. “Oh! No, the wait wasn’t an issue.” She gestured to the empty platters and the well-appointed room in general. “I mean all this. What’s going on?”

The woman tilted her head to the side, a frown. “My apologies, Mistress Tala. I had thought that you came regarding the missive.”

Tala tried to contain her confusion. “What missive?”

“Well, when we heard you’d arrived in Alefast, Waning, we sent a missive with the next caravan heading that way. That was some two months back.”

Tala blinked a few times. *Oh… how did they hear that I was in Alefast and not Bandfast?*

-No idea. Is that really important?-

I suppose not…

“My apologies. I never received the missive. I’ve been meaning to come by but only now had the chance.”

The woman looked a bit flustered. “Oh… Well, umm… That is unexpected. We really should have used an Archive missive, I suppose, but we’re just not used to doing so… not yet.”

“That’s more than fine. I’m here now. What is this all about?”

“Thank you, Mistress.” Valry seemed to still be gathering her thoughts. “Well, the message basically was an invitation extended to you by myself and this Guildhall.” After a moment’s hesitation, she amended, “Well, by the whole guild, really, but we are the presenters.”

After a brief silence, Tala inquired, “An invitation?”

“Yes! Yes. We are incredibly grateful for your help in lifting the veil of self-imposed secrecy on our research. We, as a guild, have been able to broaden our contacts and delve deeper than we

ever thought possible with the aid of Mages." She scoffed at her own words. "Mages. Can you believe it?"

Tala frowned bemusedly, and Valry seemed to recover herself.

"Oh, of course you can." She shook her head. "Where is my mind these days? In any case, we wanted to thank you for what you did for us."

"I honestly didn't do very much. I mainly just opened lines of communication."

"Even so." She clapped her hands twice, and two waves of servants swept in through the doors into the room.

The first wave cleared out all the empty serving dishes and set up a couple large tables with startling efficiency.

The second was a bit odd.

There were six servants, five with small parcels and one with a simple pouch that exuded a respectable amount of dimensional energy.

The five lined up behind the tables, setting down their parcels and opening them.

Each parcel contained a mix of dried and otherwise preserved foods.

"These are our five newest food sets for quick energy and nutrient recovery for Mages on the go. Perfectly balanced for different types of injury, with your method of healing taken into account. We have a whole line that is varied based on recovering after other types of healing, but those are obviously not needed for you."

Tala walked over and sampled each offered mix.

They were all mundane foods but of startling quality and composition. "These are amazing."

“Indeed.” Valry smiled with obvious pride. “Our new, more open communication with Mages has allowed us to perfect and widely distribute foods of this kind. It should aid our Mages and guards in recovery to an unprecedented degree.”

She motioned the final servant forward.

“This is a dimensional pouch!” She was clearly proud of that fact alone, but she quickly continued regardless. “It is filled with a thousand of each of these food packets, along with a double portion of the long-lived foods that you acquired from our guild in Makinaven. We also increased that portion based on our best guess on the increase to your appetite.”

Tala’s eyes widened. That was amazing. Even with Mistress Petra preparing food for her, this would help supplement her diet until she could eat solely from what her sanctum produced. More importantly, it would be an amazing backup and emergency supply for both her and her sanctum’s incoming residents. “Thank you, truly.”

“It is the least we could do. I know that this is but a pittance, but we hope it conveys our gratitude.”

“It most certainly does.” She’d bought a five-year supply of food in Makinaven, and that was before factoring in her increased appetite. That meant that she now easily had solid food reserves for more than ten years, if it was well stored, which it unquestioningly would be.

Valry smiled. “Now, is there anything else we can do to show our thanks? What brought you here today?”

-That was a kind, small thing of them to do.-

It was more than they needed to do; I really didn’t do very much…

-Even so.-

Tala smiled, addressing Valry, “I heard that you all were selling access to your research on the preparation of harvests for human consumption? I believe that the notebook I have only covers the basics.”

The guild-mistress’s smile grew in excitement. “Oh! That would be wonderful and incredibly appropriate. Do you wish access?”

Tala blinked. “Oh… I assumed that such would be of incredible value.”

“In some ways, yes, though it costs us little. Even so, it is an ideal show of our gratitude. I would have already offered, but our understanding is that you did not have an interest or bent toward the culinary arts.”

“I do some, but I also have someone who is helping me in that department.”

Valry nodded, signaling a servant who departed immediately. “I see. So, access for two? We will provide you with the tokens.”

Tala smiled. “Thank you!”

Archive tokens were a means of granting a set of predetermined Archive access, without requiring the grantor and grantee to interact directly. Tala had never had need, so she’d only heard of them in passing.

The servant returned less than a minute later with two gold-inscribed clay disks, roughly the size of her hand.

“I trust that the one to help you is a Mage as well?”

“Yes.”

“Good, good. This little booklet should be sufficient to allow you to activate the scripts. They will each be used up, and the clay disk will crumble after one use.”

Clever. Never seen one of these in person. “Thank you.”

-So, likely only access to read the contents, not make changes or grant others access. That makes sense.-

Valry gave a nod of acknowledgment. “Of course. Now, my understanding is that this will be used to prepare food for you, is that correct?”

“It is.”

Valry smiled. “Would you be interested in one of our experts imparting their knowledge? We have many tasks on our local, collective plate, but I think we can spare someone for a few days?”

Tala’s eyes opened wide. “That could be amazing! When might they be available?”

“I will have to consult my master schedule, but I believe we can have someone free in a few days, and they should be able to give you at least three or four days.”

“That should be wonderful. I’ll make the arrangements. Are they alright working within a dimensional space?”

Valry looked a bit surprised but nodded. “I’ll ensure that the one who gets the assignment agrees to that aspect.”

“Great. I’ll come back in three days to pick them up, then?”

She hesitated. “Make it four? Does that work for you?”

“It should. Thank you.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before parting with smiles and bows, both incredibly content with the time spent.

Tala went straight from there to the Constructionist Guild.

Master Simon was summoned as soon as she arrived, and they went back to the workroom that was still his for the next week.

It had been his space for the last several years, while he was working on projects for Master Queue. That time in his career was ending, and he was simply tying up the last loose ends.

He set up tea for them both, and they got to work.

The first thing they did, while their tea steeped, was carry in two artifacts to hook into the network of scripts put in place by the House of Blood.

The design of the sanctum's scripts was quite modular and simply allowed for any new artifact to be slotted in.

Not that there's a literal slot.

-Of course not. That would be too restrictive. The description implied that they often find unique artifacts in ether holds or in the wilds that can enhance sanctums, so they leave the ability to connect in other magical pathways to provide power as needed.-

They really did think of so *much…*

They began with those two items that they both agreed were required. First and foremost was the Archive interlink. The functionality of the device was apparently incredibly simple, because it was her magic powering the sanctum and her soul that was bonded to the link. The rest was just translation.

The second was a communication beacon.

A large stone was placed beside the dais, and anyone could touch the stone and speak with Tala, so long as she was within a hundred feet of Kit.

Similarly, there were smaller items that allowed connection to each other and to Tala through the larger stone, though they only worked within the sanctum.

The communication with her once again utilized the fact that it was Tala's power within Kit, magically bonding it to her.

The experience was odd from her perspective, because it almost felt like a part of her magic vibrated, near her gate. It took a few minutes before she learned how to understand the words coming through, but as an Immaterial Guide, she had a better grasp on the movements of her power and the meanings therein.

While she could also respond, her ability to do so was atrocious.

In the end, they agreed that she could send back one odd buzzing sound for ‘yes’ and two for ‘no.’ This was under the assumption that the most common question asked of her would be ‘Can you let me out?’ or some derivation therein.

Terry watched the installation and seemed fascinated by the new trinket.

Why do I feel like I’m going to regret some part of this?

-Because you probably are. Regardless, it’ll be nice for him to be able to request an exit rather than you having to remember to ask him.-

That’s true enough.

Tala could also use one of the subsidiary devices while within Kit, so she’d be able to talk to any of those within fairly easily.

That was especially good considering that, before learning of this option, she had just been planning on having Kit move her to their side, and she hadn’t really thought through how that could end badly.

Yes, giving some warning would be good, and no need to pop up beside people randomly.

-Yeah, that could lead to all sorts of awkward situations.-

What followed after, while they enjoyed their tea, was a general look at the items available to enhance or augment dimensional storage spaces. Most were useless for Kit; either they were too weak to affect the vast space in a meaningful way or Kit already had the functionality.

Master Simon and Tala did not look at options for merging items with Kit, simply those which could be placed within the sanctum.

While she dismissed most of the options presented and was undecided on most of the rest, one thing became clear to Tala: she would need to add a grid-node to her sanctum.

A grid-node would effectively allow any magical technology which worked in cities to hook into the power within Kit instead, thus preventing Tala from having to create a hodgepodge lattice of interconnected inefficiency.

-That's an elegant descriptor.-

It seemed fine to me. The whole thing could be a mess, and it isn't.

-I suppose that's fair.-

In the end, they both decided that Master Simon needed to spend a good deal of time within Kit before he could make meaningful recommendations beyond the three items that already made sense.

Even so, exactly which grid-node would work best in Kit was still not apparent. So, all things considered, the two Mages perusing all the options available was not an effective use of their time.

As such, they turned their attention to the other tasks at hand.

Tala presented Master Simon with the list of magical items from the arcane lands she still had but didn't have a use for, and he granted her access to a list of Archive access methods available, which could be used by Mages and mundanes alike.

They each perused their lists, asking the other occasional clarifying questions.

The slates would connect to the grid-node when that was up and running, so they didn't need to be independently powered long-term. Moreover, since Tala wasn't leaving Bandfast before all

of this was settled, they could simply run on the Bandfast grid, so long as Tala opened Kit for at least an hour every day to allow the power to reach into the space and keep the devices powered.

In the end, the Constructionist Guild was happy to take the items she offered, and Tala selected eight robust Archive slates. As neither Master Simon nor Mistress Petra were Refined, they didn't have any bound to them, and those that they used within Bandfast were either borrowed or owned by their employers.

Well, that's not changing, I suppose.

-Yeah, these will work long-term for anyone within your sanctum.-

It was that thought which had prompted Tala to select three more than she strictly needed, just to have backups and to have them available at need.

-Probably overkill.-

Yeah, but if I'm wandering the wilds, I would hate to have to head home just because a slate broke, and I want to honor my commitment to keep their Archive access in place.

-That's fair.-

A key feature that had further influenced her slate choice was the ability for the slates to be used by someone without any Archive access at all. In those cases, the slates would need to be initialized by someone with access, in which case, they could mirror their access in whole or in part.

Basically, Tala would be able to share limited information even with people who didn't otherwise interface with the Archive.

Could be useful for trading in the towns when we go back.

-Show them what we have, then find a way to more permanently transfer the information over? Yeah, that could work.-

“Alright, Mistress Tala.” Master Simon looked up from his tallies, where he’d put together a contract of exchange for them. “Right now, there is quite the imbalance. Though these items you’ve presented for trade are rather basic, they more than cover the cost of what you’ve selected. Is there anything else that the Constructionist Guild can do for you today? Or should we discuss monetary means of balancing the transaction?”

“Well, two things come to mind that I could use from your guild.”

He smiled invitingly. “Certainly, Mistress. What were you thinking?”

“First, when I was working in the caravans, I noticed that the Guards had inscribed weaponry that remained unpowered until it interacted with the targeted magical creature.”

“I’m familiar with that type of spell-form, yes.”

“Can they be inscribed for me?”

“I’m not sure I understand. Can you start by telling me what beast you want counter-spells for?”

“Oh, they are specific to the arcanous beast?”

He tilted his head for a moment then nodded hesitantly. “No, but mostly yes. They are tailored to the specific magics. They do work for those magics on different species, but only so long as the magics they wield are similar enough.”

“Oh… how many sets are there?”

He chuckled. “Do you mean how many different types of arcanous magics have we worked up counter-spell inscription sets for?”

“Yes?”

“Three hundred?” He frowned then looked down at his Archive slate before flipping through some information. “There are three hundred twelve standard sets, and an additional thousand that

caravan guards carry in case they cross those rarer variations. There seems to be a further seven hundred or so that either haven't been useful in a century or more, or are not effective enough on the current manifestations of arcanous creatures to be worth creating and having on hand."

Tala grimaced. "Well, that's less useful."

"What were you thinking of doing, if I may ask?"

She pulled her hauberk out of Kit and held it up. The piece of fitted armor was now fully restored with white steel scales, each filled with gravity alteration, ready to assault her enemies.

She briefly explained that each scale could become a projectile, and that she'd hoped to increase their lethality.

He took a long moment to digest the implications of what she'd conveyed. Once he had come to terms with the reality of the armor-turned-weapon, he shrugged. "You could embed an endingberry in the center?"

She blinked a few times. *Genius! But no… that wouldn't really work… would it?*

-No. It would be highly unstable and not very effective without heavy scripting and modifications.-

Master Simon was already shaking his head. "No, that would be a difficult method to implement… I can think on it, but nothing comes readily to mind. The scripts you asked about would be an excellent idea if you were waging a war on a specific kind of creature. Maybe for the next Leshkin war?"

Tala nodded at that. "There's an idea, yeah."

-Note that for later?-

Absolutely, yeah.

“The inscriptions are incredibly inexpensive to create. I could balance out the exchange by crafting three arrows for each of the most useful counter-spell inscriptions?”

Tala blinked a few times. “That’s… That’s interesting. How many could I get if I wanted one of every type and a description of exactly what it’s supposed to counter?”

He looked down at this pad, nodding to himself. “One of each should be doable. It’s a *bit* of a stretch, but we can make it happen.” He smiled. “I know there are a few who will find greater value in the items you’re providing because they came from arcanes, and that should balance out the difference.”

What do you think?

-It could be a good thing to have in our back pocket, just in case. Especially if we are going to be wandering the wilds and beyond.-

One each isn’t really *enough…*

-Yeah. Ask about five?-

“How much would it cost to increase to five of each?”

“Oh… well… Hmmm… We’d already be setting up for each single inscription, so it wouldn’t be five times the cost to make… I think we could do it for thirty-two gold?”

“Make it thirty and you have a deal.”

He huffed a laugh. “Only if you pay upfront.”

“Done.”

Chapter: 40
Dimensional Storage, Recovery Artifact

Tala left the Constructionist Guildhall having concluded her business for the day with Master Simon.

While there was a lot swirling around in her head, she was rather curious about the last item that Master Simon had brought up.

A dimensional storage recovery artifact.

In essence, if she died, it would rocket the pouch to the closest human city.

Well, that's just one of the more basic versions.

Most options wouldn't take magical resonance into account, and thus, they would likely cause all sorts of frustrations for the city defenders for at least a few days, but it *would* get the dimensional storage to somewhere safe.

Assuming it is in Zeme when it activates…

Some had countermeasures if the storage was underground when the spell-forms activated. Others could account for massive volumes of water in the way.

In the end, the more situations they'd work in, the more expensive, at least generally.

These recovery items were usually paired with a magical tinter, much like her through-spike, which would draw power from the environment—or the city grid once it arrived—to power the dimensional storage for long enough to retrieve what was inside.

These mimicries were never *perfect,* so it would slowly break down anything it was used on, but the damage wasn't permanent if the Mage it was magic-bound to returned within a reasonable timeframe.

But if I'm dead, I'll never return.

-And if you're dead, it won't be your problem.-

That's fair.

-Also, I'm fairly certain that Kit could adapt to a slightly off *magical signature.-*

Yeah… maybe? Kit is almost as much creature as item in how she works and how responsive she is.

-Isn't that the truth.-

As to the recovery items, apparently the combination of transportation and magical tinting was often used when a Mage was hired to gather something of particular importance. The magics would ensure that the retrieved item would make it back to humanity, whether the commissioned Mage did or not.

It's a bit morbid, planning for my own death.

-Yes, but it makes sense not to take that nice family down with you if you make a foolish choice.-

Or if something goes wrong.

-Which do you think more likely?-

…Hush you.

-So, to keep the family safe, beyond question?-

Yeah… She would consider it. There were also an almost infinite variety of options for the implementation.

Many were even teleport functions, which were more expensive, and they generally had other problems. *Which explains why I thought it simply couldn't be done.*

-Well, it's highly inadvisable but still probably worth asking.-

Sure. I'll do that in a bit.

The most common drawback was that nothing mundane, and nothing alive, would endure the teleport. On the plus side, such a method wouldn't bring a tide of beasts in its wake.

Well, if I'm dead, that's not my problem either?

Alat snorted. *-I mean, you aren't wrong, but it still seems a bit inconsiderate.-*

Tala grunted. *They'll have all my stuff to pay for any damages caused.*

-True… You don't want anything to go to your siblings?-

I mean… maybe? I hadn't really considered it.

-Most Mages—and almost all Archons—set up a will, you know.-

Of course, I know… I—

Her magic, near her gate, vibrated with an inquisitive squawk.

Tala grimaced. "Oh, that's going to take some getting used to."

She opened Kit, and Terry flickered out to her shoulder.

As he perched there, he fluffed his feathers up proudly.

"Yes, you are very clever."

He bopped the top of her head.

"Oh! I wasn't being sarcastic."

He trilled in an irritated tone.

"Fine, I was being a little bit sarcastic, but you are quite clever."

He shimmied down into place and huffed contentedly.

“I’m glad that you can ask to come out.”

Terry chirped happily, and they continued on their way together.

The next two days passed quickly, and Tala found herself back at the Constructionist Guild for two purposes.

First, Master Simon was putting the last of his work things into Kit, and it was simply easier for her to come to him.

Second, her sheath was to be finished by this point.

Master Simon met her in the entry hall and led her back to his workroom. There was very little left in the space, save the furniture, which seemed to belong to the guild.

One thing was new, however. It was clearly out of place, and it positively radiated unattuned power.

The odd net of precious metals rested to one side on the main worktable, beside a simple, mundane, wooden box.

“What’s that?” She pointed directly at the small net.

“That is available to you, if you desire it.” Master Simon didn’t even glance at it, indicating that he’d expected the question.

What kind of prepared answer is that?

-Clearly a hesitant one? He does seem to be avoiding the item just a bit.-

Tala sighed, shaking her head. “That doesn’t answer the question.”

“It is a dimensional storage retrieval mechanism. If you agree, it will meld with the outside of your pouch, and if you die—in this case, this would require your soul moving on to the next world—your sanctum will be transported back to this guildhall.”

She gave him an incredulous look. “That has to be incredibly expensive. Why under the stars would this be ‘offered’ to me? Does it come with a price tag?”

“Now? No, but it does have one.”

She arched an eyebrow but waited for him to continue.

He finally turned to face her and the item. “The Constructionist Guild would become the owners of your sanctum and all its contents upon your demise.”

Tala opened her mouth to object but found herself hesitating.

All things considered, it was a very reasonable offer.

Kit was, possibly, entirely unique in the world, though the arcanes may have something *like* Tala’s sanctum. No two living creatures were ever exactly identical—even identical twins diverged.

And Kit’s value was even greater when considering all that she contained.

Still, everything in her sanctum? That was a lot. *That is an obscene cost… that I’ll never have to pay?*

-*Yeah… It makes sense for them, because the value of what you’ve got in Kit is many,* many *times the cost of even something like this.*- Alat hesitated. -*Well, actually, I have no idea what something like this would cost.*-

Tala shook her head slowly. “How long would the agreement last? What are the implications that I am not aware of?”

Master Simon nodded. “The agreement would last until you have soul-bound your sanctum. At that point, this artifact wouldn’t be able to move it. If you wanted something to this effect at that time, it would require an utterly different type of item. It’s not easy to gain access to, and breach, an untethered dimensional space, after all.”

“I thought that dimensional storage items couldn’t be teleported? Even if it worked, wouldn’t it cause all sorts of damage and danger for what and who was inside?”

“Yes, and no. Excellent questions. The easy answer is: the storage space, the actual sanctum, wouldn’t be teleported at all.”

Her frown deepened. “If that sort of distinction is enough to get around the difficulty of teleportation, then why… Why wouldn’t this be used to transport goods or people?”

He sighed, shaking his head. “Well, I was informed that if you asked that, I was to tell you something that is… outside my understanding—”

Tala cocked her head to one side. *What the rust?*

-Something beyond his comprehension? He’s been working for a top guild member for years. What on Zeme could this—-

Master Simon continued without pause, “and if you have any questions, you should *not* ask them of me, as that could convey information that I am not… ‘ready’ for.” He grimaced at the last. “Are you ready to hear it?”

She gave a half-smile, pulled out of her internal musings. “Well, you had my curiosity, but now you have my attention.”

“Good, because I can only say it once. Master Grediv assured those who gave me these words that you were knowledgeable around the topic, whatever it is, but they were skeptical.”

“You’re building it up too much, Master Simon.”

“My apologies.” He bowed slightly, then pulled his slate in front of him, clearly reading it exactly. “These magics would act directly on the fragment that is your sanctum’s anchor. The threads follow the node. It is—and can only ever be—a single-use addition, though it can theoretically be re-made and re-applied. Finally, the magics involved make it a near straight trade

in value for the items and knowledge that Master Xeel knows are within. He was consulted before this offer was solidified, and he recommends you accept, as does Master Grediv."

Tala had paled. *Direct manipulation of the nodes of reality again?*

-That does seem to be the cornerstone of higher magics.-

Clearly, but it also seems like it doesn't usually come into play until Archons achieve Paragon.

-Viewing everything from a 'next world' mindset? Could that factor in?-

That might be part of it. What if that advice is more 'see things as they really are' than 'don't sweat the small stuff?'

-I never thought it was meant in the vein of 'don't sweat the small stuff.'-

You know what I mean.

-Yeah, I do.- Alat sighed. *-It's probably a mix?-*

Also, what the rust, Master Xeel? Did he go snooping through the whole sanctum?

-Well, we basically admitted to bringing taboo and forbidden weapons of war back with us. Are we surprised that they checked to see if we were hiding even more unconventional things?-

I suppose not… Wait… the value of that is a straight trade *for the value of everything in Kit?*

-That's what they said, yes.-

They know I have Io in there. That automaton should be utterly unique… what under the stars went into creating such an item?

-Well, we can ask Master Xeel if we ever see him again.-

Yeah… we aren't allowed to ask Master Simon.

Master Simon had just looked up from the slate, a clear lack of understanding evident in his features. "My apologies if that's not helpful. I mean, I understand the bits about it being *really*

expensive." He chuckled. "I saw your sanctum, and I'm sure I didn't even get to see the best parts. For something to match your sanctum in value?"

Tala nodded absently, still considering.

After a middling pause, he cleared his throat. "If I may be so bold?"

She glanced his way and saw how nervous he looked. "Speak your mind, Master Simon. Ideally, we'll be working together for a while, and I'd rather you speak when you have something to say."

He nodded. "Thank you, Mistress." He swallowed, then continued. "I know it is poor form to try to sway a Mage on their bound items, but it would be a great comfort to myself and Mistress Petra if you were to agree to take this item. We know the risks, and we are willing to accept them regardless of what you decide. Nothing is free in this world, nowhere is fully safe, and these risks are worth the rewards, even with you being out of the cities much of the time."

He was clearly rambling, but Tala didn't interrupt. *Let him get it out.*

"Having a fallback, in case the worst should happen…" He shook his head. "I know that I could be out of the sanctum when you die—if you die. Our agreement means that I may come out to assist you in dangerous places, and this would strand me. But… but it would safeguard my family and remove any concern for their well-being from either of our minds."

Tala found herself nodding. "That does make sense. Will it work anywhere? Or will I have to be careful if I enter an ether hold or"—she stopped herself before adding on a list of things that Master Simon likely shouldn't know about—"the like?"

"They said that it would return the dimensional storage to the appointed place from anywhere, in reality or otherwise." He clearly didn't really know what that meant.

"I mean, alright. Are there any implications or restrictions on Kit?"

“Your sanctum will not be negatively affected. You will have to provide a bit more power to… Kit than you would otherwise, but it will simply pull from the grid-node that we will install in the coming weeks. Until then, it will pull from the city.”

Tala thought about it before nodding. “I’m open to the idea, I’m even leaning toward acceptance, but I want to think on it a bit more, first. Is that alright?”

“Absolutely.” He placed the item in a small, mundane chest and closed the lid, seeming grateful to have it stored away.

After that, they basically tossed the remaining items through Kit’s door, and they were done.

“Well, I’ll see you on the inside I suppose.” He smiled and bowed.

“Yeah. Enjoy your research!”

His wife was already at work within Kit, and it wasn’t a school day, so Metti, Segis, and Karsa had joined their mother.

Without waiting longer, Master Simon stepped into Kit, joining his family.

The door shrank, and Tala placed the pouch on her belt.

That left her alone in an emptied research workshop.

It was odd to feel the haunting quality of a room that was intended to be filled with activity, now empty.

There were a few odds and ends that Master Simon had collected into a box on one of the tables, along with the box containing the recovery net.

Not now. He left it here, so it must be safe enough in this room. Either way, it’s not my responsibility.

-Sure, sure. I do agree with you. It’s a good idea to take it.-

Yeah. Even so, I want to ruminate for a bit. I want to make sure I’m not rushing into anything.

-…Who are you?-

Hush, you. That's not very nice.

-Alright, alright. I suppose I'm glad that you're taking a careful approach.-

Tala scanned the room one last time with her eyes.

There wasn't dust or debris; it had obviously been well taken care of, and even if she hadn't helped with the final move-out, it was obvious that the current state was recent.

The atmosphere of the place was just… odd.

And, let's go!

A few minutes later, she knocked on the door to Mistress Airim's workshop, and the woman called from within, "Come in!"

Tala opened the door and stepped inside. "Hello, Mistress Airim. I trust that the day is treating you well?"

The woman didn't turn around as she let out a huff. "You trust I've finished your sheath, you mean."

Tala felt a smile pull at the side of her mouth. "That, too, yes."

"Well, I both finished your sheath and have been having a good day, thank you." She waved her hand. "It's there."

Tala looked around and easily saw one table cleared of the otherwise-pervasive clutter, set up just inside the door to the left.

It was barely inside the workshop, so she shouldn't expose herself to any deeper scans than she'd been subject to last time she visited Mistress Airim.

In the center of the mostly empty table lay a sheath of truly *massive* proportions. *How did I miss seeing that when I came in?* "What is this?"

“A sheath. Is that not why you are here?”

Tala walked over and looked more closely at the sheath-like-object that was as long as she was tall and half as wide as the table. It was a construction that looked more woven than forged, and it was a purposely uneven weave of numerous precious metals, interlaced to make the artifact’s spellform. “What’s with the sizing?”

Mistress Airim still didn’t turn away from whatever she was working on. “It’s a perfectly normal size.”

Tala drew Flow, pushing it into its sword form and holding it up. “Then what is this? A sword for ants? My weapon would have to be at least… three times bigger than this in order to not just fall inside like it’s a box.”

Finally, the constructionist turned around, her eyes taking in the sheath on the table. “What are you talking a— Gah!” She looked genuinely startled. “Well, that is bigger than it was a bit ago or than is standard.”

“Is it this odd size because it’s a morphic sheath?”

“Well, yes. They change all over the place until bound to a weapon, but that is… that is a bit unusually big. Quite a bit outside the standard, but I suppose not actually outside of possibility.” She shrugged.

Even as they were talking, the sheath began to shrink but somehow lengthened as well. Now, it looked like it was sized for a normal-width sword, but one that was extended to be a full seventy-three inches long and slightly curved.

Tala gestured at the sheath.

“Why do you need this extreme range of shapes? See? Who could even wield a weapon like that?”

“I don’t know, some long-haired, pretentious moron who thinks himself worthy of judging others? But morphic is morphic. The only limit is power.”

“That’s… a highly specific example?”

“That’s the fun of making things up when you don’t know what you’re talking about. You can be ridiculously specific, and no one can gainsay you.”

“Sure.”

“In any case, sheathe your weapon, and it will bond. That will fix its size and shape to your weapon.”

Tala shrugged, pushing Flow into the ill-fitting sheath. There was a magical pulse, and the intricate interweave of metals began to flow and rippled throughout the sheath along with waves of power.

The metal pulled inward, contracting the massive construction as it tightened to perfectly fit Flow’s sword form.

Tala felt a momentary surge of magical need from the weapon as it fed the sheath, and she didn’t interfere with the draw.

The increased pull calmed down shortly after.

Flow now had a perfectly fitted sheath that was *incredibly* thin, looking more like metallic paint on the blade than a sheath.

Of course, Flow didn’t *have* a blade in its sword form, but the wire in the shape of a blade was now completely hidden. The sheath also extended around the crossguard, locking itself in place.

Tala somehow knew that it would only take a thought to release that, but she didn’t need to remove the sheath at the moment.

She moved Flow through its other shapes, and the sheath altered seamlessly to match, only requiring a whisper of power to modify its shape.

“May I test the defusing properties?”

“Of course. Target that empty table, please.”

Tala nodded, pushing Flow back into sword-shape. With a practiced motion, Tala brought Flow down on the tabletop with incredible power.

An explosion of force radiated outward from the impact, and the tiles on which the table rested cracked, releasing puffs of dust and magic.

Tough table.

-Magically reinforced.-

Clearly.

She watched the tiles repair themselves, lifting the table a bit as they reshaped.

And a self-repairing floor?

-She knows what she’s about, it seems.-

“Well, Mistress Tala? Are you satisfied?” The constructionist had a self-satisfied smile, completely confident in her product.

With a shrug, Tala hung the new sheath from her belt, tucking the old one into Kit. “It looks good, thank you.”

Chapter: 41
Metti, Segis, Karsa, Petra, and Simon

Metti giggled as she ran and played beside the unnatural creek.

There was nothing wrong with the water, and the dirt and rocks that acted as bed and banks were normal enough, but even Metti knew enough to realize that water didn't flow in a circle.

She didn't actually know how many times she'd followed the water through a full circuit over the last days, ignoring the offshoots and inlets, scrabbling across the paths and under the bridges that crossed the flow.

It doesn't end! She giggled again. *And it's always downhill, the whole way around.*

The mystery was just too fascinating.

Not that anything in this place was really natural, though it did try. *It's not even winter in here, when it is outside.*

The seasons were important, and it was clearly a mistake that they didn't align.

In truth, she hadn't been following the creek without interruption whenever she played around the water. There were too many pretty flowers to smell, plants to poke at, and cute animals to try—unsuccessfully—to sneak up upon.

Why won't the bunnies let me pet them…? She pounced, but the latest fuzzy brown thing was already darting away.

Terry makes it look so easy.

Terry was the best bird.

He didn't sing as often as a songbird.

He didn’t wake everyone like a rooster.

He didn’t talk like some of Dada’s friends’ birds did.

Instead, he hunted her and taught her to hunt him in return.

She giggled, spinning around even as the quiet terror bird flew through the air in an attempt to land on her back.

“Saw you!”

Terry flickered, ending up on her head despite her attempts to keep him off.

“You always attack right after I pounce.”

He squawked in a way that made her laugh again.

“Then why do I keep doing it? Because this is fun!” She darted her hands upward, trying to catch a hold of the bird.

He flickered away and back with just enough delay to let her hands pass through where he had been.

“That’s so not fair.” Metti pouted, but she had a hard time holding the pout, especially since she knew it wouldn’t work.

Terry let out a mocking series of chirps.

“Fine…” She groused, but a smile was already fighting its way across her face.

He flickered to stand on a nearby rock, staring up at her. He knew what he was doing.

The smile won through, and Metti giggled again. “You want to play tag?”

The bird glanced pointedly toward the river.

“I don’t need to keep following it, not today. I’ll find the end tomorrow.” She just needed to look closer. The magic involved couldn’t trick her forever. *Magic is cheating.*

Terry squawked once, and she couldn’t quite understand what he was trying to say.

“You try to say too much at once. Speak less.”

He tilted his head, seeming genuinely confused.

Metti giggled. “See? That’s better. I now know that you don’t know what I meant. Your meaning is as clear as day.”

Terry flickered up to her head, where he bopped her somewhat hard before squawking.

“Ow! Stop that.” She reached up to fend him off.

He flickered away before she could swat him.

“What was that for?”

He chirped once.

She looked down and away. “I’m not being mean.”

He chirped again.

“I’m not! I’m…”

He chirped a third time, more firmly this time, and she stopped her protests.

She took a deep breath and let it out in defeat. “I’m sorry. I like you talking. Will you forgive me?”

Terry flickered to the top of her head and rubbed his face into her hair.

Metti giggled. “Thank you, Terry. You are best bird.”

This place was *amazing*.

She wanted someplace like this, and a friend like Terry, when she was older. Her time at the Academy couldn’t come soon enough.

Magic is so much fun!

Terry squawked, drawing her attention back to him.

“Right! Let’s play.”

* * *

Segis faced his opponents with courage in his heart and a blade in his hand.

He had no magic.

He needed no magic.

He was the blade, and the blade was all he needed.

It didn't matter that they had come upon him after he trained and was unarmored and tired; it didn't even matter that he only had his training weapon with him.

They would fall like all the rest.

"Segis! Lunch is about ready." His mom's voice cut through the morning air, pulling him from his imagination.

"Mom! I'm right in the middle of something!" He stood in the middle of a large training circle, a stick in hand. The funny Mage lady who owned this whole place had said he could play—*train*—in this place if he wanted, and he quite enjoyed the open feel and the solid footing.

"Well, finish up, then." He could hear the smile in his mother's voice, even though she was quite a ways away.

"Alright…" he called back just loud enough that she'd hear him.

Segis snapped his training weapon up into a high guard.

"You've chosen a poor time; I won't be able to be lenient with you. Not today. I haven't the time."

The assassins didn't speak as they swarmed toward him.

A training sword was not suited to quick, wholesale slaughter.

That was fine. He had options.

He broke his weapon across the side of the first attacker's head and took that man's sword.

From there, it was child's play.

Segis moved with perfect efficiency.

His foes died without pain.

Their blood flew away from him, leaving his clothes immaculate.

They charged him with wild abandon, giving no heed to the fall of their predecessors.

Segis was the perfect warrior.

When the last had fallen, he looked around himself with a smirk of self-satisfaction. *I suppose this will do for practice for today.*

However, he felt the smile pulling at his lips become tainted by disappointment.

Are there simply none worthy of me? None who can push me to my limits?

Such was life at the top.

His last enemy had fallen, and he looked down upon their bodies, realizing that the cleanup would be far, *far* more taxing than the battle.

He paused, nodding to himself. "Therein lies wisdom."

Perhaps he should turn his mind toward sagehood now that none could rival him with a blade.

The world transformed around him, and he stood on a council floor debating his adversaries with words rather than steel, but he cut them down all the same.

None could bring forth arguments that could withstand his mind and wit, nor bring down his own assertions.

Even so, his greatest opponent, Primas, stepped forward, a sneer evident for all to see. He tried to demand that Segis depart, but Segis simply shook his head.

“Truly, I am the greatest, and none can command me in any—”

“Segis! Lunch is ready!” His mom’s voice cut through his imaginative world once more, now with power infusing her words to ensure he heard them.

The council chamber shattered within his mind, revealing that he was still in the middle of the training circle.

He sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Coming, Mom!”

He looked around at his surroundings. It was a wonderful place, completely separate from outside, and just for them.

Maybe magic isn’t so *bad.* It did have its uses.

Segis ran toward his mother and lunch, but he paused as he reached the side of the training ring.

He glanced back, Primas coming back into view as Segis glared. “I’ll be back for you, after lunch.”

* * *

Karsa rested in the crook of a large tree, reading her book and enjoying the weather.

As much as she loved the winter, it was irritating to try to read outside in the snow, but it wasn’t winter in this place, so Karsa took full advantage.

As to the book, it hadn’t been assigned for school and was probably not on any recommended reading list, but she had found it, and she was loving it.

Even with a good book in hand, she couldn’t put her environment fully out of her thoughts. It was an odd thing, this forest in which she sat.

About one in every ten trees was an old-growth monster, and the other nine were barely a few years old.

The effect was like some city had logged the area haphazardly then felt bad, and so they replanted around the remaining older trees.

Even so, *this* tree was perfect for sitting in to read.

Karsa snuggled down into her seat a half-dozen feet off of the ground.

Unfortunately, all good things come to an end, and she finished the tale.

It hadn't been the longest book, and she'd wished it could have gone on a bit longer, shown a bit more.

Well, I suppose there doesn't have to be romance in every book… Might have been a nice addition, though.

She had plenty of time until they all left for the day, and soon enough, they would be living in here.

They'd have a lot of time in here before long, so she wasn't in a hurry to see all the interesting sights or find all of the secret places.

I can't wait until I get my Archive slate. The books held within the Archive were beyond easy count. *I can queue up so, so many.*

Her mom already had it, but she wanted to get it 'ready' for Karsa before Karsa got it for her use.

Soon enough, though, she'd have *all* the books.

Karsa was greatly looking forward to many days in the tree.

She made her way toward the pens and pastures where the livestock of this odd place were housed.

Sometimes it was hard to tell, but this was not a normal place.

Karsa knew it was true, though. After all, she'd walked through the front door of her own house to enter here. She knew this place wasn't outside her family's house.

More than that, the door she'd come through had disappeared as soon as it had closed behind her.

Dad had told her all sorts of tales about the magic he worked with, but she hadn't really understood the extent.

She looked around herself.

Beautiful paths of gravel or stone, lush plants in vibrant colors, flowing water, and singing birds abounded.

In the distance, she could see animals moving among the smaller trees.

A pervasive peace seemed to fill the very air.

Deep within her chest, she felt something stirring.

She knew that she had a gate, everyone did, but it wasn't something that she thought about often, even with all her older siblings having gone off to the Academy.

That had never *really* appealed to her; she hadn't seen much point to becoming a Mage. Most good things she experienced from magic were available to anyone within a city.

More importantly, her favorite stories weren't about Mages. Instead, they were about gateless, striving against all odds and the world itself.

But even after just a few visits to this place, this sanctum… she found herself wanting more.

She wanted to see real magic, not just the tame devices and conveniences available in the cities.

She found herself wanting to *wield* magic, to claim places like this sanctum for her own, to leave her mark on the world.

In truth, Karsa had finally decided to follow in her family's footsteps.

She wanted to be a Mage.

* * *

Petra worked the dough, again and again.

The grains available as sanctum crops that were intended for Mistress Tala were *slightly* different from the wheat and oats she was used to working with, so it had taken her a few tries to make a proper laminated dough.

The early attempts were failures, and the Refined had still gushed about how delicious they were, but they hadn't been *right.*

This time, Petra was sure she'd taken the variation in ingredients properly into account.

She still disdained the arcane *contraption* that could have beaten the dough with a rotary paddle, powered by the magic of this place. It was too unfeeling, too hands-off, and this was a new process for her.

She wanted to *feel* the texture of what she was working with. She could use the 'mixer' in the future.

While she let the dough rest, she worked to forward other parts of the meals she was currently preparing.

The counters were truly amazing. She could simply set a pan *anywhere* on it, activate a mechanism while indicating the desired pot or pan, and the cookware would heat up while sitting upon seemingly mundane stone.

Atop that counter, she had bacon frying and veggies sauteing. Additionally, on the other side of the kitchen, a large stockpot was simmering, slow-cooking a bone-broth.

Tendrils of power spun out of her inscriptions, flipping the bacon and stirring the vegetables, among a half-dozen other things.

At the same time, she turned to work on chopping other ingredients that would be stored for later use.

She was a whirlwind, constantly working on at least three or four things at a time, her magics constantly active at a level that she could maintain all day.

Some of her magics were applications of power, like those that stirred or flipped. Some were sensory, allowing her to check temperatures, tastes, or texture. And some were self-augmenting, keeping her limber and strong and helping her keep all her many tasks in the front of her mind and not cross the orders of operations or miss steps.

She found herself humming as the power flowed through her and her hands worked.

Every Mage had their own foundational understanding, but that had always been silly to her. In her mind, they all were just derivations or complications of hers.

Magic is useful.

Well—she allowed—those that didn't reference magic directly weren't so easily tied back to her own understanding, but it was only the fact that 'magic was useful' in *applying* those other understandings that allowed them to matter at all.

She did a little spin as she moved to the next task, checking the consistency of a batch of whipped cream her power was fluffing off to one side.

This recipe was for her family, so she tasted it herself and smiled contentedly.

Mistress Tala's was being made alongside, inside a specially scripted jar that trapped the magics within.

Those arcanes are a bit… crazy. Who would have thought to imbue magics regarding blood functionality into milk*?* It was effective, the liquid being similar enough to allow it to act as a carrier for the power, but it was still an odd concept to Petra.

Still, she was surrounded by things that were clearly the result of minds that thought *slightly* differently than her own.

The knives stayed sharp and even removed any humanoid blood if she happened to cut herself.

Human-made magical knives—if they had functionality beyond sharpness and durability—generally *healed* the cut made into human flesh, not that many paid for such extravagances.

This is less expensive, and who cares if the servants cut their fingers if the food stays untainted? She snorted.

That was just one of the easier oddities to notice.

Even so, working in this kitchen was a wonder, and Mistress Tala's appetite made the creation of every meal like serving a feast to Petra's entire extended family.

She pulled out the current batch of bacon and started another, allowing the grease to wick away on the cloth she'd prepared.

Then, the bacon removed, she placed the cloth on a designated section of a corner counter.

The grease vanished instantly.

Mistress Tala had apparently… negotiated with the sanctum. So, now any dish that was placed in the designated square would be instantly cleaned, and none of the food Petra prepared would be consumed.

That had been a confusing and frustrating afternoon…

Thankfully, they'd figured it out, and a solution was now in place.

All in a day's work here. She grinned as she moved back to her dough.

She was loving every minute of it.

* * *

Simon walked the perimeter of Mistress Tala's sanctum.

Kit. Her name is Kit.

He was not used to thinking of a dimensional storage as a creature, let alone a creature with a name, but he was in it now.

Literally.

He chuckled to himself.

Even as he considered his new place of employment, he continued to let the incredibly complex artifact in his hand send out its senses, probing the edge of reality.

Mistress Tala had kindly had Kit alter the illusion at the edge of the sanctum so that he could easily see where it lay.

Now, instead of it looking as if the rolling hills continued on toward the horizon, Simon could see the land drop off, immediately curving out of his line of sight.

He couldn't lean over and look because the space to do that literally didn't exist, but his detection artifact and enhanced senses told him at least that much of the story, sending the information to the Archive slate he held in his other hand.

As he reviewed the results, he marveled for what might have been the ten-thousandth time about how this place was beyond his expectations.

If he didn't know better, he would say that reality was *more* stable within Kit than within Zeme as a whole. The readings seemed to confirm that, but such would violate the theory of layered foundations.

The world fragment supposedly violates that theory.

He activated an inscription to facilitate an internal discussion once again, creating a second consciousness that specifically held the opposing viewpoint.

-A world fragment isn't a subsidiary reality. It's the original. Zeme is based upon the broken world, so, of course, the pieces that still exist can, and often do, have greater stability.-

The theory is based upon the foundational reality having greater size and primacy. A world fragment would have primacy, but size? No. It violates that part of the theory.

-Which is easier to break? A splinter of glass or a thin sheet of it, a mile across?-

That's a ridiculous example. He shook his head at the foolish argument that his splinter had grasped at. *By that logic, the universe itself should have splintered because it's too big.*

-Fine, but that wasn't my point, regardless. Something being smaller can *make it more stable.-*

Simon found himself nodding as he considered that. *It's a sound theory, at least, though I don't know of any proof.*

-Besides this sanctum.-

Besides this sanctum, Simon allowed.

He deactivated the working and felt a bit of weariness. He absently took out a premade food bar specially put together to reenergize him.

He didn't strictly need it after such a short back and forth, and certainly not with only one splinter, but he liked the taste, and it wouldn't actually hurt him.

So, in theory, a reality can be more stable if it has primacy or is smaller… That actually had merit. It made the theory of layered foundations almost worthless in general application, but it was better to have an accurate, non-applicable theory than an inaccurate one.

He shook his head, refocusing.

There was too much here, too much even for his information processing and analysis scripts. The artifacts that he'd brought to gather data and look deeper just made the problem worse.

This wasn't the project of a few years. He'd need half a decade just to figure out the things he would need to dig into before even starting any in-depth study.

He could see the spellforms and natural magics of three or four origins woven into the edge of reality here, working to stabilize and reinforce existence within the sanctum, and his artifact could see at least twice again as many.

Kit was as armored as any reality could be, but it was akin to a child wearing dozens of sets of armor.

Sure, hurting her would be difficult, but she should be unable to move.

But Kit could move.

Somehow, physicality within this sanctum was malleable, completely shiftable at Mistress Tala's will and by Kit's action.

It was a contradiction of everything he thought he had known.

He shook his head. *No. I'm approaching it like she's an object again. Don't treat this like an artifact to analyze. Treat this like an active working of a Dimensional Mage of incredible skill.*

That actually made a lot of things click into place, and some of the contradictions smoothed out. It wasn't a lot, but it was a start.

He nodded to himself. "Well, let's get to it."

Chapter: 42
Finally!

Tala felt like the next days passed in a blur as she continued with her slowly increasing training, spent time with friends, and allowed the researchers in and out of her sanctum every so often.

The teleporter still didn't work from within Kit, despite them trying a dozen variations, and they'd recently reached the end of their ideas. It wasn't impossible, they were sure, but they needed to do more in depth research into the fundamentals of the process. Master Simon's own work and study was now being fed to them as well, and that was sufficient for them to pair with their tests on the outside.

By the time she returned from Marliweather, they'd have another version or two ready to test.

Overall, it barely felt like any time had passed, and yet, she was currently making her way to Mistress Holly's workshop for her final set of tests.

And, hopefully, I'll be cleared for regular activity! She felt whole and unbroken, strong and unmarred by imperfections.

-Ahh, yes. To spar again and taste the gritty wonder that is sand.-

I don't think any of my previous sparring partners will push me to that.

-Terry.-

Tala hesitated. *That will be a much more interesting fight now.*

-Yes. Interesting.-

She was actually looking forward to sparring with Terry again. *Rane, too, and Master Cazor, if possible. There's lots for us to test as well, now that my power isn't pulling my body apart from within.*

Despite those somewhat dark thoughts, Tala smiled contentedly, thinking back over what had occurred over the past nine days.

Master Simon's research had barely begun, but he'd been able to give a solid recommendation on which grid-node to install within Kit, and they'd accomplished that with little difficulty.

Additionally, Tala had agreed to have the net installed onto the outside of Kit.

It was a fascinating branch of magical construction. It was effectively being magic-bound to Kit, rather than merged with it. As such, it could be reused for a different dimensional storage, in the likely case that Tala didn't die before soul-bonding Kit.

She was really glad for that, as the magics involved were actually beyond humanity to recreate and only actualized through the careful combination of several *very* elusive harvests. The rarity of the parts, along with the difficulty of proper construction, meant that there was no way Tala would have been able to get such a creation if she'd been forced to pay for it.

Now, however, she wouldn't have to temper her actions because she had civilians within Kit.

I'd have had to live a pretty boring life if I took them into full account, and they were counting on me to stay safe.

-Yeah, and I think your story would have been over, if you'd been forced into such a change.-

I probably wouldn't have died of boredom, but it would have been a near thing.

Aside from her feeling that it relieved her conscience of the weight of three children's safety, Tala had spoken to Mistress Odera, Lyn, and even Mistress Holly, and all three had recommended she do so.

Since the teleporter wasn't possible in the short term, it just made sense.

While Master Simon's family wouldn't be in as much danger as many in their world when traveling with her, they wouldn't be 'safe' by any means, and this little accommodation cost her literally nothing.

It had been incorporated without a hitch, beyond Tala watching closely and mentally insisting that Kit *not* eat the artifact as it tightened and sank into place.

Kit had even seemed… content? That wasn't right, but the pouch had accepted the mesh integrating with her exterior without a whisper of resistance.

If she'd still been in the arcane lands, Tala might have been concerned about a plot to kill her and take Kit, but honestly, anyone who could arrange for her death could just take her stuff if they wanted. There was also the fact that while Kit would return and be maintained for the short term, it wouldn't last very long in the grand scheme of things.

Thus, those who *might* have been most inclined to try to get access to Kit would lose out in the end, as opposed to simply asking to study what she had, which she had allowed Mistress Ingrit to offer.

There had been some cursory inquiries but nothing truly concrete, yet.

But that was getting off into the weeds.

With those two additions, the modifications of Kit's magic were completed for the near-term.

Mistress Petra and Master Simon had brought in raw materials, and Tala had taken a couple of hours to help manipulate them into place to fashion the beginnings of a living space for the family.

Kit did all of the work, but Tala still had to give the commands.

Beyond that, the teacher from the Culinary Guild came and went, spending nearly all of four days with the Mage and leaving Mistress Petra much better versed in the preparation of dishes, while maintaining their magical conveyance.

Per their agreement, Mistress Petra had recorded all the specific insights provided toward the creation of food for Tala. That way, when the woman left the position, her replacement would at least have a place to start.

Whether that is in a year or a century, she won't be my cook forever.

Tala slowly allowed the increase of the proportion of magic in her food until the harvests from her sanctum were the sole source of the ingredients made into food for her.

Kit was rather accommodating, though she didn't allow Mistress Petra to make requests directly.

-You are anthropomorphizing Kit, again.-

Well, Kit acts like she has a personality.

-All that's happening is Mistress Petra is sending us a message with the raw ingredients that she needs, and we wish for her to have them. Kit does what she does, and the harvests arrive.-

Kit could move anything within her to anywhere else. She could also exert *slight* force, such as pulling a berry from a stem or a leaf from a plant, but she could not process the harvests.

Mistress Petra still had to kill and butcher the animals as needed, processing the meat to lock in the magics imbued within, according to the methods of the Culinary Guild.

Honestly, the results were surprisingly effective.

Tala was able to compare what she saw with some memories, and it seemed like the Culinary method was at least as efficient at trapping the power within the harvests as the arcane methods.

I suppose the cooks have been working at this for a long *time and with very few resources. They learned to be efficient.*

-And now that they have Mages coming in to build on their theoretical foundations? It's no wonder that there have been massive leaps in methodology even in just a year.-

It makes Mistress Ingrit's position on knowledge more understandable.

-Yeah, imagine what we could do as a species if we didn't hold back any secrets and strove toward a common goal?-

Tala smiled to herself. *But then, would we really be humans anymore?*

Alat snorted in amusement. *-To be human is to strive for self-improvement and advancement.-*

But to continue, we need each other, and we must serve one another as if we were one and the same.

Tala gasped, almost missing a step as her soul resonated with the sentiment.

-What?-

I think… Did we just take a step toward Paragon? They examined their aura, and sure enough, there was the barest hint of green in the otherwise pure yellow.

-I'd estimate… a hundredth of one percent of the way?-

Tala smiled. *Still, that's something. We weren't even striving. We were… just…* Her eyes widened. *We were just discussing how our society has been set up to operate and why it makes sense… Do you think?*

-It makes sense that a society built and maintained by Paragons—and those even more advanced—would reflect at least some of the insights required to reach that level of advancement.-

When said like that, it was almost insultingly obvious. *So… does that mean we need to study civics?*

She was not keen on the idea.

Alat didn't have any more idea than Tala did, whether or not it would be helpful. They'd ask Master Grediv later. Mistress Holly had proven that she'd not say more about advancement than she already had.

With nothing more to consider in that vein for the moment, Tala turned her thoughts to what lay just ahead. *I have nothing else keeping me from visiting my family.*

-Assuming these tests go well.-

Yes, but they will. Tala could feel it.

She was more connected to her physical body than ever, and it was more in tune with her magics than she'd have thought possible, even just a few months ago.

Her natural magical pathways were perfect reflections of her inscriptions, not being the same but creating identical effects, and her inscriptions seemed to be functioning with an entirely new smoothness.

Honestly, Tala had never noticed any latency or roughness in how her power flowed through her spellforms, but now? Now, it felt like she'd been running with one leg shorter than the other for years, and they were now the same length.

-That's… That's an odd analogy.-

Yeah… not the best… It's like wearing homespun clothing my whole life, but now, someone has gifted me perfectly fitted silks?

-Yeah, that's a bit clearer. I feel like I've been utterly remade, though I felt some of that immediately. It's just clearer now.-

It does seem like it. From their investigations into their natural pathways, they both believed that Alat would now continue, even if Tala lost all of her inscriptions. She would be lessened, and it would need to be corrected, but Alat would no longer vanish until the inscriptions were restored.

All of her magics had been 'set' deeply in place, seemingly like Tala had been using them for decades or centuries, rather than less than two years.

I still can't believe I didn't set a record…

-Well, Betty the Blessed wasn't named that for nothing.-

Too bad we can't find out what happened to her.

-We may one day. She did always say she wanted to explore beyond Zeme. She could be out there, now, trying to find a way back.-

Or she could be a Transcendent and have forged a new humanity on some distant world.

Tala actually felt some hope in that. Even if the worst happened, even if Zeme shattered, or humanity fell here, they wouldn't find their end as a species.

Humanity would live on.

Tala glanced at her own aura out of the corner of her vision.

-No advancement. You're trying too hard.-

Fine…

Betty wasn't the only Mage who had beaten Tala in the speed of her advancement, but there weren't many, only a couple of dozen in recorded history, and none in the last few centuries. Thousands had been just barely slower, but again, most of them were from the centuries just after the advent of gates within humanity.

Those early years must have been truly brutal.

-Yeah, advance fast or die trying.-

In the end, the tests with Mistress Holly went exactly as well and uneventfully as Tala had expected, and the following morning, Tala was cleared to act without restriction.

Mistress Holly did implore her to act with caution, but that was more a general injunction than a statement that Tala needed to take it easy for any reason.

FINALLY! Tala was so exuberant that she had practically exploded out of the warehouse.

Mistress Holly had simply granted Tala and Alat access to the results and bid Tala farewell with a rueful smile.

She'd already secured a promise from Tala to return later for a demonstration of her reinscriber.

-This is impressive, Tala.- The alternate interface was clearly going over the results. *-Do you want to know the numbers?-*

Tala laughed as she jogged down the mostly cleared roads. The first true thaw of spring was still a little ways away, but the sun was definitely melting more of the snow each day than it had even a week earlier. *Not a chance. I'm not falling into that trap. I'll test myself and learn my new limits by more practical means.*

-That sounds wonderful! Rane said he'd reserve a training area for us; he shared the location. Take the next right turn.-

Tala barely kept to a reasonable pace as she followed Alat's directions to the indicated arena.

She rushed past the attendant, barely acknowledging the young man, thanking him and conveying who she was.

He didn't try to stop her or direct her as she clearly knew where she was headed.

She pushed open the doors into the massive, sand-floored space, and they slammed back against the walls despite each of them weighing as much as a few people.

Tala felt a bit abashed at the too-forceful entry. *Well, strength test, I guess?*

The doors began to swing shut, partially due to rebound and partially because they were balanced to rest closed.

Rane stood in the center of the space, dressed in only his exercise shorts, Force drawn, his stance firm and his features filled with anticipation.

He wasn't any more muscular than before, but something about his physique seemed more *solid*. Like the muscles he had contained more strength. "No need to wait. Let's get to it."

Tala grinned, a surge of jubilation building to a crescendo within her.

Flow *snicked* into her hand, sparring sheath firmly woven around the sword blade and guard.

She bent low into a runner's crouch, and at the moment the doors crashed shut behind her, she pushed off with all of her newfound power.

The sand vanished from beneath where she'd been standing as the immense pressure she'd exerted—along with the surface area increasing scripts on the bottoms of her feet—had temporarily locked a large section of it together, even as the force threw the chunk back against the doors, burying them and sealing the exit.

If she'd remained in place, she'd have fallen a good four feet down into a hole wider than she was tall, but she wasn't still in the same place.

Rane's eyes didn't even have time to widen in surprise before Flow struck Force.

Tala hadn't aimed for his weapon, but it was there to block her regardless.

She had aimed for the left side of his back with a wrapping strike, and he'd brought Force around to align with his side and parry the blow.

The impact sent out a wave of power that forced ripples into the sand as it resonated through the room.

He must have moved on pure instinct to block that strike.

-Or his perception has increased?-

Maybe, but he's only now showing cognizant surprise.

Rane's lips parted, and he pulled in a startled breath… as he punched her with his off hand.

The blow hit her shoulder like a charging bull, but Tala's stance was firm, and she wanted to test her own durability.

It didn't hurt even a whisper, feeling much like a strong poke would have when she was a student at the Academy.

Even so, there was a *lot* of strength behind the blow.

The power of the hit was transferred through her body and into the ground by way of her back foot, and there was enough force to drive that planted foot nearly six inches downward, creating a large circular depression because of her inscriptions.

The downward force also compacted the sand around the depression, and that exploded inward when the pressure had passed, still resulting in her leg being showered with chunks of sand up to her knee, many of which stuck, even if only temporarily.

Despite being slightly off balance, she ripped her back foot up and kicked at his legs even as she rolled backward to get her feet back under her.

He jumped over her attack, and an instant later, a series of *cracks* resounded through the arena.

Many of them seemed to have been from some of the clumps of sand that she'd carried with the kick tearing through the air, but some were from the stone of the wall behind Rane.

The sound was so unexpected that they both paused and turned to look, seeing a series of small craters in the wall behind Rane. They were in a nearly perfect line, along the arc of her kick.

What?

They exchanged a look and tacitly came to a silent agreement.

They let their weapons fall to hang by their sides, still in hand but not in any sort of fighting placement. Together, they walked over to inspect the wall.

In the center of each little crater were the remnants of a cluster of sand.

Rane looked at her, aghast. “What did you do?”

“Nothing! I just tried to kick you. Some compacted sand must have come along for the ride and been thrown off.”

The little craters weren’t deep, but they were there, surrounded by little cracks.

“Will that… be repaired?” Tala was a bit hesitant. *Do I have to pay for that?*

Rane shrugged. “I think so? They have a stone Mage who comes through and enacts repairs, but anything substantial is an additional charge.” Seeing Tala’s face, he quickly added, “This *shouldn’t* be sufficient to necessitate that.”

Tala frowned. “Even so, that’s irritating. Isn’t this room meant for high-level Archons?”

“Well, yes, and no? I told them we would be mainly fighting in melee, and that might have influenced the arena they gave me…”

She snorted a laugh. “Well, it seems like we might need somewhere sturdier to fight.”

“So it would seem.”

An hour later, they stood facing each other in a slightly smaller arena. The floor was still sand, but they were completely surrounded by a feeling of power.

They'd had to dig themselves out of the previous room because Tala had buried the door in sand. Then, they'd had to track down an attendant with the authority to grant them access to the higher-rated training rooms.

This one seemed like it would do nicely.

The stone of the room was actively reinforced with inset magics, powered by the city grid.

They had been assured that this room was at least as sturdy as the outer city wall.

The two of them could probably break the walls if that was their aim, but they should hold up to glancing strikes or the spillover from their clashes.

"Ready, Tala?"

"Absolutely."

He struck first this time.

Force moved almost lazily from her perspective, even as the air distorted around it from being forcibly compressed.

Where did he get this much physical power? She pushed off to shift herself out of the line of attack, even while she thrust forward with Flow, pushing her weapon into the form of a glaive.

Force *changed direction* mid-swing, knocking Flow aside.

What the rust?

There had been a trickle of power surrounding Rane as the change had occurred.

No, not physical power. He's augmenting his movements somehow.

They exchanged a startlingly quick series of strikes, and that trickle of power never manifested again.

Tala slowly drove Rane backward across the arena throughout the clash, and she began to frown in growing frustration.

Tala had always overshadowed Rane in sheer physical might, and even speed, but he had, overall, been her match due to his better foundation in the fighting arts and his magically enforced defenses.

His defenses still stood, but Tala had closed the gap in regard to technique.

More than that, she had surpassed him in that area.

He was still a master with his blade, easily showing as great proficiency as any his age could hope to achieve, but Tala had a second lifetime of experience to draw on, and far, *far* more brutal teachers and experiences to solidify her foundation, even if at least some of them hadn't actually happened.

When handling Tali's memories, Tala had discarded everything false, with the sole exception of leaving the foundations for her martial training. In that way, she didn't have any of the memories, but she still had the mindset that Be-thric had instilled on which to build Tali's fighting ability.

More importantly, as she'd noticed before, Rane's style was designed and tested against creatures larger and stronger than himself. He was built and trained to fight arcanous beasts.

Tala was trained to kill *men*.

Unless something changed, there was no possibility of Rane matching her for longer than a handful of moments.

She couldn't fully grasp how disappointing that was to her, and she knew that she would not be able to continue if this kept up. Obviously, her disappointment was clear in her expression and her actions.

Still, she saw a smile tug at Rane's lips as he was backed almost all the way to the far wall.

The next instant, *everything* changed.

Rane shifted stances from one reminiscent of the city or caravan guards to one that was more… casual? He suddenly seemed like an artist, critically examining a blank canvas.

Force deflected Flow, but as the weapons met, Flow was sent off in a completely nonsensical direction, the forces applied were almost—but not quite—perpendicular to the direction they should have been directed.

The unexpected jerk pulled her off balance for a fraction of a second, and Rane capitalized on it, punching her shoulder again.

She instinctively braced just as she had before, but his punch somehow *pulled* with as much force as it should have pushed with.

She was jerked forward, right into the path of the follow-up swing. Force's edge sent out ripples through the air as it ripped toward her.

He's actively manipulating the kinetic energy and momentum of whatever he hits.

-That's a level of control and a use of his magics that we've never seen before.-

It really is. A smile pulled at Tala's lips.

This… This would be a challenge.

Even as she moved to counter this most recent attack, her smile only grew.

Chapter: 43
Goodbyes

Tala grumbled even as she and Rane walked out of the arena.

"It's completely unfair that you don't have to contest my aura in order to manipulate the kinetic energy when we clash."

Rane huffed a laugh. "How many times do I have to explain it to you? I alter the vectors while they are imparted. You'd have to overcome *my* aura to prevent it from happening."

She grunted. He had told her dozens of times. She'd even managed to do it occasionally while they fought, but she still didn't like it. "It's still completely unfair."

Truthfully, Tala knew that she could have beaten him in a real battle. Rust, even in a truly intense sparring session, she would be able to achieve victory. She hadn't even relied on her Way of Flowing Blood in their fight.

That said, she also wanted to be able to spar against Rane in the coming years in Alefast, and no one enjoyed being crushed in a conflict. *Maybe next time…*

Even so, his ability to manipulate kinetic energy upon impartment was difficult to deal with. *Definitely next time. I want to make sure I actually can beat it under sparring rules.*

He shook his head. "I'll buy you breakfast as an apology?"

Tala sighed. "No… Mistress Petra's cooking is much better, and I think I want to be eating that exclusively."

Rane gave her a startled look. "Are you alright? Did my magics affect you that much?"

"What?"

“You’re turning down food.”

She glared. “That’s not very nice.”

A small smile pulled at the side of his mouth. “Accurate, though.”

She huffed but didn’t have anything else to say.

“You know, you can eat more than one meal. I’ve seen you do it before.”

“That is true, but somehow, the food with my magic imbued within it is… more filling. As Mistress Petra gets better at maintaining the magical content, it becomes even more so.”

“Huh, I hadn’t thought that would be the case.” Rane looked away, then gave her a side-eyed glance. “Does she have anything that I could eat?”

A smile tugged at Tala’s own lips. “Nothing magical, but maybe mundane. I’ll check.” She pulled Kit open, willing the internal side to come into being near the other woman. “Mistress Petra?”

The calm voice of someone who was obviously in the middle of something came back in response, “Yes, Mistress Tala?”

“Would it be possible to get a meal for my friend, when mine is ready?”

“You missed your breakfast, Mistress Tala. I have that ready, now. I can have something ready for your friend, too, in under ten minutes.”

Tala felt a bit shell shocked. *I missed breakfast?*

She thought back on it, and yes, she had.

She had gone straight from Mistress Holly’s workshop to the arena.

Tala hadn’t thought about food at all since she’d been so excited to test herself that she hadn’t considered anything else.

“Yes, that would be wonderful, thank you.”

“Happy to be of assistance.”

Tala closed the pouch and glanced toward Rane, seeing a truly concerned look. “I was joking before, but *are* you okay? I don’t know that I’ve ever seen you miss a meal when you were conscious enough to eat it.”

She grimaced. “I’m not *that* food oriented.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it and shook his head. “If you say so, I suppose.”

They found a nearby park—as neither of them were really bothered by the cold—and waited for their meals to be ready.

Instead of filling the time with inane chatter, Tala and Rane simply enjoyed the silent stillness of a walking-park in midmorning and didn’t speak even after they’d found a nice bench on which to break their fast.

A few minutes later, Rane turned to regard her. “So, you’re leaving for Marliweather tomorrow?”

She nodded. She hadn’t been circumspect about her plans. “I need to see my family, now that I’m back.”

“You’ll be there for… what? A month or two?”

“Something like that. It will depend on how things go. Plus, there’s the travel there and back, but that shouldn’t take me too long.”

He nodded. “I can understand that. Family can be… complicated.”

She grunted in return, remembering her two interactions with his older brother.

“What about after? Do you have any concrete plans?”

She shrugged. “I was thinking of spending the Waning in Alefast. See what that’s like, help out how I can, learn what I’m able.”

Rane chuckled. “That makes it sound like a holiday or festival instead of something that most sane people avoid.”

She grinned in return. “Well, I won’t claim to be sane from a mundane perspective. For me? It might be a sort of holiday.”

“That’s a long holiday. I think it’s supposed to be a bit more than twenty years until the Waning is finished.”

That was true. She would be almost twice as old as she was now when the Waning was complete. “Still better than waiting nearly fifty years to watch Makinaven’s Waning.”

“Yeah, and forest cities experience it differently.”

“Not to mention southern forests and I don’t exactly mix well.”

“That’s the truth.” He quirked a smile.

“All that to say, I’m not fully decided, but I do think I’ll be moving over to Alefast, Waning.”

He nodded in understanding and didn’t interject again. He had already known that this was something that she’d been considering. So, she hadn’t expected it to be a surprise.

Even so, she’d never told him or Lyn that she’d made a final decision.

This was mainly because she hadn’t.

-Yes, you have. You just won’t admit it because such a long commitment is scary.-

Hush, you.

-Master Nadro says you need to be more honest with yourself.-

Tala ignored that, waiting for Rane to comment further, and when he didn’t, she continued, “While based in Alefast—if I go that way—I’ll probably explore some, rather than just sitting behind the walls, but I definitely want to experience the Waning at various stages.”

If we do go, then maybe we can snag Artia, Adrill, and Brandon to aid in research?

-Yes, 'if.' They might be interested, once the Waning reaches its end.-

Rane nodded. "I understand it's an interesting process, one you have to see to truly understand. There are far worse ways to spend the time, all things considered."

"Yeah, I've heard the same."

She felt a vibration within her power and opened Kit. "Mistress Petra?"

"Here you are." The woman's voice was cheerful and welcoming.

"Oh! Thank you."

Two trays were passed out, one obviously for Tala, the other for Rane.

"Thank you, Mistress Petra."

"You're welcome, Mistress Tala. Are you in a place where we can exit?"

"Yes." Tala set Kit on the ground, and she grew upwards into a door, which almost immediately opened to let the family out.

It was a bit earlier than they'd agreed, but the family each had people to see and places to go as a final goodbye in this city. There was no reason for Tala to force them to stay around.

Mistress Petra smiled. "Your lunch is already prepared. You should be able to grab it at your leisure."

"Thank you."

The older ones bowed to Tala and Rane, and Metti waved vigorously before they headed off to do what they had planned.

With the family departed, Tala and Rane turned back to their breakfast.

Tala's tray was loaded with at least four times the amount of food as Rane's, and every bit of it was *packed* with power.

Rane gave her food a skeptical look before focusing on his own with a bit of confusion. “Wait, this tray is an artifact?”

She smiled. “The arcanes didn’t give me the items to host a large group, but my sanctum is packed with random conveniences.”

“Like trays that maintain the temperature of every part of everything they hold, independently?”

“Well, you don’t want your fruit or creme to get warm inside the crepe before you get to it, do you?”

“I…” He shook his head. “I can’t say I’ve ever considered that as a problem to be solved, but I suppose not.”

“That’s right you don’t.” She smiled. “And when I am eating this much, I can tell you: it is frustrating to the extreme to have much of what I eat come to a homogenous temperature before I get to it.”

Rane nodded at that. “I can actually see that, yeah. Room temperature food, unless it’s supposed to be that way, is often pretty gross.”

“Hence, trays.”

“And multiple because you often need more food than can fit on one tray?”

She huffed a laugh. “Well, *yes*, but also redundancy. Whatever I have that they provided, I have enough for me, at least five times over.”

Rane’s eyes drifted toward his food.

Tala grinned. “But enough of that. Let’s eat.”

He didn’t need any more encouragement than those words.

They ate their meal in relative silence, simply enjoying the excellent food and the lovely setting.

When they finished, Tala put the trays back into Kit, and they headed toward the guards' training compound.

Tala had been… delinquent in addressing this particular group of people.

She had no obligations to them. The class that she'd been helping Adam with had ended well before she'd disappeared, but he was still an acquaintance whom she'd not seen since her return.

There were all sorts of justifications for the lack, but in truth, she just hadn't prioritized it.

If it matters, you'll find the time. If it doesn't, you'll find an excuse.

-That's a little harsh. Sure, the aphorism is true enough under normal circumstances, but your circumstances were hardly normal. You're only now fully recovered.-

Tala grumbled internally but couldn't say that Alat was wrong.

Even in the cold weather, they still found the training yard full, as expected.

They were greeted when they stepped across the invisible dividing line between the yard and the street beside it, and one of those training went to see if Adam was available.

He was, and they spent the remainder of the morning catching up.

There was an oddly uncomfortable distance between them that had never really existed before.

They both seemed to be aware that they no longer had any real points of commonality.

They also no longer had the caravans as a point of contact and overlapping purpose.

Due to his experience, Adam seemed to have noticed that Tala was physically on an entirely different level than she had been before, and even then, she'd been able to physically dominate as many guards as they could throw at her.

Moreover, Tala could tell by the way he moved that—at least subconsciously—he saw her as a threat, which had never been the case before.

Obviously, Adam knew she wasn't going to hurt him, but it was similar to how she, herself, changed her actions when interacting with Kannis as opposed to with Rane, Master Cazor, or one of the others she'd sparred against.

She knew that she was always a bit more careful in how she moved around them, and now Adam was treating her in the same manner.

In a way, it was an incredible compliment. He seemed to be able to tell that her foundational understanding and experience in combat had grown dramatically.

It was a pleasant visit, but as they parted ways, both Tala and Adam seemed to know that they'd likely never see each other again.

As Tala and Rane walked away from the training yard, Rane was giving her an odd look.

"What?"

"You. You seemed… off in there. Like you were obligated to be there and couldn't wait to leave."

Tala immediately grimaced at the accusation, but before she snapped back at him, she forced herself to mentally pause and consider. *Were his actions a reflection of my attitude?*

-Maybe? I think you were both feeding off of each other. He's always been very perceptive, and I think he realized that you are not the same person who you were. More iron in the body and blood on the hands, as it were.-

She found herself nodding. "I didn't feel obligated to go, not really, but it did feel awkward to be there."

"Oh?" he prompted without being overly invasive.

“It’s odd.” She frowned. “When I was here last, I… I was so ignorant, so inexperienced. Now?”

They fell into silence, and Rane simply walked beside her.

Finally, Tala continued. “I’ve killed so many people, both directly and indirectly.” Her voice was small. “I’ve talked with Master Nadro about it some.” She huffed a short laugh. “It’s filled up a couple of our sessions, actually, but it hasn’t really felt as *real* as it did just now, being near Adam.”

“Why is that?” Rane’s voice was soft, genuinely inquisitive.

“Because he has spent his whole life training and fighting to protect others, and when push came to shove, I killed to save myself. I killed *so* many.”

Alat?

-*Yeah. I’m on it.*- The alternate interface would see if Master Nadro was available to meet up in the near future.

Rane was silent for a long moment, then he carefully asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

After a long minute, she nodded. “I think so. Let’s go to Lyn’s to set up Kit and talk.”

And so, that was what they did.

They spent the rest of the day walking the hills within her sanctum as Tala simply talked through her perfectly preserved memories of what she’d done to secure her position and when she was an Eskau.

They shared dinner while Tala continued to speak, but when they had finished, Alat interrupted.

-*Tala?*-

Yeah?

-Mistress Holly reached out via the Archive to verify that you are still coming by to show her the reinscriber before you depart.-

Right… Tala let out a long sigh. *I don't suppose we could skip out?*

-She might legitimately chase you down.-

I could see that, yeah. A smile tugged at Tala's lips.

-She's also been far more patient about it than I think either of us expected.-

That's rusting true.

Rane had turned her way. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just have to swing by Mistress Holly's shop."

He smiled and nodded, pushing himself to his feet, standing from where they'd been sitting the last hour or so. "I'll let you get to it, then. You have an early morning tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah. I've let Master Cazor know that we'll do the iron experiments when I swing back through, so I don't have anything keeping me from Marliweather."

"I hope you have a great trip." His smile was genuine and warm.

"Thank you. Are you going to be staying around here?"

"I think I'll head back to Alefast, Waning. There's a lot going on there, and Master Grediv probably has a long list of tasks for me by this point."

"Oh." She blinked a few times. "Alright then. I suppose I'll see you there?"

"If you come that way, yeah." His smile turned rueful. "Do you have any guesses on your timeline?"

"Not really. I'll stay in Marliweather for at least a month… probably. We can stay in touch through the Archive, now, right?"

“At least while I’m in a city.” He gave her a knowing grin. “Not everyone has your *connections*.”

“That…” She hesitated. “That was an *awful* pun.”

He shrugged. “I liked it.”

Tala huffed a laugh. “Fine.”

The door out appeared, and Rane gave her a deep bow as if they were strangers and he was trying to show respect toward her, befitting her superior advancement.

She frowned. “Is that really necessary?”

He smiled mischievously as he straightened. “No, but it is proper. Take care of yourself, Tala.”

She shook her head, dismissing his antics. “Oh, I will. In the worst case, I’ll fight my way free.” She grinned before giving a self-deprecating laugh. “If it was somehow worse than what I’ve already been through, assuming I’m not instantly killed at that point, I think it would take a Sovereign Boon for me to win free. But there is not too much chance of that actually happening.”

Rane opened his mouth, clearly a bit at a loss for words. Finally, he shook his head and smiled. “That would be unfortunate, but you’re probably right.”

“Goodbye, Rane.”

“Goodbye, Tala.”

He bowed again, causing her to roll her eyes even as she smiled. Then, he turned to depart. “Oh, no you don’t. You don’t get to leave with that smug properness.”

She covered the distance between them in an instant, careful to close the last couple of inches slowly enough that her movement couldn’t be mistaken for an attack by his magics.

She latched on, giving him what she suspected might have been a painful squeeze. *Serves him right, trying to leave like that.*

Rane laughed, hugging her in return. “Take care of yourself, alright?”

“I will. I promise. You, too?”

“I will.”

She gave him one more squeeze which he returned, and then he was gone, the door closing behind him.

Tala wished one of the communication stones to her hand, and Kit moved it there. “Is everyone back?”

They had arranged ahead of time that Kit would be back at Lyn’s house, so that hadn’t been an issue.

There was a short pause before Tala heard a voice coming back to her.

It was Mistress Petra who responded, “We are, thank you, Mistress Tala. Are we leaving early?”

“No, I just need to move the entrance for a bit, and I didn’t want to strand anyone.”

“We appreciate the courtesy. We’ll let you know if we need to leave for any reason.”

“That sounds excellent. I’ll be bringing Mistress Holly to the dais for a demonstration in the next hour or so. It shouldn’t be disruptive, but if you feel magics from there, that’s likely why.”

“Understood.”

Tala let go of the stone, and Kit took it away.

Let’s go.

Twenty minutes later, she was placing Kit on one of Mistress Holly’s walls, the inscriptionist looking more excited than Tala could easily remember seeing the woman.

-Want me to look through your memories to check?-

No, thank you.

The doorway opened, and the two of them stepped through, arriving in front of the dais.

Mistress Holly gestured Tala forward.

Tala grinned at the older woman. “What, nothing to say?”

“Well, we got this far before.”

She shook her head, her smile turning rueful. “I suppose that’s true.”

Without another delay, Tala hopped up on the raised platform and walked to stand near the center, just behind the command seat that she so rarely used.

“Ready?”

Mistress Holly nodded, tossing out a handful of artifacts that would be observing Tala with what seemed to be incredibly advanced magesight or something similar. “At your leisure.”

Chapter: 44
Let's See for Ourselves

Tala stood on her dais within Kit, preparing to be reinscribed as Mistress Holly observed.

She was also surrounded by a good handful of observation creations, which would be recording the whole process.

Honestly, Tala didn't mind the artifacts; Mistress Holly had requested permission earlier, after all.

With nothing else for it, Tala held her arms out to the side and forcibly deactivated her toughening inscriptions. *No need to make this thing work harder than it needs to.*

She set her mental framework for a through-the-mouth reinscription. She was *not* interested in getting naked in front of Mistress Holly when there were other options.

The frameworks and preparations in place, she spoke the command, even though she could have simply thought it, "Reinscribe."

Gold wire streamed out of the ground in a tight, intertwining bundle.

Silver and copper joined the gold but in far smaller quantities.

As the wires approached her, they tightened in on themselves in order to slip between her teeth and flow down her esophagus before they branched out. At least, most of the metal went that way. Some split off within her mouth to replace the metal she'd used up from the inscriptions within her head.

Each other branch got smaller and smaller as it flowed through her, splitting and dividing to cover every inscription, every offshoot smaller, until each was the size needed. In some cases, that was so thin that she couldn't have seen the filament even with her enhanced vision.

You know, that might not be true anymore. Her senses were even more enhanced now that she was Refined.

Still, it wasn't worth interrupting the process to somehow find a way to check.

I still need to get a good handle on my increased perception.

The pain had come the moment the metal had begun to branch out, but it was more than manageable, especially with Alat helping to mask what little her body couldn't ignore.

Thankfully, this wasn't an inscription from a blank slate, so there *shouldn't* be any agony in her soul or spirit, thus masking what pain there was shouldn't build up to a backlash.

We hope.

-We're pretty sure. Even if there is, it won't be too bad.-

And then we'll know.

-And then we'll know.-

All across her body, the metal flowed into place beneath her skin and throughout her body, no part of her spared.

As it worked, Tala could somehow tell that the reinscriber struggled to move the material through her. Even without active power running her inscriptions, her body was enhanced to the point that it took a *lot* to cause her harm.

Now that she thought about it, reinscription might only be possible at all because Tala truly didn't see the effect as harming her.

Arcane magics work much more on concept than I usually give them credit for.

-Yeah, I could very much see this not working for someone else of equivalent toughness because they thought it was harmful.-

After a short ten seconds or so, her inscriptions were reinforced, recovering the little metal that she'd used over the past weeks.

Thus, the process was complete.

Mistress Holly called her devices back to her even as she was nodding to herself.

Tala smiled, swallowing a bit of blood that had tried to leave her. "So? What do you think?"

"I think that my invention is not in danger in the least."

She barked a laugh. "Yeah, I can't imagine many Archons wanting to reinscribe this way, and fewer would have the healing scripts to allow it."

"Precisely. Still, thank you for allowing me to observe so thoroughly. I think it will be… insightful to review the process at length."

"I'm happy that I could help."

"There is another method, correct?"

"Yes, I could have had the inscriptions come from the outside rather than from within, but I thought that unnecessary."

"Wouldn't it have been less painful?"

"Absolutely, but I'd have had to strip down, and I'm tougher from the outside."

"Ahh, yes. I can understand your choice, then." Mistress Holly was nodding again. "I did notice that it even refreshed your new spell-lines, those that we added just before you Refined."

"That is correct, yes. From my understanding, it reinscribes based on *my* knowledge of my inscriptions. It's not that I have to know the placement of every line, but the process is founded

on the concept of my knowledge. Therefore, if I know that there has been a change, the reinscription will reflect that."

Mistress Holly tilted her head to one side. "That does seem to be the case. The operations manual you shared with me also agreed, as oddly put together as it was. Truly fascinating."

"Do you need anything else on this front?"

"Oh, no. I have plenty to analyze for now. I'll let you know when I want to see another demonstration." There were obvious embers of curiosity and imagination in the inscriptionist's eyes.

"That should be workable."

They talked for a bit longer before they bade each other good night, exiting Kit side by side.

Within Mistress Holly's workshop, the older woman turned to Tala. "Take care of yourself, Mistress. I know that I am not of as much use to you, now that you have that interesting bit of arcanum, but I am still invested in your continued success."

"I will keep that in mind. Thank you." After a moment's hesitation, she gave a shallow bow. "And thank you for all of your assistance with my Refinement, and before that with my inscriptions. I wouldn't be where I am without you."

Mistress Holly smiled. "It has been my pleasure."

Without further ado, the inscriptionist went back to work, and Tala headed back to Lyn's house to place Kit in the back hall for one more night.

As Tala walked back, she had a thought. *You know, incorporated metal* could *work through the reinscriber.*

-*That would be* insanely *inefficient on a level I don't even want to consider.*-

Oh, absolutely, but it might be worth it to get gold, silver, and copper incorporators to have in case of emergency?

-I can't imagine such inscriptions lasting even ten percent as long… but you're right, it would be a good emergency stop gap… if it could even work.-

Yeah, I'd definitely understand if those materials didn't quite work the same.

-Add it to the list?-

Yes, please.

* * *

Tala stood at the edge of Bandfast before the dawn of a new day.

It was the true edge, not a place like the city gate.

The city defenses ended barely two strides ahead of where she stood in the growing dawn.

Her fingers were practically tingling with anticipation, as well as no small amount of trepidation.

She hadn't been out of the city since Master Grediv had brought her to Bandfast nearly three months earlier.

More importantly, she hadn't been away from other humans since she'd arrived in Alefast, Waning.

It's okay. I can do this. A quiet part of her kept insisting that if she left, she'd be lost. *He's not waiting out there. He's dead. I know he's dead. I killed him.*

-*Tala? Are you going to be okay?*- Alat's voice was soft, soothing.

Yes. I can do this. I can be on my own. Tala forced herself to smile, feeling a little better even though the emotion started out as fake. *This is just a short trip.*

-Yeah, just a short trip. Besides, you have Master Simon, Mistress Petra, and their family with you. You aren't alone.-

Right, right. She took another deep breath, glanced at the nearest guard tower, waved in case someone was somehow watching her, and walked forward.

And just like that, Tala deliberately, voluntarily stepped into the wilds on her own, for the first time.

Wait, this is the first time ever, isn't it?

-I mean, in Alefast you went out to harvest endingberries.-

Right. That's how Terry and I really got to know each other… Speaking of which. She opened Kit. "Terry?"

Terry flickered forth, trilling at the sky as he stretched his vestigial wings outward and reached his beak toward the sky.

The majestic image was somewhat ruined by him perching on her shoulder and barely stretching up above her head, even while his left wing pushed against her face.

"Get off, you!" She flapped her left hand at him, even while she was laughing.

Terry chirped happily and flickered to stand beside her, now nearly her own height. He gave her an inquisitive look.

"I want to get an hour's run, or two, from here and then do some experimenting."

He squawked and took off, straight away from Bandfast.

Tala grinned and jogged after her avian friend, picking up speed as she got used to cross-country running once again.

They ran across the rolling hills, skirting copses of trees and avoiding the arcanous creatures that they could feel around them.

Terry seemed more interested in truly stretching his legs than in hunting for the moment, and Tala didn't feel like needlessly slaughtering weaker creatures.

Thus, for those first two hours they simply ran, letting the sky lighten just behind them on the right.

She had to move slower than on her run back from the arcane lands despite two counteracting differences. First, the magical density here was generally lower, causing magical resonance to not come into play until a higher speed. Second, and far more important, her own magical weight had increased, reducing the speed required for detectable resonance even in the lower ambient magic.

Even with Master Grediv's more efficient aura shape, she was still kept to a reasonable mundane running speed.

By the time it was a reasonable hour for breakfast, they'd gotten far enough from the city for Tala to safely test a few things.

She'd thought of doing these tests with Mistress Holly on watch, but her safety wasn't *really* in question, here, and so the variability in possible results mostly included things that would be bad for those around her, and that was best done in the wilderness.

Having decided to stop, Tala first found a bald, slightly higher-than-average hill and reached the top without difficulty.

With that vantage, Tala could see the magic of Bandfast's defenses, even if she couldn't see the city itself.

It was probably within her ability to leap high enough to see it, but that wasn't of interest to her at the moment.

She opened Kit, and after a brief exchange with Mistress Petra, Tala was able to pull out her breakfast tray.

She threw Terry a hunk of jerky that he flickered to catch before taking off into the surrounding hills, hunting for his own fare.

And likely continuing to stretch his legs. He's been really confined with me lately. I've got to make sure to allow him the freedom that he needs.

The meal was easily up to Mistress Petra's excellent standards.

The crowning feature of the breakfast was a laminated pastry with a hole cut down through the top layers. An egg had been baked—over-easy—in the resulting space, seasoned, and sprinkled with shavings of a hard cheese.

The result was stunningly excellent, and there were *five* of them for her.

By the end, as she finished the last of the side dishes, Tala even found herself pleasantly full.

She knew it wouldn't last, but it was enjoyable, nonetheless.

Her body was quickly incorporating the calories and nutrients, and her power was siphoning the magics from the food and layering them overtop of her inscriptions and natural pathways.

-*Alright. Are you ready?*-

Tala grinned. *I am. I hope that we're being overly cautious.*

-*Oh, definitely, but there's no reason to set off the city's defenses or blow ourselves up around mundanes.*-

You're not making me feel confident. She quirked a smile, not about to let some joking pessimism stop her.

-We'll be fine. Don't worry about it.-

Tala huffed a laugh, tucking the now-empty tray back into Kit. *Well, there's no way that I'm* not *going to try this. So, better now than later.*

With a flex of her will, she disabled her through-spike and called her iron from where it rested within the dimensions of magic around Flow and into her physical body. It obeyed with alacrity, rolling over her inscriptions and perfectly insulating them from the surrounding dimensions, leaving her body clear and uncontaminated.

There was an instant resonance through her power as her magics felt almost like they had been folded over on top of themselves, gaining greater depth and stability.

Okay, even this is way *better than when I was Fused.*

-Agreed. This would build nicely, and I would expect… there.-

Almost immediately, the magical resonance caused inscriptions as fine and intricate as lace to spin into existence, seemingly carved with light into reality itself, surrounding her entirely.

Somehow, they didn't block her vision, even though she could see the same effect manifesting before her eyes with her mirrored perspectives.

Now, the real test. She'd tried this before when she was already worn thin, and it had… gone poorly.

-Are you sure?-

Now or never.

-That's not really true.-

Oh, I know, but I still want to do it now. She had a momentary thought of her death and Kit being whisked back to the Bandfast Constructionists. She could practically picture Master Simon's face as he sighed and said something like, 'Well, that was a short job.'

-He'd be sad if you died, and not just because he lost the opportunity and the job.-

I know, I know. I was just having some fun with the mental picture.

With another flex of her will, iron flowed over her skin, giving her a perfect covering.

It moved with her easily, though somehow, she knew it would feel hard and unyielding to anyone who touched it.

Her magic responded, her inscriptions yet again echoing and reinforcing themselves.

Tala shivered at the feeling of power.

It almost immediately began to boil over through the dimensions of magic, but she had sufficient iron to closely cover herself across those directions as well.

The wreathing of light vanished, the magics that carved them now contained within another layer of iron.

-Amazing. That feels great. Better than when you tried this as a Fused. Again, I feel more*, somehow. Keep it up!-*

Tala felt her enhancements ramping up even higher and her efficiency increase, not due to the scripts being more efficient but because of an additional recursion being added on top of those already flaring through her.

The world became clearer as her perception was enhanced *further.* Each moment seemed to stretch on forever, not in that it dragged, but in that it felt like she had the ability to fully analyze *everything* before the next moment came to be.

It was more extreme than when she'd attempted this before. Even so, she felt her physical form rise to the occasion.

Her every cell was *bathed* in carefully calibrated power to a degree that was hard to describe.

This is going to be amazing.

Tala stood, stretching and feeling her muscles pull more strongly than ever before.

She felt like she could rip her own body apart if she pulled hard enough, even though she knew that wasn't true. Her ligaments and connective tissue were as amplified as her musculature, after all.

Her bones would have creaked under the increased pull, but they'd grown in resiliency just as much.

As she was completing her quick stretches, Terry flickered back into view.

The avian jerked backward upon seeing her, and he squawked inquisitively.

At that, Tala really looked at herself with a mirrored perspective, even as she reassured the terror bird, "It's me, Terry."

He squawked again.

Tala's skin was the dark gray of wrought iron. She looked like a masterpiece of decorative blacksmithing, with even her hair fully contained by iron.

The only breach that she could see was her eyes: blood-red on white, glaring out of a metallic visage.

The slight echoes of Terry's squawk faded from the surroundings.

"I'm not turning my through-spike back on. I want to see if I still create magical resonance." It was odd watching herself speak. It looked like a statue moving, but inside the statue's mouth was human. Her teeth were almost blindingly white, not because they were unusually clean, but because of the contrast with the dark gray of her skin.

Terry let out a long-suffering, descending series of trills.

"It'll be fine. Ready?" It was then that she really heard herself. The magics on her lungs and throat had been enhanced as well, and while they were in a passive state, they still added a power

and endurance to her voice which caused it to carry far farther. After all, Terry had appeared at the bottom of the hill, and he'd heard her perfectly, even without her specifically speaking louder or wishing for it to carry. *I have to be mindful of that.*

He turned and vanished with a flicker of dimensional power.

Tala grinned, crouching low before she pushed off as hard as she could.

The surface area enhancing scripts had been likewise amplified, and she effectively pushed on the entire hilltop at once. She wanted to go fast, so she allowed all of her weight—along with that of her iron—to lend inertia so that she could push harder.

The hill exploded under her, a shower of snow, bits of grass, and dirt billowing out behind her.

And she dropped almost straight down into a new depression.

What?

-Huh. That's odd. There isn't an underlying, firm foundation to compact the soil down against, like you did to the sand in the arena.-

Yeah, I need more mass behind me or to come up to speed more slowly.

-Something like that, yeah.-

How could a hilltop survive without bedrock under it? Why is it here?

-I have no idea, but the lack of trees seems to imply that it hasn't been here that long.-

Could it be the result of some fight?

-That is most likely, yeah. It doesn't even seem like there was much grass here, under the snow.-

In the end, they'd probably never know, but the loose nature of the soil implied that the hill hadn't been there for very long and wouldn't be around for much longer in the grand scheme of things.

-I mean… it's not really around now*, not after what you just did.-*

Tala chuckled as she walked to the edge of the now-lower hilltop. *Well, you aren't wrong.*

Chapter: 45
Tea at the End of a World

Tala calmly started down the correct side of the hill at a jog, completely sheathed in her metals.

She let her speed increase, vaulting forward into a loping run, bounding from foot to foot with increasing power.

Tala quickly passed the speed at which she would have built up magical resonance without the iron, and she only felt the barest amount of build up around her head and more so her waist.

Eyes? …And Kit and Flow?

-And likely your ears, nose, and mouth as well.-

That made sense. As she looked closer, there was also a general resonance around her clothing as well.

The elk-leathers. Her bound items were showing their issue.

Her scripts were *incredibly* efficient, she had inscriptions specifically designed to help reduce power leakage from her eyes, and she had surrounded every part of her with iron in the dimensions of magic.

All of that combined to a very, *very* minuscule magical footprint in reality, with which to resonate.

As such, she was able to get up to *far* greater speeds before she began to feel any echoes in the world around her.

Even as she worked to shape what little of her aura was leaking out, to reduce her magical drag, Tala was considering.

Is this what Master Grediv meant? That if I am able to completely contain my own aura then I can go faster?

-I honestly don't think so. Even if your power was fully contained within your body, without the iron, there would still be the same issue.-

Yeah… Well, we can ask him when we see him.

Terry was still faster than she was, of course. Though, he did seem to have to flicker forward in order to keep that advantage.

I want more. I don't need my eyes, do I?

-And you don't honestly need to breathe. It will take a bit more power, but that's not really an issue with the efficiencies we're seeing.-

With a thought, Tala closed her eyes and felt iron seal up the last points of egress.

Her internal, magical resonance took another tick upward.

She *almost* felt closed in, but her bloodstars were in place, providing her with three-hundred-sixty degrees of perception independent of her eyes.

It felt vaguely uncomfortable to not be breathing, but as it didn't build beyond that ambiguous sense of wrongness, it was easy enough to ignore.

She now looked entirely like an iron statue, eyes closed.

Now, Kit and Flow.

Kit was easy, flattening out against her leg before she willed an iron layer overtop of it, sealing it in place.

For Flow, she pressed the knife against the top of her left forearm, where she coated it and the sheath with iron.

It would be trivial to pull it free with a thought.

The elk-leathers.

She contracted it down to a simple band around her throat and covered it with iron as well. *Three pockets in the iron.* She felt a smile pull at her lips. *An interesting solution, but it seems to work.*

There was the issue that she was now quite obviously naked, at least in appearance.

Alright, let's see how we can do this.

Tala opened a small hole near the band at her neck and white metal flowed out, covering her utterly in a thick layer of protection and obscurity.

She then added another layer of iron on the outside.

In the end, she simply looked like a roughly human-shaped figure. *I look like a posable doll for figure sketching.*

-*Oh, yeah, I can see that.*- Alat hesitated a moment, then added, -*You know, you could just have thickened the iron around the places you wanted to obscure.*-

Of course I could have, but I wanted to test this, too. I think it will be a bit more effective in battle.

She felt *heavy* and defended to an almost ridiculous degree.

-*I call this your battle regalia!*-

That's… not a bad name, I suppose? I'll need to have my scalemail hauberk on to make it complete, but do we need to name it?

Alat shrugged in Tala's mind. -*Putting a name to it will help you cement the mental model and come back to it more easily.*-

Naming an outfit still seems odd, though I don't dislike this particular name.

-*You'll get used to it.*-

Probably, yeah.

Thus, Tala stood in her battle regalia; the only hints of power around her were from her four bloodstars.

One at the base of her neck and three orbiting her head.

Let's do this.

She came back up to speed once more, her steps barely heavier than before as her will naturally moved the iron along with her.

By shaping the minute parts of her aura that leaked out from the bloodstars while mirroring her perception, she could go as fast as she could propel herself without causing noticeable resonance.

Terry was a bit dubious of her new form but didn't cause an issue over it.

She and Terry chose to swing wide around a couple of founts that they detected, and three creatures of magic.

With where the magical creatures were positioned, Tala understood that they were known threats that had been accounted for already. Her attacking them would simply destabilize the route between Bandfast and Marliweather—maybe even the whole region, depending on how things shook out.

All in all, it seemed like she'd be able to make it all the way to Marliweather in just a single day, but then, she sensed something… *odd.*

Tala turned her head in confusion to look—even though that wasn't necessary or useful—as she worked to stop.

She left long furrows in the ground as she slid to a halt.

Terry flickered back to her side, clearly confused, even while he just as clearly sensed what she had.

"I—" The word caught in her sealed mouth causing an odd buzzing within her head, and she twitched away from the unexpected feeling.

Terry flickered a bit away at her sudden jerk, but he came back a moment later as the metal pulled away from Tala's mouth and nose.

She cleared her throat, pulling in a deep breath before she spoke, "I want to see what that is."

He cooed softly but insistently, seemingly deciding to ignore her odd behavior.

"Why would a simple Mage be out here on their own? There might be something wrong."

His second coo was filled with sad insistence.

"What do you mean I should leave it be?"

This time, he huffed and trilled quietly.

"Terry, they might need help. Why else would…?" She opened her eyes in realization, the metal shifting at her will to allow her to see by that means once again. "Oh…"

Tala felt her shoulders sink as the most obvious reason came to her.

"You think that they're about to become a fount."

Terry bobbed his agreement.

Even so, Tala shook her head. "You might be right, but I need to be sure. If someone got lost from their caravan out here, I'm not just going to leave them because they *might* be… broken."

Terry huffed again but didn't seem to object further.

“Let’s see for ourselves.”

Even though Tala had decided to investigate the oddity of a mere Mage wandering alone in the wilds, she proceeded with caution, keeping her focus on her and Terry’s surroundings.

Additionally, she mirrored her voidsight onto a couple of her bloodstars in order to cover what she could see through that unique vision as well.

What she saw took a bit for her to fully understand, but the implications were immediately apparent once she did.

As Tala neared the person that she and Terry had sensed, magical density and the strength of the zeme were dropping.

It wasn’t as if something was consuming the power. Instead, it seemed like this was simply a natural area of lower saturation in the already lower magical density around the human cities.

Additionally, the structure of reality appeared smoother to her voidsight the closer they got.

The fragments of existence seemed to be pressed closer together, looking almost seamless even under close inspection.

“You know, I never really thought about *why* founts were found where they are.”

Terry chirped quietly.

“I don’t know. I suppose I assumed that Mages just wandered a bit before… becoming founts, I suppose.”

He stopped in place, turning to give her a long look before returning his focus toward their destination.

“I never said I was right,” Tala hedged, feeling rather judged by the avian. “I even stated that I’d never really thought about it before.”

Terry huffed and didn’t react further.

“Fine, ignore me. Let’s just see what’s going on.” Just in case this wasn’t a Mage on the way to becoming a fount, Tala dismissed the remnants of her battle regalia form, returning her elk-leathers to the form of clothing, pulling the white metal back and allowing her through-spike to reactivate.

-You could have just made sure your through-spike had a path and allowed it to activate.-

I could have, but this seems better.

-As you say, it’s up to you.-

As it turned out, the Mage wasn’t all that far, and soon enough, they were approaching the source of what they’d sensed.

Tala and Terry crested a little rise, looking down on a dell in which an old man knelt.

From what Tala could tell, he was kneeling at the point of lowest magical density and highest stability in reality.

The man was well-enough dressed, though decidedly not in travel clothes, and it looked like he had been out in the elements for a few days at the very least.

His skin had an unhealthy pallor, and it was likewise suffused with an unusual amount of power, as if magic was taking over every part of him and slowly subverting it, somehow.

It honestly reminded Tala somewhat uncomfortably of her own recent, hyper-saturated state. Though her body was able to take the strain, whereas this man’s clearly was not.

Also, in her case, the power involved was specifically in line with all of her inscriptions.

For this man, the magic seemed far more crude, and it was woven through with something she couldn’t quite detect.

That makes no sense.

-I’ll see what I can figure out.-

“He really is becoming a fount.” She didn’t actually know how she knew. After all, she’d never seen the process before, but it was the only thing that made sense to her. At some level, deep within her being, she just *knew.*

She stared down the slope for a long moment, her mind turning to Mistress Odera.

If it was her down there, and I was another Archon…

-Tala. We don’t know what could happen. We know almost nothing about the process itself.-

I know, but we also don’t know that he can’t be saved.

-Yes, we do. That is one of the few things that is known with absolute certainty. There have been Archons at every level, with all sorts of magics at their disposal, who have lost family members to this, and they have been trying for centuries to stop or reverse it. It is a fact *that once they enter the fugue state, nothing can knock them free. There isn’t even certainty that they still exist within the body at all. Their consciousness, their personage, is gone.-*

Tala grimaced, wrestling with herself even beyond the discussion with Alat.

I’m going to try anyway.

Alat groaned in resignation but didn’t argue further.

“Terry, wait for me here. I don’t know what’s going to happen when I go down there.”

Terry chirped a couple of times, but it seemed more like a word of caution than trying to convince her not to go. He settled down into a crouch, fluffing his feathers and settling in for a long wait.

“I’ll be careful, but I need to at least try.”

She strode down the southern side of the dell, approaching the kneeling Mage from a direction that should allow him to see her approach.

If he can see anything at this point…

Tala stopped a dozen feet from him. “Good Master, are you well?”

The man didn’t react in the slightest.

Looking upon him, Tala was struck by just how human he appeared.

He had thinning hair that drifted around him in the cold breeze.

It was nearly as white as the snow, with a bit of gray and black peppered throughout. A leather tie held it in the last remnants of a tail at the nape of his neck.

He had crow’s feet beside his eyes, showing that he was a man of many smiles and a quick laugh.

The lines of his face were strong and firm as expected from a Mage. Even so, he looked to have been a kind man.

His eyes were vacant, staring past her and allowing her to see their crystal blue color like that of a late summer, cloudless sky.

His hands looked strong but only lightly calloused, making Tala believe that he had most likely been a Constructionist or of a similar profession, working with his hands but not to the extent to reshape them with heavy callouses.

His neatly trimmed nails added to this aesthetic and impression.

As she looked at his hands, she noticed that he clutched a piece of paper in one of them, tucked closely against his forearm.

Overcome with curiosity, Tala walked forward and easily took the page from his unresponsive fingers.

It was an incredibly lifelike sketch of a large family with this man centered in the group. There were still traces of power on the paper, indicating that it had been created using magic to render an actual scene into black and white.

His family.

On the back, a simple note was written:

'You loved us well in life and are loved so much in return even as you journey onward. We're glad that you'll be with Mom again. I love you, Dad.'

Tala felt tears trying to fill her eyes as she lowered the page.

Shaky, thoughtless hands moved for the first time that she'd seen as the Mage took the page back before returning to his previous state.

That was far more than she'd expected. *An echo of his consciousness?*

-Probably from his soul.-

And he's been reduced to this… What have we become? She looked at the man more closely, trying to memorize his features, which was silly given her perfect memory. She'd memorized them the instant she saw them.

She still had her voidsight mirrored to one of her bloodstars, and finally, at this close distance, she recognized what had been tugging at her awareness.

Nothingness.

Throughout the man's magic was woven the nothingness that had formed the visages of horror within the Doman-Imithe.

Her consciousness interpreted the nothingness as if she were in that place, causing her to see flickers of a too-wide, bright-white smile, filled with decidedly inhuman teeth in both kind and number.

Tala shivered and stepped back. *What is this? Why is that here?*

She forced herself to look more closely and found that a distorted grid of nothingness was permeating every part of the magic that suffused the man.

No, not a grid, a spell-form or something like it. The nothingness was so dark to her voidsight that it lost all dimensionality. It was the complete absence of magic, its direct antithesis, though Tala believed that she could detect some resonance with both void and reality.

Is this what drives us to become founts? Some sort of taint from the Doman-Imithe?

-And arcanes throw the bodies of gated humans into the Doman-Imithe when they die. What if part of the reason is to return the bit of nothingness that suffused them?-

Tala shivered again. *We need to watch this. We need to know what's going on, what's going wrong.*

She gave a deep bow to the kneeling Mage, already feeling like she'd been intruding. "My apologies, good Master. I need to witness your change. I don't know when I'll get the opportunity again, and it seems there is much I don't know, much I need to learn."

As expected, the Mage didn't respond.

To say he didn't object would be dishonest, as he was clearly not in a state to do so.

"If I can, I will carry word of your fate to your family. That is all the recompense I can offer."

-Tala?-

I… I am just imagining someone standing and watching Mistress Odera succumb, or Mistress Phoen, and I'd want to punch them with everything I have. Even so, we need to watch, and there's nothing that we can do to help.

-We don't even know where he came from. It is likely to be Marliweather, but we don't actually know.-

We will look. I said I would try, but it won't become my life mission if we don't succeed.

-That makes sense. Though… there is something else we can do…-

Tala felt herself nodding. *We can disrupt the fount after its creation and release him fully to the next world.*

-I'll check in with Mistress Ingrit and verify that we have the correct procedure.-

Thank you. The last thing she would want was to do it wrong, somehow…

Tala pulled back to the top of the hill near Terry, about fifty feet from the Mage, and sat down to watch.

Let Master Simon know what's happening.

-I will.-

Tell him that we'll notify him when the process comes to a head.

The man didn't move as power swirled through him, seemingly without end.

It was clearly coming from his gate, but Tala couldn't tell where it was going or even if it *was* going somewhere. She couldn't tell even after she positioned her bloodstars in a circle around him at a similar distance to herself.

She could easily penetrate all the way through him with both her voidsight and magesight, but she couldn't see where the power was going. It seemed to remain, but that shouldn't be possible. There was no way he had sufficient magical density to take all of it in, so she left that issue to the side for a moment.

Worst-case scenario, she could review the memories later.

Nodding to herself, she slowly took out her tea-making supplies, brewing chamomile with almost ceremonial slowness.

This wasn't a ritual that she was familiar with, nor was she attempting to make it one.

Even so, she felt the solemnity of the setting and didn't want to disturb it.

As the tea brewed, her thoughts turned to the sketch the man was holding.

He was the head of his family, clearly the anchor of a large group of people.

Sure, the Mage who had created the sketch could have made small alterations in the process of copying it down. They had probably taken some liberties to make everyone look a bit better, a bit happier, and a bit more unified, but there had been a quality of truth evident in the little things within the still family.

The mere fact that there was such a large extended family close together was telling.

The note on the back seemed to imply that one of the children had gone out of the way to somehow get the picture into the father's hand after he had given in to the pull of his Archon Star.

There were a large number of little ones in the picture as well.

Tala didn't truly remember her own grandparents, but she remembered how it had felt when they died.

It had felt like the world was ending.

She took up her tea and drank a long, calming sip.

Down there, a world is coming to an end.

Chapter: 46
Void It Is!

Tala contemplated the Mage in the valley below even as his own magics altered him, transforming him into a fount by unknown processes.

Was it worth it? The price for magic?

One answer came back quickly, as uncharitable as it was.

That is the price for mediocre magic. That is the price for failing to advance.

She knew that wasn't true even as she thought it.

Mistress Odera, until quite recently, could have matched or beaten Tala, in almost every metric of magical skill, despite having a handicap in her level of advancement.

No, becoming a fount was not a failure in effort.

Some just didn't have the capacity to advance further, and even so, they had tried; they had aided humanity in their own ways.

Their efforts were fruitful, sometimes nearly doubling the Mage's life and allowing them to contribute that much more, that much longer.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the first flickers in reality, a precursor to what was to come.

The information that Alat had been able to get from the Archive gave them some markers to watch for, so that they could at least have a rough understanding of where they were in the process at any given time.

Tell Master Simon that it's about to happen.

-He's ready.-

Tala quickly set Kit beside herself. The pouch opened briefly, and six small spheres rolled out.

Then, Kit grew upward until she formed a wall with a window in it. Through that window, Tala could see Master Simon and Mistress Petra sitting, prepared to watch from within the safety of the sanctum.

As Kit morphed, Tala picked up the spheres and carefully threw them with enough force to imbed them in the ground surrounding the Mage down below.

They were observation artifacts, feeding information to Master Simon's Archive slate and through Tala's connection to the Archive itself.

All of that took less than a handful of seconds. Thus, Tala was still able to give her full attention to the valley as a pulse of power reached outward, reality itself seemingly being bent and twisted to her voidsight.

To her magesight, the man was finally, fully saturated with power.

Even her mundane sight could see a fiery glow beneath the Mage's skin.

His cells. His body was being stuffed with power, far beyond their safe capacity, in order to…?

And then it hit her, and all the pieces came into place.

Somehow, the nothing was enacting either an attraction or a containment to allow the magic within the man's body to reach insane levels.

As she considered it, the magic had likely wiped the man's mind—utterly erasing his personhood—if something else hadn't done that first.

Is that what allows him to be taken over?

-Whatever eliminates his personage likely does, yes. Whether it's magical density? I don't think so; they don't have that much power when they leave, at least not according to the research we have access to.-

Maybe something else then. But it wouldn't be detectable if it was focused around their mind and contained by some means with nothingness.

-That's not really the best name for something, given that 'nothing' literally isn't something.-

Do you have a better suggestion?

-...No.-

Alright, then. We can ask Master Grediv if there's a better name for it when we see him.

As they had watched, the Mage had built up power to the point where his entire being matched the magic suffusion of the next world.

Tala leaned forward unnecessarily, witnessing the edges of the man's gate fade away. Rather than closing, the through-put increased manyfold.

There was a silent impact that rippled outward through reality to her voidsight.

Even her magesight didn't detect anything but an increase of power, and her mundane sight hadn't seen anything at all.

The restriction on magical power that had been acting on the man was obliterated, and his power radiated outward on the heels of the ripple in reality, flickers of flame scorching the ground across the whole valley.

The soil directly where the man had been kneeling was almost liquified by the heat.

Tala watched as the sketch vanished to ash and then into nothingness before the initial burst of heat.

-*Yeah, we're authorized to close a flame fount of this flavor.*- Alat's voice faded as she noticed what Tala was staring at. Her focus had been on communicating with Mistress Ingrit, so she hadn't seen it immediately. -*What the rust?*-

Tala's gaze, her voidsight, was locked on the fount.

There was no reason it should have remained.

A gate without a body or other containment should simply slip into the next world. Even the arcanes knew this, being careful to have artifacts prepared to contain and harvest founts. But this natural fount had no vessel. Instead, tendrils of nothingness looped around it, holding it as it clearly tried to move on.

Tala knew that she couldn't be the first to have seen these or at least seen evidence of it.

Moreover, she was *sure* that nothing of the kind had existed in the founts held by arcanes within housings of various kinds. It would have been obvious in the extreme.

Unless it's only something that's visible, or that happens at all, right at the time of formation?

It was likely a result of it being 'exposed' or having naturally occurred. Even then, it might fade with time.

Regardless, likely because of her experiences in the Doman-Imithe, the tendrils took on a very specific look as her conscious mind struggled to interpret what she saw.

The fount was gripped by an eight-fingered hand, quite obviously from a creature like those she'd seen before. Very likely it was the one that she'd seen echoes of just earlier, when looking closely at the Mage.

It's not trying to get in. This Mage is specifically at the point where reality is the strongest…

-*To destroy Zeme? Is that its goal?*-

Maybe? That doesn't make sense though… right? What would it gain?

-We have no idea what the true nature of these things is. How can we even begin to guess on their motivations?-

Yeah…

Tala's voidsight was showing her a struggle like saltwater and fresh fighting at the mouth of a river, the two forces pushing on each other, each gaining supremacy for a short moment before waning.

Reality and the void were clashing, both also fighting against the magic of the fount.

All the while, the whole process was being stabilized by a darker-than-black hand of nothingness.

Tala watched as the fount solidified, moving toward a balance similar to that which she'd seen once before.

Though, that was lightning, not fire.

Even with the obvious differences, it was plain to see that this fount was also *far* more volatile.

The lightning fount that she had seen seemed to almost infuse all the surrounding plant and animal life, filling the area with power and a tint toward that type of magic.

This was literally scorched earth.

Maybe it would balance out if we gave it time.

-But, we won't.-

No, we won't. In the worst case, it could unbalance the whole region, calling down magical creatures and starting quite the upheaval.

-Mistress Ingrit just informed us that when she contacted the powers that be, they thanked us for our prompt response and indicated that the standard bounty would apply for closing such a fount.-

Standard bounty?

-Apparently, the Archons with the ability to close founts are generally notified when a fount is discovered that needs to be removed for one reason or another. This falls under an environmental hazard fount. They'll need data to verify, but if it checks out, the bounty is one hundred gold.-

Tala hesitated. *That seems… Is this that dangerous?*

-Well, yes. For you? I don't know. I think the Archons range in advancement, the key being access in some form to void-magics. You probably have a greater control and range in that department than most.-

She hesitated for just a moment more. *I can do this. I'll see him on to the next world.*

Tala walked forward, her elk-leathers growing a layer of white metal to completely encapsulate her against the hot air and flame.

She could probably have withstood the magics directly, but it would have required at least some healing, and the white metal would lessen that at virtually no cost.

-So, all that we need to do is surround the fount with void, just beneath the surface. That should force it to lose connection to Zeme and move on.-

You mean just beneath the nothingness-hand?

-They did not specify that, no, but it does stand to reason.-

Alright.

The hand did seem to be stabilizing the fount somehow, and the nothingness *did* seem to be fading as it did its work. That said, it was almost like it was leaving behind a residue, a filter of sorts between the fount and the rest of Zeme.

But it's not a fast process.

-Not at all. I'd guess that it won't fully stabilize for another couple of days.-

And at that point, the whole area will be a burned husk of what it is now, or something else will have gone sideways.

As if to prove the point, a blast of fire shot out in all directions.

Tala's white metal exterior heated up to an extreme degree, and Tala cycled the metal, replacing the hot material with other metal held merged with her elk-leathers.

-That's… huh. I wonder if that will work long-term. Will the metal you removed cool back down? Remain the same temperature?-

No idea, but it would be interesting to test. The metal on her left arm shifted slightly as she returned the previous material to that spot. *It cooled off nearly instantly.*

Another pulse of fire radiated outward.

This time, instead of exchanging the metal, Tala just flexed her will for it to cool down.

It took quite a bit of power, though less than fully exchanging the metal, and it worked. The white metal returned to below her body temperature, feeling cool against her skin once more.

That… That is incredibly useful to know. It also reminded her that she hadn't recoated herself in iron, and with a minor act of will, the skin-covering layer flowed forth to encase her.

-The iron is probably a wise choice. As to the temperature control—or at least suppression—I suppose it makes sense. If we can move the white metal at our will, with applications of power, that should mean altering its internal kinetic state, which is just its temperature.-

True enough, yeah.

It was a bit more complicated than that, obviously.

Tala knew she couldn't jump into a volcano and simply keep her armor from getting hot.

That said, since she could bleed the heat away at an incredible rate, if there wasn't too much power behind an external source continuing to try to melt the metal, she should be able to keep it intact and herself at a bearable temperature.

All it cost was power.

You know… maybe I could *drop into a volcano?* She was quite durable, so the margin for error would be rather high…

-*No. Just no, Tala.*-

You're right… not until we can sufficiently map out the rates of change we can bring about.

-*…Can you focus?*-

Oh, right. She could consider harsh-environment exploration later.

Tala felt the solemnity of the situation settle back on her shoulders—her attempt to distract herself having backfired—as she stood before the fount, which was all that remained of the Mage.

The shape was incredibly odd.

One moment, it was like that of the kneeling man, but the next it was a small ball, seemingly the size of a human gate.

It was in the fractional instants between the two where the nothingness was the clearest.

Alright, I don't have a fount-breaking tool, so I'll have to get creative.

-*Should I warn the nearby cities?*- Alat's tone was dry enough that Tala wasn't sure if the alternate interface was joking.

That was—Tala sighed as she considered some of her other more eclectic experiments—*hurtfully accurate*...

Alat snorted a laugh within Tala's head. -*Your idea is a good one. I was mostly teasing.*-

Tala shook her head, smiling despite the tenseness of the situation.

With a flexing of will, she brought the void-magics in her elk-leathers to the forefront, enhancing and focusing them around her white-armored hands.

The white metal receded everywhere else to allow her full focus to orient on the task before her.

The fount flickered back to the size of a small ball, and Tala lunged forward, closing her void-coated hands around it.

At the same instant, she caused the white metal to flow over the fount, fully encasing it with metal and void-magics, simultaneously locking her hands together.

The power fought to try to escape, but it couldn't.

She outweighed the departed Mage—magically speaking—many, *many* times over.

You know, I most likely outweighed him physically, too.

-*Focus, Tala.*-

Right!

Additionally, the void was specifically suited for the containment and consumption of… well everything else.

The man's power, his flame, was pouring into her elk-leathers, but it wasn't nearly of sufficient quantity to cause any sort of substantive change.

But her mind was not focused on that, not really.

As soon as her hands had wrapped around the fount, she had been faced with something across from her, something that was seemingly also holding onto the fount and only visible to her voidsight.

As soon as she noticed the figure from the Doman-Imithe, the world began to flicker between three places.

What? This is not how the instructions described the dispersal of a fount.

Her three forms of vision showed her the valley in which the Mage had knelt.

Then her surroundings changed to a place that was *clearly* in the Doman-Imithe.

The threads of reality called to her voidsight, and while, blessedly, she couldn't see any other too-smiley creatures, the distorted and entirely alien landscape could only exist within the Doman-Imithe.

Trees grew out of one another, holding up the ground which she was somehow hanging from.

The leaves each had a single nostril which gave off the sense of desperately trying to catch a whiff of the scent of prey.

The bark of the trees looked more like diseased, encrusted blisters than anything resembling wood.

Even in the Doman-Imithe, this place was twisted to the extreme.

It looks like one of the floating cages I saw when I first entered with Thron.

Before she could do more than barely register what she was seeing, her environment changed again, and she was slammed by a tidal wave of magical power that, blessedly, crashed against her iron covering and was rebuffed, at least temporarily.

Unfortunately, even in the brief instant of exposure, the magical power flooded through breaches in her iron covering, mainly her eyes, ears, and nose. As it entered, it began burning everything it came in contact with.

Her every cell was anathema to the pure power that flooded into her, even the magic within her body was being seared away, the impurity of her unique aspects enough to taint the whole of her power in the face of the clarity of the next world.

Because that was what this place was: the next world.

It was entirely forged of magic.

The zeme was so complex that it was hard to see the vague shapes of objects in the power; everything she could perceive was seemingly entirely composed of *pure* magic.

As stunning as it was, if she hadn't moved back to the valley, Tala had no doubt that she would have died in seconds. Blessedly, as soon as she was back in the valley, the pure power was instantly aspected to match her, becoming hers and refilling the reserves of power that had been burned away.

Nope! Not dealing with that as I am. Iron covered her entirely, thickening as much as she could make it.

Her elk-leathers and Flow guzzled power as they tried to recover from their own damage, sustained in those bare fractions of a second, and Tala did her best to cover it all in iron.

Her bloodstars' perspectives—floating a short distance away from the fount—were not changing. So, with her eyes closed, she couldn't see the changing environments—or she shouldn't have been able to.

From the outside, from the perspectives mirrored to her bloodstars, she didn't appear to be moving, though different magics were washing over her, seeming to be spilling out of the fount clutched and sealed between her hands and within her metal and void-magics.

That's a frustrating result.

-Which shouldn't be happening…-

From the inside, she could still see, even with her eyes sealed behind iron. She had no ready explanation as to how, but she could.

In the Doman-Imithe, the grinning creature didn't seem to move, even as it also somehow seemed to be fighting to keep the fount where it was.

In the next world, the fount seemed to be in the form of the Mage, now standing and looking at her with fond… pity? Gratitude? Anger?

She had no idea. He was basically a three-dimensional outline, and she wasn't great at reading people at the best of times.

This was not among the best of times.

In the valley, flames wreathed the whole area, now a nearly constant deluge seemingly spewing forth.

It only pauses when I can perceive the valley firsthand. Is the seal on the fount somehow rotating, along with my perception?

Throughout, she stubbornly held onto the round gate, hands locked in place by void-magic-filled metal.

Her iron was beginning to warm and bend under the heat in Zeme, even under the white steel, and the oddly pure power of the next world was somehow beginning to affect the iron as well.

Her soul-bound items were beginning to recover, hidden away in their pockets, but Tala had only barely gotten them fully sealed in iron, and they'd each endured at least a half-dozen cycles exposed.

I am so glad that Kit is up on that hill. She would have survived, but that would have been a power-drain that I don't need right now.

The only thing that was spared were her white steel gloves.

Why are the gloves fine?

She forced her focus onto them and saw the obvious: void-magic.

That wasn't surprising, but what was surprising was that they seemed to take longer in transit, transitioning between the three locations, and in between, they almost seemed to pause before being dragged onward.

The perception of that one fact was so odd and counter to reality as she knew it that Tala felt her mind fuzz for a brief moment before she was able to reclaim her own thoughts.

The gloves are pausing, in the void?

-It is the buffer between worlds, right? It absorbs the disruptive aspects. Well, it absorbs everything it can, really.-

Void it is!

Chapter: 47
Her Choices

Tala gritted her teeth against the churning perspectives that washed through her as she clutched onto the forming fount.

Even so, she knew what she needed to do, and she grew the white steel across her entire body, carrying with it the void-magics that she was already using in the gloves.

It took a *lot* of power under the current strain, and she moved through another five cycles before she was fully covered. When it was done, however, she felt instant relief.

As she held on, fighting to do what was supposed to be a simple task, the flickering worlds passed more and more rapidly.

Tala couldn't tell if she had caused the increase in pace, or if it was just a perception because she was now sheathed in the void, but regardless, it was becoming dizzying.

She was still unsure *how* she was able to see through her iron, white steel, and now a void-magic buffer, but she couldn't deny that the perspective was coming to her somehow.

Finally, the cycle became such an endless, quick stream that the three worlds seemed to meld into one, and Tala was left floating in a void.

She almost had a moment of panic as she seemed to be floating in a void with nothing but the fount in her hands, but her bloodstar perspectives showed that she was still standing in the valley, holding the fount exactly as she had been.

So, more of a spiritual, perceptual, or magical dislocation?

-Maybe? The instruction book must have had a page ripped out or something…-

Alat's grumblings carried a note of uncertainty that Tala did not particularly like. -*I still have our Archive connection, so all this madness will get to someone, no matter what.*-

Great vote of confidence, there.

Despite Alat's only half-joking pessimism, she focused her mind on the present moment.

The fount, in the shape of a sphere, was suddenly mobile, and Tala was able to pull it toward herself, cradling it against the iron plating on her chest.

The iron across her whole body was rusted and pitted, but it remained remarkably unbreeched.

Wait, where's the white metal? Where's my void-magic shell?

It was still there, as seen through the bloodstars, but she couldn't see it with whatever odd perspective was coming straight into her mind.

Even so, that was the least of her concerns.

Before her stood two figures.

One was the grinning creature of nothingness.

The other was the nearly featureless three-dimensional outline of the Mage.

It was odd, seeing them standing side by side. With the proximity, it was incredibly easy to tell how similar they were in form and concept.

Like an ice sculpture and another made out of clay, each crafted by a different artist but with the same model.

-*Huh… I actually think I agree with that analogy.*-

Tala didn't respond to Alat as she was focused so closely on the two.

Outside of the Doman-Imithe, the too-wide smile *almost* looked like the creature was trying to be friendly but had no true foundation on which to base its expression. *Or it's a lure…*

The outline forged of magic was composed of power that was so pure it almost burned to see it, but Tala could somehow tell it wasn't perfect.

It was just a reflection of what it *could* be.

To behold that perfection would have killed Tala—she somehow knew that for a fact.

Suddenly, Tala felt like she understood.

She had 'won' the struggle for the fount.

If she wished, she could take the fount and depart. She could use it as the arcanes did or for some other purpose.

Or she could give it to either of these… beings.

But aren't the fount and the magical outline the same thing?

Tala felt herself frown.

It would be nice if she could get an explanation, but her mouth was sealed, and she somehow knew that if she broke the seal in an attempt to speak, both of these… things could end her simply by the nature of their existence, whether or not they intended to.

A horrifying thought washed through her. *We're all occupying the same space across the three worlds, and the fount caused a sort of blending for a moment.*

-That may or may not be true. Does it matter?-

No. No, I suppose that it doesn't really matter right now.

Regardless, Tala knew her choices.

The first was the most obvious, but also the only one she wouldn't seriously contemplate. She would not be claiming the fount for her own use.

Second, she could allow the being from the Doman-Imithe to have it. The fount would solidify in Zeme, and there it would remain until something broke it free.

Finally, she could allow the being from the next world to have it, and the fount would fade away, passing on just as the gate of a mundane would.

No, the outline isn't from the next world. It is how he will be in the next world. It was a strange thing, that knowledge. It felt like it came from within her, but she definitely didn't think she'd known it before.

-Innate knowledge? Something your gate knows but your consciousness doesn't?-

I suppose it could be either? I have no idea. It could even be from the dasgannach, but I highly doubt that.

Similar to the magical outline, the creature from the Doman-Imithe was decidedly *like* the Mage, but for some reason, Tala couldn't tell if it *was* the Mage or was somehow drawn or shaped to resemble him.

Oddly, Tala felt like there should have been other options.

For example, she should have been able to cast the fount, the gate, into the Doman-Imithe, but something was stopping her.

Like before, the knowledge was just there, within her mind as she contemplated the idea. *It is not my role to choose the eternal resting place of a soul.*

Alat shivered within Tala's head. *-That was the exact impression I just got, too.-*

Founts will always pass on eventually, even if it will only happen when the world ends. So, in the end, they will always go to the same place. We can't change that. It seems like you've just won the right to influence the journey.

Tala shuddered, the many straining forces grinding against her were beginning to be too much. *There is absolutely no way this is standard, Alat. What is going on?*

-I told you what it said: 'surround the fount with void.'-

I'm doing that!

-You're also surrounding yourself with void. Maybe, you've somehow brought yourself along for the ride?-

Or somehow gotten a seat at the table…

-Quite the dangerous table.-

Yeah, this is just typical… She grimaced.

There honestly was only one option. She'd been curious what else was available, but it seemed like nothing else would truly present itself as reasonable.

As soon as she'd solidified the choice in her mind, the creature from the Doman-Imithe reacted.

Somehow, it didn't seem to move or do anything, but Tala *felt* it raging.

The strange, unnatural stillness accompanied by the feeling of cosmic levels of anger was worse than seeing something storming around or throwing itself in a tantrum.

It's not doing anything. What is going on?

-I… I don't know.- Alat shivered again, her confusion and disjointment growing.

As the rage rose to a crescendo, the thing didn't appear to have moved in the slightest. Even so, she would have sworn it was doing all sorts of things that she didn't want it to be doing.

Less than a second had passed.

The fount that she had been holding had vanished at the moment of decision as well, and the three-dimensional outline of the Mage was fading away.

Tala couldn't tell what the fates of any of the three would be.

Honestly, she couldn't truthfully tell if they were three separate entities or if they were three parts of the same, or three states of the same, or three similar aspects of entirely different entities, or three aspects of the same, or…

Her mind spun through uncountable possibilities as it felt like something was grinding away at her thoughts, the memories of the encounter slipping away.

Tala could hear Alat growling as if she was seemingly fighting *something* with all that she had.

In a haze, Tala fell into unconsciousness.

* * *

Tala, of course, immediately came back awake, catching herself even as she started to fall to her knees in the still-burning valley.

Alat's original activation scripts verified that she was up and running, and nothing more came of it.

With an act of will, Tala pulled apart her hands and reshaped her gauntlets.

The fount was gone without a trace.

Tala snorted, taking in the fire-ridden valley. *Yeah, no trace at all.*

There was obviously evidence that fire magics had been in the valley, but nothing remained that would have indicated that a fount ever had been there.

I'm feeling a bit out of it… She frowned. *Where did the fount go?*

-I'm not sure. We grabbed it and then… it was gone? Wait, there's something labeled 'Urgent' in our Archive repository.- After a momentary shocked silence, Alat continued, *-It's from me? What is… Rust me to scrap. Are you ready?-*

Tala frowned. *Ready for what?*

-Ready for the memories of what just happened. It seems like we had a close interaction with something of the nothingness, and something would have removed or corrupted our memories as a byproduct.-

You saved them?

-I am actively archiving our every experience these days. They won't make us lose anything ever again.-

Sometimes, I love you. She felt vaguely uncomfortable at the undeterminable 'they' in Alat's injunction, but it wasn't important at the moment.

-That's a bit narcissistic, but I appreciate the gratitude. Ready?-

Yes.

Tala was not ready.

She reeled backward as she was suddenly able to recall the entirety of the struggle followed by her choice. *What the rust?*

-Oh! Mistress Ingrit has a lot *to say. One moment.-*

Right, we were sending her what we were detecting, weren't we?

-Yeah. It looks like she wanted to interact during, but it happened rather faster than it seemed.-

Faster?

-The whole process took less than half a minute.-

Well… rust. What did Mistress Ingrit have to say?

-First of all, she wants to know why you didn't just use Flow.-

Is she serious? The last time that I used Flow, it ate *the gate, or at least appeared to. I was not really comfortable attacking the fount when I had other options, not with the potential of destroying someone's eternal existence.*

-Master Xeel assured us that wasn't the case. The fount wasn't really 'eaten,' not in that sense.-

I know, but… I had another option, and I didn't want to 'just hit it with my sword' if there was another way.

-Well, at least now we have solid confirmation. The true consumption of the fount would violate the sense we got, that we can't change or violate the eternal destination of a gate.-

Yeah. It just seemed like I should try the other way since it was available to me.

-That's fair.-

Next time, I'm using Flow. That was… I'd rather not repeat that.

-Agreed.-

So, what else is she saying?

-Do you want to just talk with her?-

Are you capable of that?

-Yes. Stay fully encased in iron, and I can maintain it for a few minutes. You'll need a reinscription afterward, though.-

Alright, get it arranged. One of her mirrored perspectives had seen two people coming down the slope, surrounded by cooling magics that seemed to originate from Mistress Petra.

It was, of course, the woman herself along with Master Simon.

Master Simon called out to her when she turned, “Mistress Tala! Are you alright? That seemed to… go oddly.”

Tala tried to speak and encountered the same issue as before, that of having her mouth sealed. She willed the metal away from her lips as she responded, “I’ll be fine. There were some complications.”

The two stopped on the slope still at least a dozen yards from the epicenter, already visibly sweating despite the cool breeze and the magics meant to keep the heat at bay.

That might have been a scathing rebuke of their level of power and resiliency, but given the ground was glowing in quite a wide radius, Tala thought they were doing incredibly well. “Stay back. I’ll get the analysis artifacts—if they survived.”

Mistress Petra shook her head. “Forget the devices. Are you alright? Let’s get you back into the sanctum.”

It was only then that Tala really considered the fact that they’d both come out.

If she had truly been on the edge of death, which she likely appeared to be, then they had risked Kit being whisked away when she passed on, stranding them both in the wilds.

They had come to check on her anyway.

-We lucked into some really caring people, didn’t we?-

So it would seem, yeah.

She retracted the iron and white steel from around her face, and at the same time, she extended her aura to give her iron room to reach out and scoop the artifacts out of the insanely hot ground.

The constructs were mostly intact, and Tala drew them to her even as she broke her feet loose of the ground and moved toward the couple.

She held in a groan as her whole body protested the movement.

Oh, that's uncomfortable. "Something to eat definitely wouldn't be amiss, now that you mention it."

Mistress Petra's face softened. "That sounds wise, Mistress. Let's get you to a nice, comfortable seat. We'll get some water and food in you."

As soon as water was mentioned, Tala realized just how thirsty she was. *Yes, water.*

The three walked out of the valley, though the two others kept a bit away from Tala as she was radiating an uncomfortable amount of heat.

They *probably* wouldn't have been burned if they had touched her, but it would have been a near thing.

Tala was actively cooling the white metal that was still surrounding her, and that was helping her internal temperature drop. The whole thing was acting like a magically assisted heat-sink.

As Tala considered her physical state, she directed her thoughts at Alat. *Do I want to know?*

-I don't see why not. If you were still Bound, you'd be dead. If you were still Fused, our brain would be cooked, and you'd be unconscious until it cooled enough to be regrown and refilled with our memories.-

Well… Let's do it the easy way next time. Draw Flow, one quick cut.

-Agreed. Mistress Ingrit is asking if she can bring in an expert? To be clear, his area of study is founts, not void-magics or the Doman-Imithe.-

Sure. That could help us piece this all together.

-Alright, they will be ready in ten minutes. She wants the expert to review the findings first.-

Is there that much?

-Master Simon's info is a part of it. He didn't really *see more than we did. The specialized artifacts recorded more deeply, but not really anything specific that we didn't see.-*

What does that even mean?

-If we tried every dish, he brought the buffet. Nothing really different*, no more dishes than we sampled, but he has more full platters?-*

Huh, I suppose I can understand that.

The three got back to where Kit waited at the top of the slope. Blessedly, Tala was a more reasonable temperature by that time.

Tala stopped in confusion when she saw that Kit was in the form of an open door. "What?"

Master Simon and Mistress Petra turned to her. "Mistress Tala?"

"I thought you were looking through a window."

"We were, but we thought you needed help when the view vanished, and a door appeared next to us."

Mistress Petra nodded. "We couldn't leave you out here if you needed help, so we came to see what we could do."

"Huh." Tala shook her head and smiled. "Well, thank you."

"Of course, Mistress."

The three went inside, the door closed and vanished, and Tala handed Master Simon back his artifacts before settling down in one of her comfortable chairs, looking out on the calming view of her sanctum.

Mistress Petra went and grabbed some food for Tala, presenting her with a tray of snacks and a large flagon of water.

"Thank you, Mistress Petra."

“Of course. You just went through fire.” She chuckled at her own joke. “Take a minute. I think Simon is going to want to ask you a few thousand questions when you’re free and settled.”

Tala looked around but didn’t see the man. “Where is he?”

“Oh, he grabbed his slate and constructs and went off to his work area. He’ll be trying to figure out how those that broke failed and why.” Mistress Petra smiled fondly as she spoke of her husband. “I’m sure he’ll be back once his mind is settled, but I’ll hold him off until after dinner at the very least. You should have that long to collect yourself and do your own thinking.”

Tala felt herself smiling, too. “Well, I hope to have more for him by then. I need to clear my head and get all this straight.”

“As is only wise. Even so, eat up, first.”

-*You have time.*-

Tala nodded. “I will. Thank you.”

It didn’t take long to eat the bit of food, and she did find herself practically chugging the water. Kit refilled it at need, and Tala ended up draining four massive mugs.

Altogether, the repast was amazingly refreshing in a way that Tala didn’t expect. *I can’t believe that I’m still surprised that my scripts don’t heal everything.*

-*Well, they do, but they don’t always make you* feel *perfect. They will keep you functional and fit, which was what they were designed to do.*-

Tala grunted before standing. “Thank you, Mistress Petra. We’ll likely be on our way in less than an hour.”

“I’ll let Simon know.”

“Thank you.”

Tala left the dining area and went to her room before standing beside the bed. *Are they ready?*

-*They are now, yes*.-

She nodded to herself, and once fully encased in iron again, the scripts involved in her mental enhancements—and Alat's functionality—blazed with power.

Five seconds later, Mistress Ingrit and an older man were seemingly standing in her room, looking around curiously.

Tala bowed to each. "Hello… Greetings? I'm sorry, I can't really say I know how to start such a conversation."

Mistress Ingrit smiled and gave a small bow in return. "'Hello' works well enough."

The man gave a small bow as well. "Hello, Mistress Tala. Thank you for agreeing to see us."

"Sure. Unfortunately, I can't maintain a connection for long. We should address the pertinent things first. I understand that you have questions?"

He hesitated. "Wait… you're maintaining the connection yourself?"

"With my inscriptions, yes."

"Remarkable. I would not have thought a Refined—" He shook his head, cutting himself off. "I apologize, I easily get lost on rabbit trails. I am Coinin, and I have so, *so* many questions. I will attempt to be brief."

Chapter: 48
Master Coinin

Tala faced Mistress Ingrit and Master Coinin as they were projected into her perception through Alat's efforts.

The alternate interface could only hold the connection for a few minutes, so they needed to be efficient with their time. Even so, the man's few words had already let Tala know that that wouldn't be happening.

"It is good to meet you, Master Coinin."

He smiled and nodded once. "Alright, brief and fast. I can do this. Did you notice anything different between this smiler and others you've seen before?"

She wanted to pass over the obvious name for the beings she'd seen, but she needed to be sure. Also, if there was already an established name for them, there should be more information about them available. Thus, she asked, "Smiler?"

Master Coinin gave her an almost-disappointed look as he answered, "Yes, I'd thought it would be obvious what I was referring to."

She contained her desire to cut back and shook her head. "It is, I just haven't heard that term before."

"It fits, so…?"

"Ahh, so not an established term. Thank you. As to a difference. No? Not really. The ones I saw before all felt… the same? Like they always had been and always would be, forever unchanging, forever hungry, forever consuming. They were an emptiness beyond the void. After

all, individual voids, or sections of the void, can be filled. These… smilers can't, or at least they didn't, feel like they could."

"And the most recent smiler?"

"It felt… incomplete? That's not right. It was the same, but lesser, though that might just have been because I was sensing it from Zeme, rather than from within the Doman-Imithe. That's why I wouldn't swear to having sensed a difference. There are just too many complicating factors."

"That might make sense, yes." Coinin was nodding. "Do you think that the Doman-Imithe is their natural habitat?"

Tala blinked in surprise at the change of direction for the line of questioning but shook her head. "Not in the way I understand it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, creatures should be able to traverse their natural environment, and these were almost forcibly fixed in place."

"That… That is an interesting way to look at it. I appreciate the perspective… What do you—?"

Mistress Ingrit cleared her throat. "The topic, Master Coinin."

"*Right*! Right, my apologies. We were discussing the fount. Your perception seemed to indicate that you felt you had a choice over the temporary fate of the gate, is that correct?"

"Yes. That is the sense I got."

"But you also felt an… inevitability? Can you expand on that?"

Tala was a bit confused, and rather than allowing that confusion to last, she simply asked, "It seems like you reviewed my memories, you should know all I do. Right?"

“Ahh, but I don’t have your context. A person’s memories are stored for him or herself. As an example, you might think to yourself that a wolf reminds you of a childhood dog. In reviewing those thoughts, if granted to me, I would know that factoid, but I would have no idea what caused that connection to be drawn, nor would I inherently know anything about that dog from long ago.”

Tala frowned. “I’m not sure I fully understand.”

“Basically, your memories are encoded for your own mind and how you see the world. Thus, with such a small sample, I can only make guesses at some of the more esoteric parts, and let’s be honest, the entire experience was esoteric.”

She found herself nodding. “Oh, I suppose that makes sense. Yes, then. It felt like my choice would not matter for the gate’s, for the soul’s, final destination. What I was granted, or what I had seized, was the ability to influence the journey. To use your word, the ultimate fate of the gate seemed inevitable regardless of me or my choices.”

“I see, I see. And that inevitable fate, it was the next world?”

“That seemed to be the case, yes.”

“And on the topic of the next world. The power you interacted with there was hostile toward you?”

Tala shook her head. She was certain on this point. “No.”

“But it damaged you, correct? It instantly harmed you with the slightest exposure.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t make it hostile. Just as a mundane can drown in water if he is not equipped to traverse its depths, that fact does not mean that the water is hostile to the man. The fact that we often use anthropomorphizing, antagonistic language isn’t an indication of truth. The power isn’t hostile. It just *is*. And I am unable to endure it.”

“So, this power? The fundamental makeup of the next world…?” He gestured for her to go on.

“It felt like something about me was utterly out of place. Like I simply couldn’t exist beside the pure power. Like an acid and a base.” She frowned. “No, that’s not right. It wasn’t an interaction of mutual destruction or dilution. The purity of the next world wasn’t tainted by my presence. I simply could not exist there as I am.”

“Fascinating.” Master Coinin seemed to draw into himself for a moment, considering.

“Master Coinin?” Mistress Ingrit had remained quiet for their short conversation, only interjecting previously to help the man keep on topic, and it seemed that she was again attempting to facilitate.

“Hmm? Yes, Mistress Ingrit?”

“Do you have any other questions?”

-I am nearing the end of what I can maintain.-

I’ll try to be fast.

“I think so. Mistress Tala, are you aware of the nature of existence?”

Tala arched one eyebrow, causing the man to laugh self-deprecatingly.

“I suppose that was a silly question, wasn’t it? It could mean anything or nothing at all. In fact, if we think about—” He glanced up and saw Mistress Ingrit staring at him intently, stopped, cleared his throat, and redirected. “But, of course, now is not the time for that. What I meant was, are you aware of the tripod supposition?”

“That seems like an entirely different question.” Tala hesitated. “Unless you believe it to be beyond question in its relation to the nature of existence?”

“I do, actually, and I suppose my bias comes through rather strongly.”

“It does a bit, yes. Even so, we are getting off topic again. No, I don’t believe I have heard of it.”

He nodded, seemingly not expecting her to have known what he was referring to. “Well, the basics are that existence is composed of three things: Reality, Void, and Magic.”

Tala frowned but didn’t interrupt.

“Imagine they are the points of a triangle. The side opposite the *point* representing Reality is void-magic, or the line connecting those two points. The side opposite of Void is reality-magic, again the line. Thus, the side opposite of Magic is…?” He gestured encouragingly to her.

She realized it would be faster to guess than wait for him to continue. “Reality-void?”

“Precisely! Or rather a void in reality. I believe that is your ‘nothingness.’”

That… made a lot of sense, actually. “I think I can see that, and these three things make up existence? Like a tripod, existence can’t *exist* without all three?”

“Well, they obviously aren’t *things,* but loosely, yes. More specifically, they make up existence *within Zeme.* I wouldn’t dream of making a claim about existence outside of our fractured little corner.”

She grunted at that. *That’s probably wise, yeah.* “So, what are you driving at?”

“Ahh, yes, the actual question. How would you guess the Doman-Imithe fits into that framework?”

Mistress Ingrit closed her eyes and sighed, slightly shaking her head. Even so, she didn’t interrupt.

Tala blinked a few times, trying to grapple with such a monumental question.

-Tala…-

I’m trying!

She tried to clear her mind and give the best answer that she could, “Well… reality threads throughout, sheathed in the void, and the smilers were there, too. There… was magic, but it was all tied up, somehow, all doing various things rather than free-floating, just as the void and threads were…” She trailed off as she understood what he was getting at. “You think that the Doman-Imithe is actually existence? And somehow Zeme is… what? Just a cobbled together mass of unused pieces hanging off the center?”

He laughed once, almost triumphantly. “Yes! That is what I and many others have postulated, though not exactly. We believe that the Doman-Imithe was created to hold everything together, to provide the underpinnings for existence in its truest form, and then Zeme was constructed within that protective framework. This *isn't* all of existence.”

Tala remembered speaking with Meallain and the City Lord of Platoiri. They had either implied or said the same things. Still, she was trying to be quick. Instead of mentioning those conversations, she focused on a more tangible response. “Well, of course it isn’t. The next world isn’t a part of Zeme, but it clearly exists.”

He tapped the side of his nose while pointing at her with his other hand. “Precisely.”

Tala was about to add that the next world was *also* not a part of the Doman-Imithe, but Mistress Ingrit shook her head and interjected, “Alright, Master Coinin, you’ve followed your last trail. I believe our time is up.” After a moment’s hesitation, she smiled and added, “I do believe that we have some memories available for your acquisition which might be *quite* interesting to you.”

Tala glanced to the Archivist, and Mistress Ingrit smiled.

-*She notified us. She is referencing the pertinent discussions with Meallain and the City Lord of Platoiri.*-

Perfect, then I don't need to deal with it. She really is incredibly helpful.

-That she is. Now… please?-

I'm trying.

Master Coinin nodded to Mistress Ingrit in acknowledgment. "I look forward to our negotiations." He then bowed to Tala. "Thank you, Mistress Tala, for your time. May I reach out again in the future to discuss things further, should there be a need?"

Tala nodded. "I am open to the idea."

"Thank you."

She then turned to Mistress Ingrit. "Anything you need from me?"

The woman shook her head. "No, thank you. I just knew he'd get utterly off topic if he communicated with you by himself."

He pointed to her, nodding sagely. "She's absolutely right."

-Tala!-

Tala quickly bowed to each of them, and they bid each other a final farewell before the two vanished from Tala's perception.

Alat groaned. *-Ow… Reinscription, please?-*

Sure. Let's do that now.

Less than five minutes later, Tala was reinscribed and back in her room, soaking in her massive tub.

I need to do this more often. It really is relaxing.

-Maybe without the massive strain on my pathways first? As to the bath, we don't have that much time, but yes. It does seem good for you.-

Thank you for keeping up the conversation. That was really much more… pleasant? Useful? Efficient. Tala nodded. *That was much better than trying to communicate through passing messages back and forth.*

-I'm glad that I could be of service. I'll be able to slowly improve, and we might be able to get something to augment the connection when we're in a specific location, but I think it might be a bit expensive.-

It sounds like it's worth looking into at the very least.

-Thank you.-

Of course. She shifted slightly in the amazingly hot water. It was incredible how different hot water could feel from being within a fire. Cold water *might* have been 'better' for a recovery from so much flame magic, but Tala had chosen a relaxing, if short, soak over a freezing plunge.

-You know, ice baths are good for you.-

Yeah, but they are really unpleasant…

-You would barely feel it.-

...Maybe. She shook her head and changed the subject. *Are we still going to be able to make it to Marliweather today?* That felt so odd to even contemplate.

It was a week trip by caravan, but that was because the caravans took it slow to be as safe as possible. The distance was only about a hundred and fifty miles, and she could easily run that in a day, especially with her magical resonance so reduced.

It should have been a relatively trivial thing for her to make the trek, but instead, it had turned into an insane day.

While finding a Mage about to become a fount was unlikely, it wasn't that unusual considering the range of her senses. Now, if she found another, she'd know something was really odd.

You know, I think us going around larger pockets of power might have increased our chances, too.

-I agree. It seemed like the Mage was drawn to a place of lower power, so since we were trying to stay in exactly that same environment…-

Far more reasonable, yes.

-Let's just not do it again. I agree, that would be a disturbing pattern.-

Or if another *unlikely thing happens. That would be unideal.*

-Are you trying *to jinx us?-*

Tala huffed a laugh. *I suppose not. I'll leave it.*

With a quick aspect mirror, she cleaned herself within the water. The little grime that had stuck to her skin came free in the water, and Kit whisked that away to who knew where.

Tala stood, combed out her hair, braided it, and dressed for cross-country travel.

She coated herself in iron but let her through-spike maintain her appearance. *No need to look odd for the Simons.*

-…I don't think that's their last name.-

Well, I don't actually know it, do I?

-I could see if I can find it?-

No… if I need to know, I'll just ask. She considered for a moment before sighing.

She should ask.

Even so, Tala almost summoned a door and simply stepped out into the wilds but thought better of it at the last moment.

Instead, she went back to the dining area, where Mistress Petra had more food ready for her. “Thank you, Mistress.”

“I’m happy to provide. That looked like hungry work you did.”

“It was that.” Tala gave a wan smile. She hesitated for an awkward moment before she shook her head. “I’m sorry, Mistress Petra. I don’t think I ever asked for your last name?”

The woman tilted her head to one side. “I suppose you haven’t. It’s Zuccat.”

“And do you prefer Mistress Petra or Mistress Zuccat?”

“Usually, either is fine, but you and I are easily on a first name basis, I think.” She gave a cheeky smile. “Are we not, Mistress Tala?”

Tala grinned in return. “I suppose we are, Mistress Petra. Thank you.”

“Take care of yourself now. Eat and get us back to a proper city.”

“Will do.”

Tala sat in her comfortable chair and ate.

She didn’t linger, but she still made sure to enjoy every bite.

Even with the measured pace, she quickly finished, banishing the tray with a thought.

“Thank you again.”

Mistress Petra simply waved dismissively with a smile as Tala stepped through a summoned door and out into the wilds.

The valley below was still hot, even with winter’s steady encroachment.

Snow had begun to fall, and it sizzled when it struck the ground anywhere near the center. Even so, the outer edges were already being covered, black giving way to white.

Peace was returning to this disrupted corner of Zeme.

Tala picked up Kit, pressing the flattened pouch against her leg before enfolding it in iron.

She wanted to perfect her various accoutrements, so this time she didn't use a layer of white steel. Instead, she followed Alat's suggestion and simply thickened the iron to obscure wherever that was needed. She also suppressed her through-spike, removing almost all of her magical presence.

Flow was still secured on the top of her left forearm, and her elk-leathers were reduced to a tight band around her neck, both fully enclosed in iron.

-Why did you add iron to make your face a blank mask, too?-

Anonymity can be useful at times?

-Yes, because there are so many Mages who can go around covered in iron.-

Well… it doesn't hurt, does it? Besides, non-Mages can't instantly tell it's iron, can they?

-No, I suppose not. Well, we need a name for this configuration. 'Travel'?-

I was thinking 'everyday.'

-With the face? Or should I say, without a face?-

The through-spike will add the illusion of my face at need.

-I mean… I suppose? I won't fight you on it. What about your eyes and mouth?-

I want to get in the habit of treating my mirrored perspectives like my main vision. This should help with that. I also want to get used to not breathing, so it's not a draw on my attention in tense situations.

-What if you need to speak?-

Then, I'll open a slit or pull the metal back or something.

-*As you wish.*- Alat clearly didn't think it was the greatest idea, but Tala disagreed. Keeping maximum magical containment would do wonders for her natural pathways and magical density over time, and this was the best way to do that.

Tala stretched briefly, nodded to herself at her easy movements, and took off down the hill away from the valley. She would circle the fire damage and continue on her way.

Terry flickered up beside her mere moments later. A few more flicks of dimensional power let him move all around her, seemingly examining her from every angle.

Her metal pulled away from her mouth as she addressed him. "I'm fine, Terry."

He squawked once.

"I'm glad that you pulled back. That wasn't something that you could have helped with."

Terry squawked in irritation.

"I *was* careful, and I *am* fine."

He did not seem mollified.

"I'm not going to do it that way again in any case. Don't get your feathers all bunched up over it."

He trilled a derisive series of notes.

"Just because I'm going to do it differently in the future does not mean I was reckless the first time."

-*Why do you think he tried to convey anything like that?*-

Because it's what I would have said if I were him? And his tone matches. Tala shrugged internally.

Terry let out a long-suffering groan but turned his attention forward once more.

They only ran like that for a little while before Terry began flickering around once again.

At that point, Tala fell into a rhythm and allowed Alat to bring up the next book for her to read as she ran.

The experience of reading as she did other tasks was more odd than usual because the book didn't block any of her vision at all this time.

The book seemed to hover before her closed eyes, visible even so. Independently, she could see perfectly through her mirrored perspectives.

Thus, she was in a position to split her mind and attention as she moved.

It was actually a bit exhausting, mentally speaking, which meant it was probably good training.

I don't split my focus very often, do I?

-No, you just jump between tasks or areas of focus. If you truly need to do more than one thing simultaneously, you rely on me.-

Tala found herself nodding as she ran. *I've let that become a weakness. Let's correct that, shall we?*

-As you wish.-

Chapter: 49
Baby Steps

Tala ran through the wilds and read as the sun moved across the sky.

Terry kept close and checked in on her fairly often, but he didn't bother staying within sight most of the time.

In the end, they came to the edge of the city's defenses with the sun barely showing over the horizon. *Ahh, short winter days, how inconvenient you can be at times.*

They stood on top of a particularly high rise and looked down upon Marliweather, the city of Tala's birth.

It covered so much more land than Bandfast, given that its mines were still operational. *They still have almost fifty years left to drain the mines dry.*

Within the ring of massive gantries and equipment to transport workers and materials down into and up from the mining tunnels, the familiar farmland lay just as dormant as it had been around Bandfast.

The city also looked very much like Bandfast, and she was yet again struck by the similarities. The layout of the streets was nearly hauntingly familiar, as were large portions of the skyline.

Even with the steadily falling snow, the view wasn't *that* obscured.

She was reminded of her first time returning after her Academy days, and she looked over to Terry, shifting the metal away from her lips. "Wait a minute."

Terry froze in place and glanced her way, letting out a questioning trill.

“You were learning to fight with weapons. Throwing them until you were a hurricane of blades all by yourself. What ever happened with that?”

He lowered his head and glowered.

“You were getting really good! Even before I was… taken. Why haven’t we gone back to that?”

Terry shook himself and turned back toward the city.

“Ahh, right. Too much else going on… Well, we should get back to it. You were rusting terrifying.”

He tilted his head slightly, giving her a side-eyed look.

She held up her hands. “Not that you aren’t terrifying as you are now.”

He bobbed once and chirped in satisfaction.

Tala found herself grinning. “You know, you really do make everything better.”

He preened slightly, trilling happily.

“Come on, let’s get into the city.” She had a realization as she said that; she didn’t actually have any pressing need for anything within the city.

She didn’t need to find a place to stay or supplies; she had Kit.

She didn’t need to find food; she had Mistress Petra.

She didn’t need safety; she was more than capable of handling anything that this region was likely to throw at her.

Why am I here again?

-…Your family.-

Are you sure? I think I can just go back to Bandfast. We could probably get back before dawn.

-Tala.-

She let her shoulders drop slightly. *Fine…*

"Let's go."

Terry flickered to her shoulder, and she allowed her through-spike to activate, shrouding her in an illusion of her real, uncoated appearance. She also let her elk-leathers re-cover her in appropriate clothing.

Then, together, they moved down the hill, toward the closest road.

The work hours in the mine didn't need to follow the sun, so the traffic on the road was still rather light, with only a few comers and goers.

Those they passed waved and greeted her, and she returned the courtesy.

People are so nice.

-Yeah, it really is good to be back.-

Tala felt a bit of wetness building up in her eyes. *It really is.*

She didn't actually cry, but she definitely had a tightness in her chest.

Come on, Tala. It's just people saying hi. People said hi to you in Bandfast, too.

She shook off her wave of emotions. She knew that her reaction was likely due to being in her hometown again, and the mindset this location moved her toward.

This was a homecoming, even if not the same type as returning to humanity as a whole, or even returning to Bandfast.

She should expect it to dredge up some powerful feelings.

Terry had been occasionally shaking himself free of snow, and he seemed to finally have enough, glancing down toward Kit with an inquiring chirp.

"Sure. I can let you back in."

Tala opened the pouch, and Terry flickered within, vanishing into her sanctum.

Now without a companion, she focused more inward.

Walking the last stretch allowed her to reaffirm her emotional state and her plans.

She'd told her siblings that she'd be in Marliweather in the next few days, so she could delay if she wanted or needed.

She didn't think that she would. If she waited too long, she'd leave without seeing them and make some excuse.

Tomorrow. I'll see them tomorrow.

-Do you want me to message them to that effect?-

...Maybe? Is it a school night? Will they even be available?

-They won't have any school tomorrow, Tala.-

Okay, thank you. Yes, please send them a message.

-Do you want me to say anything other than, 'I'm in town and will be by tomorrow morning'?-

No, that sums it up pretty well.

-Alright, I've reached out to Master Leighis. He's been a solid connection to them.- Alat only paused for a moment before continuing. *-I still say we should have tried to connect with one of your siblings directly…-*

Oh, I know that's your opinion. You've been very *clear. I like the little bits of separation…*

-Do you think that's going to stand?-

No. Not after… all this.

She walked through the main gates to the city and felt a wave of power pass over her, reading her projected aura.

One of the guards off to one side stood up a bit straighter, seemingly hearing something that she couldn't. He then oriented on her and strode her way.

What is this, now?

-I have no idea.-

He stopped near her and bowed. "Mistress."

"Guardsman. What seems to be the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter, Mistress. I was instructed to greet the Refined Mistress and see if there is anything in particular that has brought you to our city."

Alat? What is going on?

-I still have no idea.-

"My apologies, but why?"

The man looked vaguely uncomfortable. "No, Mistress, I must offer *my* apologies, but I do not know either. I am simply following instructions. Now, is there any way that we can assist you?"

She frowned, feeling the whole situation was odd. "No, thank you, Guardsman. Good night to you."

He bowed again, clearly seeming relieved that their interaction was coming to an end. "And to you, Mistress."

She walked into the city without further delay, but she felt the need to glance back.

Instead of actually turning her head around, she simply put more focus on the aspect-mirrored perspective from the bloodstar at the base of her neck.

The guard watched her go even as he returned to his station.

Please let Mistress Ingrit know what just happened and ask what this might be about.

-Done.-

Alat would let her know as soon as a response came back, so Tala didn't feel a need to wait.

She walked through the streets of the nearest market, the falling snow continuing to build up. Tala shifted her metal and drew in a deep breath, taking in the feeling of having people around her again after being in the wilderness all day.

Oddly, the mere presence of so many people was relaxing to Tala at that moment.

She liked her usual isolation, but the mass of humanity held its own sort of appeal.

-Alright, Mistress Ingrit said that it shouldn't be anything to be concerned about. It might be because you were a new Refined, not in the city's records. It could also be that the city defenders have been doing surprise inspections or defensive drills, and so the guards are more on watch for more advanced Mages. If there was any real issue, you'd have been greeted by an Archon at the very least.-

Okay, then. Please thank her for us.

-Already done.-

Thank you.

She wandered a bit until she found a shop with a clear wall on the side, in an alleyway that wasn't too shadowed or foreboding.

The shopkeeper was meticulously keeping her wares cleared of the little snow that drifted under her canopy, ensuring they were visible and ready for the evening crowd.

Tala walked up to her with a smile. "Good evening."

"Good evening. What can I interest you in today?"

"Well, I was wondering if I could use your exterior wall." Tala gestured at the alleyway she'd been eyeing.

“My… wall?”

“Yes. It won’t be damaged, or affected at all, long term, but I thought it would be polite to ask.”

“May I ask what for?”

“Of course. I want to anchor my dimensional storage against the wall for the night.”

“Oh! Mistress, my apologies.” The woman bowed politely. “I did not realize that you were a Mage.”

“It is no matter. Do I have your permission?”

The woman glanced in the direction that Tala indicated. “If it will cause no damage or disruption…”

“It should not.”

“Then, you are welcome to use it. Thank you for asking.”

Tala gave a shallow bow. “Of course. Good night.”

“Good night, Mistress.”

She walked around the corner and placed Kit on the wall where the pouch expanded into a door that seamlessly fit in with the building’s aesthetics.

Honestly, Tala felt *tired.*

Once again, she didn’t know if the feeling was just an artifact of all she’d been through, combined with being back in her childhood hometown, but she felt like she would sleep solidly all the way through the night.

Dinner first, then sleep.

That was a plan she could tackle with ease.

And tomorrow, the siblings…

That part would not be as easy.

* * *

Tala had been correct.

She slept all evening and through the entire night.

When she woke, she felt rested at a level that she hadn't realized she was lacking.

It seemed that the events of the previous day—*more like previous months*—had been even more draining than she'd realized.

It was still before sunrise on the outside, but the sky of the sanctum was beginning to brighten, and that light was likely what drew her awake.

She moved through her stretches before aspect mirroring and hopping to free herself of what little grime had built up through the night.

Then, iron in place and through-spike active, Tala went to get breakfast.

She didn't have her iron in the 'everyday' configuration she was trying out because she was about to eat, then go talk with her siblings. Thus, having her face thickly covered would be quite the irritant.

Even so, she did close off her eyes and ears, leaving only her airways open.

She could still see and hear via her bloodstars, and it was good practice for the oddity of her hearing not coming from the expected locations.

When Tala entered the dining area, she saw that Mistress Petra had her breakfast ready and waiting, while being out of sight.

The Mage had learned quickly that Tala enjoyed a bit of peace and quiet in the morning.

She is a treasure.

The food was as excellent as always, and Tala savored it while she watched the sun rise over her domain.

It was an odd thought, that this was her domain, but it really couldn't be considered anything else.

This place was controlled by Kit, but Tala was its benefactor, its ruler.

Her power sustained Kit and everything within the sanctum.

If she were to die, or withhold her power, this place would crumble away.

In the best case, Kit would abandon the too-large dimensional pocket in an attempt to exist for a bit longer, and this would simply become an unattached pocket of existence, which may or may not ever encounter Zeme again.

If it did, it may or may not have become an ether hold by then.

Tala really didn't know how such a process took place, but with dimensional storages being one of the most common types of items sought and used by Archons, there had to be millions of tiny spaces floating around.

I wonder if they collide, combine, or… something else?

-First of all, they have to be over a certain volume before they truly become separate spaces, without specific interference. So, most dimensional storages simply 'flatten out' with Zeme upon their dissolution. Second, I believe that even for the larger ones—those that are truly separate and only loosely connected with Zeme—most degrade over time. Finally, you're delaying.-

Tala smiled ruefully; she had finished her breakfast a few minutes earlier. *Fair enough.*

The doorway out appeared in front of her, and she pulled it open, looking out onto the falling snow.

You know, if I do soul-bond Kit and go through the process of having her only tethered to my soul, that would mean that the entrances could appear anywhere around me, or rather anywhere around my soul.

-That is my understanding.- Alat's voice was hesitant, clearly sensing Tala building toward another delay, even if only a cognitive one.

And we have a part of a soul-bound ring in the Library in Bandfast.

-I… Huh.- Alat actually sounded a bit surprised by the obvious connection.

And I could leave a bloodstar… well, anywhere. Could I open an entrance to anywhere I'd left a soul-bound… anything?

-I… I don't honestly know. Most Archons only soul-bind things they want to use all the time. Thus, they keep the items within easy reach. Even so, I'm sure someone *has experimented with the idea.-*

We should look into it.

-Yes, we should, and you should stop delaying.-

Yeah, yeah. Tala stepped out into the well-lit alleyway, moving through a reasonable amount of still-falling snow.

The sky was still dark overhead, but some people were out and about, walking past on the nearby street.

Tala hesitated for only a moment before pulling Kit free of the wall and hanging the pouch from her belt.

She *could* leave the entrance to her sanctum there on the wall of the random shop, but that would end up being really inconvenient for her.

Terry hadn't come out with her, but he would likely ask to at some point this morning.

-You're delaying again.-

Tala turned and walked toward her childhood home.

The snow that had started the previous afternoon had continued.

It hadn't mattered much the previous day when she was maintaining a bounding run through the wilderness. Walking through the streets was a different experience.

By some quirk of the local climate, Marliweather got a *lot* more snow than Bandfast, reminding Tala of her previous trips and of her childhood when the snow would sometimes pile up to four or five feet in a single storm.

Tala didn't have any issue pushing through the growing drifts to get to the main street before continuing on her way.

She didn't see any familiar faces as she traversed the city, but she didn't expect to, and Tala actually made sure to pick a route that avoided the haunts of such people that she was aware of.

Baby steps.

-What about Bob?-

The Constructionist? Tala was confused as to why Alat would bring him up.

-Yeah, didn't we hear that he was going to be in Marliweather?-

I suppose so. Why?

-Well, you could ask him for anything we need the Constructionists for, like a way to relieve the burden on communication through the Archive?-

Ah, yeah. That would probably be reasonable, but who's creating cognitive delays, now?

-Fine, fine. Get back to your introspection. Don't let me provide distractions while you're on the move.-

Tala huffed a laugh and shook her head but didn't otherwise respond.

Her mind wandered back to the large amounts of snow.

Work crews were moving through at the early hour, some using artifacts powered by local harvests to melt or move the snow. Some were physically moving the snow to melting zones, where larger workings or Mages were liquifying the buildup and that which was brought to them, allowing it to flow down the storm drains and clear of the city.

Tala saw a few Mages working to move the snow as well, obviously working with ice or water-related inscriptions.

Another few seemed to be spraying powder across the streets.

What is that? Incorporators?

-It does look like it. If the smell is any indication, they are hot, salt incorporators. At least close enough to salt to closely mirror the smell of the ocean when mixed with water.-

Now that her attention had been brought to the scent, Tala could easily smell salt on the air just as Alat had said.

-Look behind the Mages. They are being careful in where they apply it, otherwise it would just leave behind sheets of ice, and that's worse than snow.-

Yeah… I suppose they were doing this when I was younger, too. I remember some, but this seems like a whole other level of effort.

-Well, you didn't come to the market districts very often.-

That's fair enough. Even when she'd been visiting her family quite often the previous year, she'd mainly stayed near their house or at the work yard. There also hadn't *really* been any big storms while she was around, then.

I was only in Marliweather for a couple of days every two weeks or so. So, I suppose it makes sense that I might have missed seeing something like this.

It was interesting enough that Tala specifically watched the goings on as she moved deeper into the city, toward her destination.

Finally, she approached the alchemist shop, the sun still not peeking over the surrounding rooftops, though the sky was bright enough that she expected it to come into view shortly.

Well, with all the clouds, it might not come into view all day. It should get a lot brighter soon, though.

Just as she remembered, the street her family lived on was much less important, so it wasn't being cleared with the same fervor. Still, there was an easy path to walk, so it wasn't like the people who lived here were being abandoned.

When she finally got a good look at the storefront, she stopped in her tracks.

There, beside the door, bundled against the cold and sitting in a sturdy chair, was her father.

Chapter: 50
Catching Up

Tala stood frozen in the street, staring at her father nearly a block away from her. In the dark of pre-dawn, under the clouds and the still falling snow, there was almost no chance that he could see her yet.

The man was clearly freezing, and he was just as clearly waiting for her.

-*You don't know that.*-

Oh?

-*Yeah, he's quite well bundled. He might be fine temperature wise. As to why he's outside? He could… just want some fresh air for his health?*-

Tala scoffed and shook her head. *Not likely.*

She was suddenly torn.

She could simply stride past him into the family shop and ignore the man, but knowing him, if he had set his mind on *something*, he'd be planning on standing as she approached and blocking the door if she tried to move past.

She could just move him. She was easily strong enough to move him, bodily.

There would be some catharsis in that, but it would also be bullying, and she didn't like how even the idea made her feel.

She could go around back? Hop the back wall and come in through the kitchen….

Then, she'd have to face her mother. *Stepmother.*

-*Now you're just being petty* and *delaying.*-

Tala growled.

She had no idea why he was outside.

What did he want to say or do that he didn't want anyone else to hear?

Is he so naive that he thinks no one will be watching or listening at the door?

-You could stand out here until both of you freeze. Does that appeal?-

I don't actually think that I'd freeze even in the void.

-Of course you wouldn't. You'd overheat. That's part of the issue.-

Fine, I don't think I'd freeze if I stuffed myself into a glacier for a hundred years.

-Now, you're just being argumentative.-

Now, you're being pushy.

Alat sighed. *-Tala. What do you want?-*

She growled again. *If I knew that, I'd have already done it.*

Even so, she started forward once again.

Her father did see her coming and stood. "Tala," he called to her, then seemed to hesitate. "Mistress Tala, may I have a moment of your time?"

She stopped in the street in front of the shop, a good two paces from him.

They were surrounded by mounded snow, and more was falling as they stood in awkward silence.

Finally, she shook her head. "What do you want?"

She could hear the small smile in his voice as he responded, "A moment of your time. Didn't I already make that clear?"

"For what?" she snapped back.

He sighed, visibly deflating just a bit. “Can you open your eyes? I know you don’t want to see me, but that’s… It’s hard to talk to you like this.”

Tala froze. *My… eyes?* Her eyes were covered in iron, so they were closed, but she had her through-spike active.

-*And the illusion mimics the real you.*- Alat sounded a bit chagrined. -*I did not think of that…*-

Clearly, I didn’t either. She opened her eyes, maintaining her iron covering.

It felt *weird* to have iron on her eyeball, but leaving any gap could cause a distortion of the magic reflected back.

Her father nodded. “Thank you.”

Tala gave a strained smile. She was slightly hurt that he’d thought she was being so childish, but what else would he assume? She certainly wasn’t going to take the time to explain things to him.

“I wanted to talk with you about Dagan and Alva.”

“What about—” But she cut herself off, slowly nodding. “They’re turning twelve in just a couple of weeks.”

-*Yes, they are! That is a fact that we both know and remembered… and simply didn’t consider.*-

Not helpful, Alat.

“Yes.” His voice was firm.

“So, they want to go to the Academy, I assume?”

“They do. Illie and Nalac send messages so full of wonder about what they’re learning and seeing that it’s hard not to be drawn in.” There was only a hint of recrimination in his tone. “Add to that Latna’s new apprenticeship and—”

“What?” Tala cut him off.

He winced, shaking his head. “She’ll tell you herself.” He half-glanced over his shoulder. “I’ve already probably said more than she’d prefer.” He deflated further. “But we’re getting off topic. I want you to convince them it’s a bad idea.”

Tala couldn’t help it. She barked a harsh laugh. “You? You want *me* to convince my siblings to stay away from the Academy? Are you serious?”

“I know, Tala—Mistress Tala. I know I have no right to ask, but—”

“No right? A random stranger has no right. From them, it would be odd and out of place. From you, it’s an insult.” She felt herself flushing under her iron, and she was filled with a desire to punch the man. Only a complete certainty that it would kill or cripple him stayed her hand.

“Don’t you think I know that?” he snapped, and the heat in his tone actually took her aback for a moment.

She mentally pulled back, trying to assess the situation and her own emotions, but he continued before she really had a chance to sort through it all.

“We *lost* you. Again. Every one of the children…” He closed his eyes and seemed to be fighting to keep himself stoic. “They mourned you. You were *dead,* and it nearly broke this family.”

Tala was at an utter loss for words.

“Aside from the loss itself, *I* was to blame. I was the reason you were a Mage. I was the reason you weren’t here. I was the reason why you were out in the wilds where you could simply vanish without a trace. We all know it.”

It was hard to see under all the layers, but Tala finally noticed something that had been tickling at the back of her mind. He had lost a *lot* of weight. He'd never been fat, not really, but he had been a bigger man.

Now? Now, he looked like… *Like three months out from the edge of starvation.*

"What do you want me to say?" Her voice was quiet, but it wasn't soft. "Do you want me to absolve you? Do you want me to lie to Dagan and Alva?"

"No!" His voice was equally quiet and equally harsh. "Tell them the truth. Don't sugarcoat it. They are *children*, and they don't understand the dangers. Your return just cemented the invincibility of Mages in their mind, even though they know families who have lost so, *so* many." He shook his head. "I don't want absolution. I am not the reason for your success, but I am the reason for your hardship. There is nothing that I can ever do to change that, and I don't expect you to ever forgive me. But, please." He looked up and met her gaze with incredible intensity. "Please don't make the mistake I made. Don't send more of this family off to die."

The silence that only seemed to exist among new-fallen snow grew around them. Tala didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything.

Finally, her father shook his head. "That's all, Mistress. Thank you for your time."

Without another word, he turned and opened the heavy door, letting out a wave of warmth and nostalgic aromas.

Tala followed him inside, maintaining the silence, stepping into the reception area of the alchemy shop and shutting the door.

A voice came from the back, "Dad? Are you back? Or is that Tala?"

The speaker was clearly more excited at the second option. *Did he actually somehow finagle a way for them to all be elsewhere?*

She was somewhat impressed despite herself.

Her father glanced at her before calling back, “Actually both. She arrived as I was just outside.”

That started a cascade of noise, most of which had ‘Tala!’ mixed in among various other exclamations and the sound of objects clattering.

Tala probably could have parsed it all, but she didn’t feel the need.

A pile of young people came spilling out through the door into the back, and they swarmed her like a plague of locusts.

If she’d been mundane, Tala had no doubt that she’d have been taken to the ground by their exuberance.

As it was, she found herself with half a dozen little people hanging off of her or in some way trying to give her a hug in the center of a larger group. The air was filled with greetings and clamor for others to move out of the way.

A few of the smaller ones were poking at her and commenting to each other how she felt like a statue.

Tala simply smiled and added power to her voice, ensuring that it would carry through the hubbub. “Hey. It’s good to see you all.”

Everyone stopped instantly, fully orienting on her rather than those in their way.

Her dad shook his head, huffed, and stepped through the door into the back.

Her brother Dagan’s eyes were practically glowing as he spoke into the silence, clearly intending to talk to himself, “That’s so cool.”

That broke the other siblings out of their surprise, and the avalanche of greetings resumed.

It took a full five minutes before everyone was satisfied.

When they all quieted down once more, Latna stepped forward, clearly having been tasked as the spokesperson. “Do you want to eat here? Or should we go elsewhere to catch up?”

Tala considered. “Have you all eaten?”

Latna shrugged. “We just put the food out for breakfast.”

“Ahh. Well, I don’t want to interrupt that. It’s probably getting cold. Go, eat. When you’re done, knock on this door.” Tala tossed Kit against the inside of the front door of the shop where the pouch expanded and blended in seamlessly.

Her eldest sister tilted her head to one side and frowned. “What did you do to our door?”

“Nothing special, but if I want, it can now lead into my place.”

That got an excited murmur that Tala immediately realized she needed to head off before it could grow.

“Not forever! Just until I take back my pouch.”

There was a collective groan of disappointment.

“Now, go! Eat. We’ll talk as soon as you’re done.”

Tala opened Kit and walked inside, out onto a warm, sunny, grassy hilltop.

She turned around and grinned at their astonished faces. “Don’t take too long, now.”

The door closed but didn’t disappear on Tala’s side.

She wanted to make sure they came out beside her when they came.

-You know, you’d know if anyone knocked, no matter where the door was. Then, you could instantly move it to your side.-

Even so… If something went wrong, now would be among the worst times.

Alat sighed, not arguing with her clearly unassailable logic.

As expected, Tala did not have to wait long.

Soon enough, a tentative knock sounded on the door that stood, unsupported, on the hilltop beside her.

“Come!” Tala called back, and the door opened on its own.

Three of the four youngest stood outside, only missing little Sella to round out the set.

These three had been basically unknown to her before her frequent visits the year before. They’d been a baby or not born when she’d left for the Academy.

“Come on in.” She smiled. “It’s perfectly safe.”

Voices called from behind the three, a mixture of protests and demands that they wait. The three boys shared a mischievous grin before walking through as close as they could squeeze together.

The thunder of running feet followed close behind, and the others practically dove through the door one by one after the three, until they all had joined Tala on the hilltop.

While Kit couldn’t handle all of them for an extended period, a couple of hours here and there shouldn’t cause an issue.

With an unnecessary gesture, Tala closed the door, and it vanished, causing several of the siblings to gasp.

“Now”—she clapped her hands together as she looked at each of her twelve present siblings—“let’s catch up, shall we?”

* * *

The day passed quickly.

Terry came by for a bit to play, but he still seemed a bit off, more contemplative than his usual self, and he didn't stay around for that long.

The Zuccat children were introduced, but Tala had previously asked for this first morning to be strictly her family, so they also quickly moved on to other things, promising to meet up to play with the kids close to their own ages later on.

Tala entertained her siblings with *heavily* edited retellings of her various… adventures.

She didn't sanitize them to make them seem less dangerous. More than anything, she left out the parts that would be too confusing, difficult to explain, or that would complicate their advancement if they chose the path of a Mage.

And there's no need to mention all the loot I got on the way out.

-Yeah… treasure is never the greatest motivator for safety.-

She knew that she was doing what her father had asked, in a way, but it wasn't *because* he had asked, so she bore it and did as she'd planned.

Mistress Petra provided lunch.

The two of them had discussed just that before the trip to Marliweather, and Mistress Petra would be providing meals for her siblings whenever Tala requested, though they would need to refill their stores if it was *too* often.

Latna stepped out early on to let their mother know that the kids would miss lunch but be back for dinner.

Their father apparently was minding the alchemy shop for the day to give the siblings time together.

When evening rolled around, and dinner time had nearly arrived, most of the siblings left to help with the final preparations.

Only Latna stayed behind, and she even closed the door behind her last sibling, turning toward Tala. “You know, you could join us.”

“I know, but I’d rather not.”

“Mom and Dad?”

“That is a part of it.”

“What’s the rest?”

“Your house isn’t my home anymore, and I don’t want it to be. This is.” She spread her hands out, indicating their surroundings.

The siblings hadn’t gotten the tour—Tala had planned that for the next day—but they had learned a bit about what Kit was.

In the end, she hadn’t been *entirely* effective in keeping away from mentions of loot.

“I don’t want to rejoin the family, Latna. I love you; I love our siblings, but I am not one of you. Not anymore.”

Latna shook her head. “Do you really believe that? That you can just *decide* to not be one of us anymore?”

“Being a Karweil has meaning, Latna, and it no longer applies to me. There have been good and bad Karweils, and I’ve severed my connection to all of them.”

“And *your* mother?”

Tala winced slightly but shook her head. “I don’t know. I never knew her, and she didn’t have any family that I know of.”

Tragedies like Lyn’s family weren’t everyday occurrences, but they did happen often enough that it wasn’t *that* unusual to find lone remaining members of a family. In those cases, tragedies didn’t just ignore the survivors forever, so even Tala’s mother’s story wasn’t that odd.

She only hesitated a moment before continuing, “If she were alive? I don’t know. I might have more pull, but that’s not how it is.”

“You know… she chose *him*. She chose our father.”

Tala scoffed. “That could have happened for any number of reasons.”

Latna arched an eyebrow. “Really? You think she chose to *marry* a man without good reason?”

Tala held up her hands in concession. “I didn’t say those reasons weren’t good.”

Latna shook her head. “You’re justifying.”

“And you’re trying to play out an argument you had in your own head against a ‘me’ who doesn’t exist.”

She froze at that. After a long moment, she nodded. “You’re right. That’s a fair assessment. I apologize.”

Tala watched her sister slump just slightly. “I know you mean well, Latna. You will always be my sister, even if we aren’t in the same family. Just like when you get married, I won’t be a part of that extended family either.”

Latna smiled at that. “I can understand *that*, but you will still be connected to them through me.”

“To that, I completely agree. But that doesn’t make me a part of it with you.”

“I suppose…” She still seemed like she wanted to argue, but finally, the younger woman shook her head. “But that’s not what I wanted to talk with you about.”

Tala felt a rueful smile pull at her lips. “Oh? What is it, then?”

“I’ve taken an apprenticeship.”

Tala almost said that their father had told her that already, but she stopped herself. *That* would turn the conversation in an entirely undesirable direction. “Oh? What did you choose? I thought you enjoyed alchemy.”

“I do.” Latna smiled animatedly. “I see this as enhancing my alchemy. I’m studying magic.”

Tala frowned slightly. *Does she have more magic in her system than before?*

-Maybe? I don’t think so, though. There’s no discernable difference from the last time we saw her.-

And there are no inscriptions…

Latna held up a hand. “Before you fall into contemplation—spinning your mental wheels all over the place—I’ll just tell you. Master Leighis is starting me on the theory and foundations. He thinks I’ll be ready for a keystone and basic ancillary inscriptions in a couple of years.”

That was not how the Academy did things at all, but Tala supposed that the Academy was a non-standard location that might allow for a different order of operations. “So, Master Leighis is teaching you?”

Latna smiled happily. “He is. He’s a wonderful teacher. Apparently, he’s only had one apprentice before, but they were inducted as a full Mage. So, you could say he has a perfect record.”

The younger woman giggled slightly at her own poor joke, and Tala cocked an eyebrow. “I see…”

“Isn’t it exciting? I’m going to be a Mage, too!” Latna did seem very excited.

“I’m glad that you’re able to pursue something that excites you, yes.” *And maybe someone?*

-You could ask.-

Of course I could.

-*...But you won't.*-

Nope.

Latna beamed. “I’m glad. I could hardly wait to tell you, but I wanted to do it in person.” Her countenance fell a bit. “I had only just decided to go through with it when we got word that you’d vanished…”

Tala gave a wan smile. “I am sorry for how that hit you all. I definitely would not have chosen it.”

“I know.” After a moment, Latna added, “*We* know that it wasn’t something you chose. We… we had just begun to see you again, just begun to get to know you again, and then you were gone.”

“Well, I’ll be staying in touch more from now on.”

She gave a half-smile. “But not visiting often?”

“Probably not too often, no.”

Latna sighed. “I guess that’s to be expected.”

She glanced back at the closed door.

“So, are you just going to wait in here until tomorrow?”

Tala shrugged. “Probably. I have a lot to do, and this place isn’t exactly small.”

“Alright.” Latna smiled. “Good night, Tala.”

“Good night, Latna.”

The younger woman hesitated for an instant, then stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her older sister. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Tala returned the hug, curling into the familiar embrace. “So am I… So am I.”

Chapter: 51
A Pleasant Morning

Tala passed the following two weeks much as she had planned.

She spent time with her siblings, showing them Kit and actually discussing quite a bit of the random theories of magic with them—well, with the older ones at least.

They never delved too deeply into the topic as no one but Latna had any foundation to speak of.

Tala played with her little siblings and chatted with the older ones about their lives. The Zuccat children and Terry joined in the fun much of the time, and Tala often simply let groups of her siblings into Kit to play with the new playmates available in the sanctum.

When absolutely required, she exchanged words in passing with her parents, but neither her mother nor father attempted to force conversation.

For that, Tala was infinitely grateful. Though, not grateful enough to approach them for anything further.

Aside from the time with her family, she trained, *hard.*

Her body was fully recovered.

She had a clean bill of health.

The only thing she didn't have was a physical sparring partner.

In every other regard, she dove into her full suite of exercises and training routines.

She had asked Terry if he wanted to spar, but he had indicated that he wanted to wait, for some reason or other. So, she hadn't pressed him.

He'll let me know when he's ready.

Knowing him, he was probably watching her train to learn how to most efficiently defeat her.

That was alright. Tala preferred competent opponents to spar with.

She could learn from defeat, and she was excited to do so as soon as he was ready.

Tala contemplated finding sparring partners in the city, but that seemed… too permanent to her.

Maybe I can convince Master Leighis? Or maybe he knows someone that it wouldn't be too awkward for me to fight?

She'd have to ask when they spoke, and they *would* be speaking.

Master Leighis and Latna were coming for dinner that night, and Tala found that she was almost as nervous and awkward about it as she had been when she hosted the Zuccats.

But now, Mistress Petra is cooking for us and setting everything up, so I don't have to worry about it myself.

That really was a weight off.

She *did* have to take Kit to the market district to let Mistress Petra and Master Simon do some shopping for all the meals, but that wasn't too difficult either.

She could have simply let the pair walk on their own there and back, but that felt rude, somehow.

I'll get used to having people help me.

Even so, all of that was secondary to what she was currently doing.

She sat under an older tree, talking with Dagan and Alva.

"And I can't *wait* to rain lightning down on arcanous creatures! That will be *soooo* cool."

Normally over the past week, Segis would have joined in the older boy's imagination, over-awed by another so dedicated to play-fighting, but Tala had gotten time with just her two siblings, today.

Are all little boys like this?

-Evidence suggests yes, but I doubt it's really all *of them.-*

That's true, I suppose. There are always outliers.

-What was that saying? There is more variation within a group than between groups? I do wish you had paid better attention in some of your classes.-

We can grab a book to refresh if necessary. The crux was an injunction to not toss something out of a category simply because it differed radically in ways other than the defining characteristics.

-Yes, yes. I am aware of the crux.-

So then… why were you asking?

-You were speaking about outliers, and I was irritated that I should *have a perfect response, but you don't remember it perfectly.-*

Tala groaned internally. *Please let me focus. I want to give my siblings my attention.*

-Fine, fine. I'll get something else done.-

Thank you.

Tala turned her concentration back to her two young siblings.

Alva was sipping her tea as Dagan continued to wax on about his dreams of conquest and glory.

"And then, I'll turn into lightning and streak through the hordes of attackers to wreak even more devastation—"

Alva set down her cup and interjected, “What if someone you care about gets hurt?”

That gave Dagan pause for a moment, then he shrugged. “I’ll fry the wound closed or shock them back alive.”

Tala opened her mouth to correct him but frowned as she considered that what he said was *close* to accurate in what could be done. In the end, it wasn’t worth trying to divert him.

Alva seemed to have a similar view as she gave Tala an exasperated look without interjecting further at that moment.

Their brother had been enthusiastically explaining all that he would do once he had access to his magic for most of the morning.

Alva had joined in occasionally, and while she spoke less, her interjections were often more… interesting.

The first time had been especially notable.

Dagan had been describing how he would deal with a rogue group of City Guards—without bothering to explain why they were rogue, of course—when Alva had seized the moment.

“Yes, and once your lightning is bouncing between the armor of all the evil men, I will grab hold and *amplify* it! You supply the spark, and I will bring the thunder.”

Dagan and Tala had turned to her, Tala surprised, Dagan elated. “*Yes!* We will bring them down, together!”

Alva didn’t add more as Dagan then altered his tales to include his sister’s enhancement of his own power.

The young girl had smiled happily, content to listen.

You know, they could probably make that work.

-Of course they could, but it would tie them together.-

Yes, and no. A lightning-creating Mage has the potential to be very powerful, and even a guide of lightning is never truly powerless. Then she paused. *No, I'm falling into a flawed way of thinking. They can all do the same things, just in different ways.*

-Fair enough, yeah. If they follow through, it will be pretty interesting to watch their careers.-

Tala did try to ensure the two knew that Mage work was dangerous and usually not as glamorous as many stories made it seem.

Even so, Tala would say that her preference was for them to pursue magic. So, she probably didn't try as hard as she could have.

-And if you can go against your father's wishes at the same time…-

Hush, you. That has nothing to do with it.

-Oh, of course not. It's just a side benefit.-

Alat…

-Fine, fine. I'll stop. Your reasons are your own and have nothing to do with your father.-

And they actually were.

While Tala's own induction into the world of magic as a student had been… unideal, that didn't change the fact that Mages were required for humanity, and those who took up the mantle had a *far* greater control over their fate.

There was more danger but also more freedom, and humanity needed all the help it could get.

She had contemplated her own reasoning over the last couple of weeks, and she had come to the conclusion that it was better to be a player in the game than a pawn on the board.

After all, when she played tafl with Rane, the pieces never won or lost, only the players did. Even so, they were moved by others, their fate entirely outside of their own hands.

By the nature of the game, many of the pieces didn't get eliminated for full games. It was an odd, brutal game when more than half of either side's pieces were removed, so it was *relatively* safe to be a piece on the board. Even so, the pieces had no agency, no ability to affect the board.

She wouldn't let her siblings be subject to the whims of others if she could help it.

Alat had helped her reason through her thinking, so the alternate interface was mostly poking at her, attempting to tease her into further reflection.

Even so, Tala didn't allow herself to be drawn in, instead focusing on her siblings and what they wanted to share with her, now that they had finished a midmorning snack with tea.

Funnily enough, Alva quite enjoyed cross-stitch, and Tala barely held herself back from commenting on the nature of fusing or the Doman-Imithe while looking at the few pieces the girl had brought with her.

Dagan, on the other hand, had brought a wooden box almost too big for him to carry.

Once Alva broke the ice with crafts, Dagan was practically bouncing in his seat.

When Tala indicated that she'd like to see what he brought, he began pulling out… glass?

She was surprised at first, but in the end, it turned out that he had a passion both for blown and stained glass.

He wasn't that good yet, but from what little Tala understood of the crafts, he showed promise.

And he has the most important characteristic for such things.

Alat grunted in assent. -*The desire to continue.*-

Their crafts made Tala consider her own lack of a pastime.

She read.

She trained.

She ate.

She explored ideas.

That was pretty much it.

Well, she also enjoyed the theatre and tafl, but those just weren't the same alone.

I'll do more of that when I get to Alefast. I'm sure Rane will be up for it.

-I don't think there will be too many plays put on in a Waning city.-

Huh, I hadn't considered that… We'll find something to do.

She was considering what she could do on her own. Plays required performers and tafl required a competent opponent.

I could take up automata crafting…

-Tala…-

Kidding! I'm kidding.

Though, truth be told, both she and Alat were quite interested in the now completely grown body that Io had left behind. There was just an empty socket for a soul-connection, waiting within the thing's head.

A bloodstar could fit in there so *neatly…*

-Tala!-

Right! Right. They needed to do more research before taking such a step.

-And if we can figure out how to make it work, a magic-bound golem of that power would be exquisitely useful.-

Excited for all the possibilities, eh? Tala couldn't help but project her amusement along with the question.

-Of course, but only if we can manage it without undue risk.-

Tala nodded to herself, returning her focus to her siblings.

They had been playfully bickering about whether a guide or a creator was a more powerful Mage.

Apparently, Master Leighis had been giving some basic instruction to all the kids who were interested. It was nothing forbidden or anything that would unduly influence their growth.

It was just some good background that most adults would know, regardless of whether they were mundane or Mage.

Tala shook her head and smiled, interjecting, “That is a misconception.”

They both stopped, turned toward her and asked at nearly the same time, “What is?”

They then turned to each other and glared.

Tala laughed. “There is no inherent power difference between guides and creators. There are some situational limitations, but even between material and immaterial Mages, their abilities are not so easy to classify. The quadrants mainly address *how* a thing is done, rather than what can or can’t be done.”

Dagan hunched, crossing his arms.

Alva rolled her eyes. “We *know* that. Master Leighis tells us all the time.”

“And you think he’s wrong?”

“Of course not. He says that it depends on how you think about things. My argument is that it is both more efficient and more effective to think about guiding things where you want them to go than simply creating things whole cloth all the time.”

Tala gave a half-smile and shook her head. “As I said, it’s a matter of method, not capacity.”

“Oh, I completely agree, and guiding is the better method.”

Tala opened her mouth to argue, but then just huffed a laugh. “You’re going to have fun.”

Dagan perked up at that, latching onto the change of topic, “Is it fun? It’s not just boring lectures, is it?”

“Not at all.” Tala smiled.

“Good…” He looked a bit nervous. “We’re leaving in three days, and… I’m a bit nervous.”

Alva glanced at her brother, then slowly nodded. “Me too. What if Illie and Nalac were lying? What if it’s awful, or we don’t make any friends?”

Tala leaned forward. “Even if that’s the case, you’ll have each other, and you’ll come out Mages.” She hesitated. “Well, as magelings.”

They considered that for a moment.

“More importantly, everyone else is going to be feeling the same. Be a good friend, and you’ll find some. Don’t let people take advantage of you, but err on the side of kindness as much as you can.”

Dagan punched his own palm. “And sometimes the kindest thing you can do for a bully is teach them that that isn’t a good way to act.”

Tala blinked a couple of times. “While, yes, I suppose that I agree… Have you been having to deal with bullies?”

He sat up straighter. “No.”

Alva rolled her eyes again. “He’s never let anyone in our class become a real bully. He puts them down too fast.”

Tala didn’t honestly know what to say to that.

Dagan was looking away sheepishly, glancing back sporadically, likely trying to see how she would react.

“Well… I suppose it’s good that you’re protecting others. What happens to these kids afterward?”

He shrugged. “Nothing, really. They’re just like everyone else. The issue was that they didn’t think they were. Now they do.”

Alva smiled, giving a deeper explanation for her brother, “He’s friends with some, and none were really left out. They are fine, now. He even has enforced this on the years behind us, though not as much.”

He shook his head, frowning. “It’s hard to give a proper lesson to someone smaller than you. They just see it as you being mean.”

Tala honestly had no idea how to respond to that either. Even so, she took Alva’s offered way out and segued into discussing their friends.

All told, it was a very pleasant way to spend the morning.

Dagan and Alva left for lunch and to rejoin school in the afternoon.

They weren’t really participating in class at this point, as they would be leaving for the Academy so soon.

Instead, they were saying their goodbyes and generally being a disruption to their class.

It was a funny thing, really, and something that Tala hadn’t experienced given her odd departure, but she could understand it.

There was basically a celebration whenever a kid went off to the Academy, and that drew others to consider it more strongly, if they were able to make that choice.

Tala felt like it was a reasonable middle ground.

Humanity *needed* Mages, desperately. Given the circumstances, it would have been perfectly understandable if every child with any chance at Magehood was gathered up and shipped out to the Academy.

Some would fail out, but more would probably succeed than did under the current system.

Even so, that would take away so much agency from both the children and their families. It would be a tyranny, and Tala was grateful that humanity was not so desperate that such was necessary.

And it never will be if I can help it.

That idea was a bit shocking as she considered it.

She was immortal unless she was killed. She very likely would help keep humanity in a state where more choice could be offered.

It was easy to argue for freedom or death, but as she'd experienced in the arcane lands, the practical implications had her choosing servitude with a hope for future freedom.

That is a choice that no one should have to make, not with their lives. Debt? That made a sort of sense—as much as she hated to admit it.

As she sat, considering the idea, she had a realization.

If her death could have changed the arcane society, could have brought more freedom to those living there, she would have chosen death. At the very least, she *hoped* that she would have made that choice.

But it should always be my choice. She frowned. It was an odd contradiction.

Society was best when it didn't enslave the individuals, and individuals, overall, were best off when they each, individually, willingly chose to serve society.

It can't be enforced, or that ruins the point. It must be chosen freely or it's meaningless.

She felt something shift within her, and Alat confirmed her suspicion before she could check.

-Another minuscule tick toward Paragon? Nicely done!-

Tala felt herself smiling. *Just considering the nature of reality, and the wider implications of individual actions. You know, as I usually do.*

Alat chuckled.

Now, let's go play with an automaton.

-Tala…-

Kidding! I'm only kidding.

Chapter: 52
Terry

Terry was tired.

He was well rested but still tired.

He missed his mate.

He missed his hatchlings.

He missed his flock.

But none of this was new.

Each of these feelings had been his companion for longer than he'd had those that he'd lost.

His own body wouldn't allow him to starve to death. He could lie, unmoving, for hundreds of years and not be much worse off.

Even without that, his instincts wouldn't allow him to languish in mourning for too long.

His need to stalk and hunt was almost as great as his need for his flock.

Only one of those needs could be satisfied.

And so, he had hunted.

He considered attacking beings who could slay him, but that would be a betrayal of all that he was.

He was a survivor.

So, Terry had survived.

He had hunted those he could take with ease, without risk.

Until *her.*

The strange human had been so breakable but wouldn't die.

He had *heard* her bones cracking, but his claws didn't find purchase. Instead of being cut, she had begun to glow where he struck her.

Then, the bones hadn't been broken any more, and she'd given him *jerky*.

That had been a pleasant surprise. He'd never really focused on what humans ate before. It had turned out that that was a mistake.

As to the mended bones, Terry had known that humans had magic to heal themselves, but he'd never had occasion to see it for himself. None of his targets had ever survived his initial assaults to receive such care.

Humans were just too fragile, especially if caught unaware.

This one… This one was different.

This one was durable.

Terry had followed her, and she turned out to be fascinating to his instincts.

He couldn't quite understand her, and he *needed* to understand.

He'd been following her ever since, even into places that he *knew* he should have avoided.

There was absolutely no reason he should have expected to survive his trips into the magic city of not-humans, but she had been in there, and he had found her eventually.

Now, he found himself with food, a safe nest, and a travel companion.

He didn't know what to do with himself.

He felt the distant, deep ache for those he had lost.

He felt the drive to survive and grow.

But drives were not wants.

Terry didn't want anything, not really.

He knew that he should feel more than he did, and he knew it was partially due to his limited capacities as an arcanous creature that he couldn't feel more.

He could have become a magical beast, but he had avoided that, not wanting the added weight. Though, he didn't think of it that way.

He shied away from forming a connection with a powerful source of magic because something about what was offered contained *pain.*

He knew that everything would change if he accepted such a connection, such a bond.

Besides, for the moment, Terry had little hatchlings to train.

Human or terror bird, hatchlings were hatchlings.

While this crop was older than ideal for such basic lessons, they were progressing.

These last blinks had been… interesting as he had traveled with the durable one.

She had been *terrible* at fighting.

She would have been dead a dozen times over without her seemingly unending survivability, and not just because he could have killed and eaten her at least that many times if he had been interested in doing so.

Now, though? She seemed to be getting better.

She was so young, barely more than a hatchling herself, but she already fought as well as many of the older ones of her species.

Not that that said much.

She still shouldn't be able to kill him, but if he had met her in the wilderness as she was now, he would have avoided her.

And she wanted to spar with him.

More than that, she wanted to make their flock permanent.

The same knowledge of *pain* waited alongside that bond, according to his instincts, making him hesitant.

But that was not this moment.

In this moment, the little hatchling he was stalking bent to smell a flower, but by the way she turned to the side slightly, she was watching behind herself.

That was good. She was learning.

With the ease of blinking, Terry made ‘behind her’ into the location he was standing, on the side where she wasn’t looking.

It was a simple act, one that he had done uncountable times before, and it happened without effort or delay.

He simply knew that he was located there, and he was.

The sky was blue.

He was a terror bird.

Trees need leaves.

He stood *there.*

It was simply so.

The little thing turned back to the flower, content that she had foiled an ambush.

Terry, standing as close as he was, had two conflicting instincts.

The first, and far weaker, was to kill the creature and consume her. It wouldn’t be hard, but it wouldn’t supply him with much.

The second, and the far more powerful, was to protect, shelter, and train the tiny thing.

He followed the second instinct, striking out to push her over with the back of his talons.

He squawked irritably, even though he was proud that she was progressing.

It was rare for one so old to learn so well.

Terry often reminded himself that humans grew slower, but it was still odd for one to be considered a hatchling for more than the first two years.

It was unnatural, even.

But that was alright. Humans were unnatural down to the core of their being.

Unnatural didn't mean evil.

The little chick squawked back at him, disgruntled that he had outmaneuvered her and upset that he had used magic, but he didn't care.

This world had magic, and he would be a poor teacher if he trained her only to survive those few without it.

The durable one needed training, needed sharpening.

He was avoiding that.

He trilled in irritation at his wandering mind, catching the hatchling off guard with the sound.

She stumbled backward, eyes widening in fear.

Terry sighed in frustration at himself. He had let a bit too much of his anger into that trill.

He was beside her, smaller in size and snuggling against her cheek.

The hatchling calmed quickly, taking comfort in his small form.

There was foolishness there, but it was a useful tool for his teaching.

He would not break her of it, not yet.

He did shudder as he considered the most dangerous foe he'd ever fought.

The rabbit had been numerous, strong, and surprisingly competent in battle. Strangely, eating it had yielded no sustenance at all, putting him in a place where there was no good outcome.

Terry had fled its enclosure as quickly as he was able.

He had no doubt that, were it free to roam this dimension, it would be a great threat to all life in this world.

But his mind was wandering again, an annoying habit he had picked up recently, even as he had noticed his own thoughts growing more complex.

Terry forcibly turned his focus back to the hatchling under his charge.

She was fully placated once more. So, he was elsewhere, standing a distance away and chirping at her.

It was time to move on, time to ensure this one got back for her midday meal.

A short time later, Terry was still contemplating the durable one as he stalked his next pig.

He didn't *need* to eat them, but it was diverting to pursue them.

He had pursued the durable one.

She had resisted.

He had decided to help her.

She still needed him.

He had refused to fight with her.

Fighting to train hatchlings was the duty of all.

Fighting to train adults was the province of a flock.

Flocks were bound together.

Bonds were openings for pain.

Terry squawked in anger and slew the pig.

It obviously was small enough to fit within his mouth, regardless of his current stature, so it did.

He swallowed without savoring the kill.

Either they were a flock, or they weren't.

A flock must be strong.

To be bound, to hold together, a flock had to be capable.

If he were honest with himself, he had waited too long.

She wasn't a hatchling any more.

He had decided.

He moved across the landscape at his desired speed, occasionally using his taloned feet.

A true test was needed.

She wouldn't try to kill him, so it wouldn't be a lethal exchange, but if she couldn't hold her own, it was time for him to leave.

If he stayed longer, he would be bound in one way or another.

He had to know for sure.

He hoped he wasn't already too late.

He found the human woman stretching in the large, flat circle of stone.

"Terry?"

He trilled at her, moving forward in a fake attack before flicking back.

She stood fully upright, flashing her teeth at him in an appropriate way. "Oh? You're ready for a spar?"

He slowly bobbed his assent.

Something in her movements assured him that she would take this seriously. "As you wish."

After this, they would either part ways or be a true flock.

One way or another, he was ready for their last match as traveling companions.

Chapter: 53
Terry?

Tala felt like she needed a good stretch after spending the morning sitting and chatting with Dagan and Alva.

So, after lunch, she moved to her sparring circle and moved through her morning routine for the second time that day.

She was barely halfway through when Terry flickered into place across from her.

Something in his avian stance gave her pause.

He was crouched a bit lower than usual, and there was a glint of… finality?

Don't be ridiculous.

Regardless, there was *something* in his eyes. "Terry?"

He trilled at her, flickering forward and tapping her chest with his clenched talons before flicking back.

She instantly understood, standing fully upright with a smile. "Oh? You're ready for a spar?"

He slowly bobbed his assent, his eyes never leaving hers.

The solemnity of the situation settled on her in an odd way. She didn't know what was going on, but this was important to Terry for some reason. "As you wish."

She pulled Flow to her hand, ensuring that the sparring sheath was in place as she took up a ready stance. The one she chose was geared toward fighting a ring of opponents surrounding her.

She hadn't fought Terry recently, but she still remembered what it was like… At least, she thought she did.

She was wrong.

Terry immediately flickered in, landing just in front of her back foot, smaller than she'd seen him recently.

In the same instant, he grew, mouth held upward to clasp around her ankle, driving her foot upward.

What the rust?!

Tala instinctively kicked out with her other foot, and Terry flickered away.

No, not away.

He appeared directly between her shoulder blades.

The only reason she knew that was because of the bloodstar she held just behind the base of her neck, mirroring her perspective as a complement to her normal vision.

Terry struck her with ridiculous force, his foot lashing out, talons tearing through leather and *screeching* off of the iron layer of her skin.

Her willpower fought to keep the iron intact, and with the backing of her sturdy body, she barely succeeded.

Even so, she was thrown forward into a roll.

Her mind was finally switching over into combat mode. It had been less than a second, and she was already chastising herself for adapting so slowly.

Flow licked out, morphing into a glaive for added reach for the first of her probing strikes, driven straight toward Terry, where he was still falling through the air.

Each of the strikes was forced to aim in a completely different direction.

The second was a sweep to the side, with Flow being a sword as Terry flickered into being, beak snapping at her shoulder.

The third, before she vaulted up to her feet, was a slash with her knife to fend Terry away from her other side.

She was once again reminded of how much fighting Terry was like going through martial forms.

They didn't clash; Terry never stayed long enough to force that.

Instead, she was forced to move through combat forms without any feedback or rebound.

Yeah, rust that. This time seems special for some reason. I need to do better than this.

She pulled open holes in the iron layer all over her body, forcing her aura to flood out… right as Terry appeared just behind her right shoulder.

Flow struck backward, and Terry flickered away.

NO. Tala asserted her will over the space and Terry within it, but it felt like she was trying to grab a greased rope that was already whipping across the yard.

Terry slipped away without issue, and Tala cursed.

-*Voidsight?*-

Voidsight.

Tala engaged that vision across all her perspectives and glanced at Flow's sheath.

Black and purplish metals seemed to stand out more starkly in the intricate, intractable pattern that made up the sparring guard as Flow took a void-form.

Void-magics contained. Good.

The world came into stark focus, and she had an instant realization.

I could use Kit. Kit can move people. Kit could move Terry or at least contest Terry's movement.

-Tala, don't. The people we move can fight it, and we don't actually know what such a clash would do.-

She only hesitated an instant—warding off no fewer than a dozen of Terry's attacks—before she agreed. *You're right. This is a fight between him and me. Kit shouldn't factor in.*

Tala felt herself loosen, ancillary concerns falling away as she settled deeper into the calm of combat.

It was just her and her opponent. The rest of her sanctum was irrelevant.

Her voidsight showed her Terry moving about, just as her magesight highlighted the pulses of dimensional energy.

She tried several more times to lock the avian in place through force of will and by contesting him magically, but he always slipped away with ease.

She simply didn't have a good enough grasp on what he was doing to oppose him properly. She couldn't even oppose him well enough to force him to use his magical weight against hers.

We really need to study this branch of dimensional magic more.

-Even if only for defensive purposes, absolutely.-

She wasn't tired; she could quite literally do this all day. *Though, a shield would make it easier.*

It was frustrating that she seemed utterly unable to make any of her strikes connect.

Even so, beyond the first two attacks, Terry hadn't successfully landed a blow on her, either.

As Tala focused more and more on Terry's movement, she could see where he would arrive infinitesimally before he appeared, the nodules of reality shifting to make room for him, somehow.

That wasn't a perfect description, but it was the only one that came to mind, or seemed to fit, at the moment.

Sadly, her foresight wasn't even close to far enough in advance for her to react with her weapons, but it did give her an idea.

Her aura had expanded to fill the entire sparring circle, though Terry was staying within five feet of her, seemingly without issue.

That part of her attempt had failed. He was simply too magically stable to be negatively affected by her more advanced aura.

Even so, the effort wasn't in vain. She could now use that spread of control to try something else.

She focused on all the lumps, nodes, and nodules of reality and acted without thinking too deeply about what she was doing.

The command was simple. *Join.*

The working sparked but failed to grab hold.

Her fundamental understanding for her gravity manipulation, 'all mass attracts all mass,' just didn't apply in this situation.

The nodes of reality didn't have mass, they… indicated mass? They were like a convenient grouping system for various subsets of existence.

No, not existence, reality. We've never seen magic or void as any part of a nodule, just on the outside of them.

She continued her dance through Terry's attacks, even as she focused.

The threads of reality had clung together, attracting one another and trying to create clusters.

More than that, her dissolution breath was a specific breaking of connections. To do that, the magic had to act on something.

The connections are there, not just between all matter.

-The dissolution breath has dispersed magic, too. It acted on existing connections within spell-workings and broke them apart.-

And my healing and defense, the opposite of dissolution, is a pulling back together, a reunifying or a strengthening of the unity that is already there.

-The true antithesis of dissolution is pulling together more tightly, combining more closely.-

Everything is connected.

That wasn't really an important, nor novel, realization.

Void clung to reality, magic acted within reality, and all three held to itself.

Tala hadn't seen void be pulled apart, not specifically, but she believed that it could be.

What she had seen was void around her self join with void from another source, seamlessly blending.

Everything in existence pulls together.

That resonated deeply.

It wasn't unequivocally true; her own siege orbs proved that when they detonated. Her dissolution proved that when it severed the connections.

But exceptions proved the rule, and the statement was true enough to hold *weight*.

She refocused on all the lumps, nodes, and nodules of reality and acted, this time thinking deeply about what, exactly, she was doing.

Join.

Existence wanted to pull together. Gravity was but one part of that, and she was using it as a template through her inscriptions.

There was the barest hesitation within her magics, both natural and inscribed, followed by an almost ringing clarity as the spell-forms activated.

Power.

Magic blazed through her, surging at her command.

Pieces of reality couldn't be joined together, not in such a purely physical way, but they could pull together more tightly.

Tala's power stoked that *pull* at a deeper, almost metaphysical level, pressing the clumps in a way that she had no description for. This was partly because nothing *physically* seemed to change.

There was no pressure on her or Terry within the physical space, but Tala still felt a heaviness to the air.

It was purely a feeling, however, rather than something that would slow her or anyone else.

She thought that she recognized the sensation as similar to that which she'd experienced during her training with a diminutive Eskau of the House of Blood.

Everything within her aura was *just slightly* more stable.

While the effect was there, it was minor.

Terry still flickered around her unimpeded, and she still warded him off with blade, pommel, haft, fist, and foot.

But she didn't stop powering her magic.

She had the working in effect, and she devoted her immense reserves—and most of her throughput—to amplifying the 'join.'

Less than ten seconds—and uncounted exchanges—later, Tala noticed Terry taking a *hair* longer to flicker about.

It wasn't much, and it certainly wasn't enough to allow her to land a hit, but it was noticeable.

The minuscule delay took some pressure off of Tala, and what was likely more important, she could tell that Terry was needing more and more power for each flicker.

Usually, the terror bird could move with such ease that even a mundane could have sustained the power requirement indefinitely—or nearly so.

Now? Now, Tala knew that even she would be hard pressed to keep up the needed power for even an hour.

Still, this fight wouldn't last even a tenth that long despite their tremendous endurance.

I'm wearing him down, or at least starting to.

Despite the seemingly increasing resistance to dimensional movement, even after a full minute, Terry was still flickering about with little difficulty.

Terry had obviously noticed the change whether or not he knew how or why it was taking place.

His determination seemed to harden further, and a rock suddenly struck Tala in the side of the leg.

She had seen it, but Terry had timed his attacks so that she had little recourse but to take the light blow.

A light blossomed within the terror bird's eyes.

Oh… rust. It had been a test to see if it would be worth the effort, her disregard showed that it was. After all, if it had been trivial to avoid, she would have, and anything that wasn't trivial would tip the scales of the match.

At random intervals, Terry vanished for *slightly* longer than he had before, and projectiles began to arc toward the sparring circle with varied trajectories and speeds.

Tala responded by calling her defensive discs into the fight, adding them to Flow and her body as she deflected and warded off Terry's increasingly sophisticated attacks.

The incoming projectiles added the first real sound to the conflict besides the soft tap of Tala's footfalls.

Each arching attack that was deflected had a slightly different sound based on the composition of the projectile itself and which method Tala used to avoid harm.

When she avoided them entirely, rocks made a cracking sound against the sparring circle's ground, wood thunked, mud splatted, and dirt clods cascaded like a broken waterfall.

When Flow took them from the air, they rarely landed near enough to be easily heard, and the sparring sheath ensured that even the less coherent distractions were deflected as a whole.

Kinetic impartment, I can see why Rane loves you so much.

-Yeah, it is really convenient not to have to worry about shattering incoming missiles.-

The attacks that met her defensive disks made similar sounds to those that met the stone beneath her feet, save that the sound was more hollow, as if the disks were dense wood or hardened bone.

We never did figure out what those were made of.

-Yeah, it's never seemed like a priority… Like now… Why are you thinking about this now?-

The sound is rather pervasive…

-It is that. Like rain on a thin metal roof.-

Rust, no. Not that annoying.

-But it is distracting.-

Fine! I'll focus.

Terry seemed to have learned how she responded to various types of assault, so he was expertly working to maneuver her into a position to force her to take another hit.

She couldn't remember a fight this interesting since Io, though Alat could probably check. She wouldn't of course. She needed to—

-Tala, for the love of everything, focus.-

Right!

Terry's strategy was forcing her toward taking a hit.

So, Tala grinned and changed her reactions, shifting between subsets of the Way of Flowing Blood.

That *almost* earned her a blow on Terry's side, but the slippery avian flickered away at the last instant, clear surprise flickering in his eyes as he vanished.

That's right. You're not the only one who can change the battle.

Even so, Tala's mind was stretched thin.

She was *not* used to having so many independently moving parts within a protracted fight.

The fact that Terry had no discernable pattern to his attacks was *aggravating* in both senses of the word.

First, it was infuriating to not be able to predict his attacks.

Second, it was making the strain on her mind and willpower much worse.

Even with Alat's assistance, Tala was nearing her limit.

Adding to that frustration was the fact that she still hadn't landed a blow on Terry.

He's fighting more fluidly than we've ever seen.

-Yeah, if I didn't know better, I'd say he was actually trying to kill you.-

Tala huffed an internal laugh. *If he wanted to do that, he knows where I sleep. I'm durable, but a terror bird the size of a house sitting on me as he ripped off my head? Yeah… I'd die.*

-…You would, but…-

Tala mentally hesitated, which of course made all the strain she was under worse. *What is it?*

-I'm not sure that you'd stay dead, honestly. It would come down to whether your gate stuck around, or even if it left, if your body had enough power stored up to regrow your head. The Archive connection would be broken, but who knows how much would come back from just the healing. Basic function? Probably. Likely not more than that. In either case, you might not stay dead.-

But my body would be without my gate? Without my soul?

-Well, in the absolutely most extreme case of your body recovering, yeah.-

That's… horrifying. Would I still be able to act?

-That's a 'what is the soul and how does it work' type of question.-

She didn't have any bandwidth for more contemplations after that.

Thirty seconds later, Terry was able to land a blow that started a cascade of projectiles striking her and continuing to move her as he chose until, finally, he became massive in size as he pinned her to the ground with his taloned foot.

Tala wasn't breathing heavily, but her mind was definitely spinning.

That was the hardest fight she'd ever been subjected to. Even the Eskau that she'd fought hadn't pushed her that hard, and that was before her most recent improvements.

She was proud of how well she'd done, and it hadn't been enough.

-We would need to try to kill him to have a chance at winning, I think, at least for now.-

Yeah, I think so, too. A couple of siege orbs or the like could help us bring about a victory, but I don't know how he'd fare in that case.

-Precisely. It would just be a chance.-

Then there's the ending-breath.

-Oooh, I do like that name for it.-

I know, right? But hardly helpful now.

-Yeah, you should probably focus on the matter at hand.-

Tala looked up at her wagon-sized avian friend, even as he examined her with one eye, his head tilted to the side, critically. "Good fight, Terry. Give me a couple of minutes to rest, and we can go again, yeah?"

He didn't move, or really respond in any way except to swivel his head to examine her with his other eye.

After a long moment, Tala cleared her throat. "Terry?"

Finally, he trilled and flickered away, appearing on the far side of the sparring circle, barely larger than a chicken. He gave her a long, long look, then flickered away.

I wonder what that was about.

-No idea.-

"Thank you for the match!" she called out after the no-longer-visible terror bird, infusing her words with power so they would carry.

A rolling, powerful squawk came back, clearly an acknowledgment of her gratitude.

"I hope he's okay. He's seemed down lately." She spoke softly, obviously to herself.

-Yeah… I'll see if I can find any clues in our memory.-

"Thank you, Alat."

-It is my pleasure.-

Tala still had some time before Master Leighis and Latna would be coming by, so she turned her focus back to physical training for the next half-hour or so.

At that point, she was ready to move onto something else.

Honestly, she was in an awkward place.

She was back with humanity, and she had nothing that she *had* to do on a day-to-day basis.

She wasn't healing anymore, so she didn't need to take it easy.

She wasn't with her friends, so she couldn't fill her time by bugging them or doing random things in their free time.

She was with her siblings, and they weren't always available. Though, they did make an effort to be with her as often as was reasonable.

Even so, Tala *needed* some way to fill her time.

Training was all well and good, but if it was all she did, she wouldn't survive her now effectively infinite life-span.

She'd die of boredom.

There was an item that desperately needed investigation, and she'd been putting it off, again and again.

She couldn't do a lot herself, but she hadn't even done the initial things required to get others involved.

It was time that she at least looked at Io's now fully matured artificial corpse.

Chapter: 54
Her Next Moves

Tala took an extra moment to consider her next moves. She needed to investigate Io's corpse, but she wanted to proceed intelligently.

-The automaton body is not really dead, so is it fair to call it a corpse?-

But she is. Therefore, it is Io's corpse, even if it isn't dead.

-Yeah… that's fair.-

Tala bit her lip in thought. *You know, if I lost my head and my gate, but my body had enough latent energy to return itself to full health, I think it would be the same. I would be dead, so the body would be my corpse, but the body, itself, wouldn't be dead.*

-Yeah, I regret bringing up that very remote possibility.-

She shrugged. *It's an interesting comparison if nothing else.*

Tala returned her mind to the topic of Io's body.

The inactive automaton had been set aside, placed into the vat of magical liquid to finish maturing. That process had finished, and the result had been waiting for her to begin investigations into its secrets for quite a while now. Thus, it really wasn't surprising that her mind had moved back to the automaton and the need to kickstart that process.

I do think it is time.

-Really? …Fine. No experiments, but you can go examine it.-

Tala quirked a smile. "Thanks, Mom."

It was a funny thing, how she found herself speaking to Alat both internally and externally, depending on the circumstances. She hadn't put together a pattern, per se, but she had started to take note of the various instances.

But that was not the matter at hand.

With a thought, Tala was in her sanctum's lower reaches, standing near—but out of reach of—a tank filled with purple liquid.

The body was substantially more developed than when Tala had fought Io.

The automaton had seemed like a late teen at that time, by body size and development, but now, it was clearly meant to mimic an adult.

Armor plates with sophisticated, ingrained spell-forms covered the majority of its form.

Their configuration clearly wasn't designed like a suit of armor, so it wasn't perfectly sealed by a wide margin. Even so, it was obviously much more protective than the average person's flesh.

Under the plating, Tala could see bits of the construct poking through. Now, it looked like nothing so much as muscle of braided and interwoven precious metals, but each bunch was surrounded with an odd, semi-clear material of unknown composition, filled with natural magics that Tala could sense were meant to replenish and act upon the metals contained within.

A muscular system that can be strained and heal back stronger?

-That's what it looks like to me.-

Io didn't have anything like that. I feel like I would have noticed.

-No, it didn't when you fought it. That is the latest development, I believe. At the very least, the magical, metal muscles weren't visible when we checked last, and everything indicated it was almost complete at that time.-

And it is complete now?

-Yes. From everything we can determine.-

So, the ‘muscles’ that had been there had expanded and been filled with this more biological-like, magical mechanism.

It seemed to imply that the body could train and be molded to its needed tasks.

Automata are more human-like than I had assumed.

-That seems to be true, at least if we assume that Io is actually made in their image.-

Do you doubt that fact?

-Not really? It seems odd to consider them being able to have such a profound impact from wherever they are sealed.-

Assuming they are sealed.

-Tala. If they weren’t—-

Tala waved her off. *I know, I know. If they weren’t contained, they’d be doing more than simply influencing a random arcane researcher or two.*

-Exactly.-

She returned her focus to the automaton.

If it were freed of its growth tank, the form would stand taller than her, though it had similar proportions.

The figure was designed to have feminine characteristics, for whatever reason.

It’s almost scaled to be like the larger arcane species, but not quite *that size.*

-I agree. It seems like it’s as large as a being could be while still fighting at human scale with relative ease.-

Yeah… I don't remember any overlarge features in the hold we took this stuff from. Maybe they just were an average-sized group, so they made this creation to be powerful and overbearing but still work within their facilities.

-That's a pretty solid guess, actually. Certainly better than many other reasons we've considered.-

Tala smiled at that. *Isn't that the truth.*

They had bandied about some rather *insane* potential reasons for all sorts of aspects of the automata they'd fought.

Tala stepped forward and placed her hand against the side of the tank. "There is so much about you that we don't know."

She knew that there was no consciousness to hear her, and she doubted her words would have carried through the rather thick, purple fluid regardless.

The tank was warm under her hand, both with heat and magical power. It was an impressively magically-dense construct, all things considered.

-We need to get to work on researching all the spellforms contained within.-

Tala only paused for a moment before nodding. "Let's do it."

Without further delay, she moved her bloodstars around the tank, panning her perspective over the automaton from every angle using mundane vision, magesight, and voidsight.

Her aura suffused the purple liquid, pulling all the information she could from that perception as well.

It would not be a fast process, and it would likely take many days to complete it properly, but together, she and Alat began building a comprehensive, three-dimensional understanding of the unusual creation that had fallen into their hands.

In the end, they hoped to have a map similar to what Inscriptionists used to design spellforms for their clients.

They wanted to fully understand every aspect of the magics involved in the automaton's construction.

This was a chance that they simply couldn't pass up, and truthfully, they didn't trust anyone else to do it.

They would bring in others to study what they pulled from the form, but the automaton itself? That would stay here unless someone like Master Xeel asked for it.

While they had it, they would not simply hide it away, fearful of what it could do, what it could mean.

No.

Tala and Alat would learn everything they could; they would find every secret and weakness hidden within the automaton, and they would pray that that information would never be needed.

* * *

Tala sat around a small table with Latna and Master Leighis.

Mistress Petra had outdone herself with the meal, even specifically mirroring the mundane food for the other two and Tala's magic-filled fare.

The Mage-cook had made a selection of meat pies, varying the makeup of the crusts and composition of the contents for a truly scrumptious and varied spread.

It also made for a funny comparison.

While the Healer and Alchemist, between them, had five or six little serving dishes, each with three of the given type of pie, Tala had a single large platter with a full thirty sundry pies.

The evening began rather boisterously as Latna described how they'd made great strides in cornering the market for the iron paint that Tala had helped them acquire the recipe for.

The Constructionist Guild had a standing order for just a little more than they could make.

While it was slightly frustrating to leave money on the table, it also meant that what little they couldn't supply wasn't being fulfilled by another alchemist.

There wasn't enough profit in it for another alchemist to fork out the cost for the recipe.

At least, there was no reason until the contract Latna had negotiated came close to its end, but that wouldn't be for another three and a half years.

They were using the time to get better at the process and reduce expenses surrounding the production. Latna guessed that they'd be in a place to offer rates no one else could match when the contract turned over.

That would cut into their profits, but it would cement their hold on the customer.

At that point, they would be positioned to increase production and possibly begin selling in the neighboring cities or, more likely, seeking out other customers in Marliweather.

The various aspects of that got them through most of dinner, at which point, the topic turned to magic.

Latna was beaming. "Master Leighis has been incredibly kind, taking his time to teach me the basics of inscriptions and the foundational theories of magic."

Tala smiled at that. "Oh? Are you moving her toward a specific quadrant or seeing how things fall?"

He smiled. “It is a bit early to be focusing on any specific quadrant or type of magic, honestly. I am just attempting to give her a solid foundation. She may stop at inscribed, but I don’t think so. I see her being able to go the distance. She’s *bound* to have a good chance.”

Tala heard the none-too-subtle statement in his last sentence. He thought that Latna should have a good chance of making it to Archon. Honestly, that was a weight off of Tala’s mind. She still felt like she didn’t really understand how to tell who would make it and who wouldn’t.

She simply didn’t have enough experience with meeting Mages before they made the attempt, in order to draw comparisons between those who did and those who didn’t succeed.

Tala purposely let her gratitude at the information show through. “That is very kind of you, Master Leighis. Thank you.”

“It is my pleasure. My own master suggested that I solidify my base of understanding and examine my perspectives before pushing toward Fused…” He hesitated at that. “You have… rather exceeded that level of advancement.”

She pulled her smile back to a small, polite one. “I have had rather extraordinary circumstances driving me forward, most of which I would not wish on… anyone.”

She had almost said that she wouldn’t wish them on her worst enemy, but she realized that wasn’t actually true. Were he still alive, she would wish *every* manner of torture upon Be-thric.

I suppose it also isn’t accurate to say that I wouldn’t wish it on ‘anyone.’ Even so, it was vague enough to not really be untrue.

“I can understand that.” Master Leighis’s face softened. “I know the barest amount of what you went through, and I definitely agree; I would not want to pay that price to advance.”

Tala shrugged and shifted the subject. “So? How do you feel about your own progress?”

“Well, I am coming to be more at peace with who I am and what I do. I definitely have a deeper resonance and connection with healing. My master and I felt that my deepest barrier to my Fusing was that I was pursuing the path of destruction, when healing held a stronger calling for me.”

Not a problem for me, but I suppose that everyone struggles in different areas. “So, you are moving toward Fusing, then?”

“I am. I feel a component, for me, is helping others reach their full potential, not just physically.”

Tala had never really considered healing a manner of helping a body realize its potential, but it made sense as soon as he said it. Even so, that wasn’t what he was bringing up. “Hence, teaching.”

“Yes, teaching. My previous student was a good memory to look back on, and I came to realize that that pursuit was a part of what I needed. Latna has been kind enough to learn from me so that I could test that theory.” He then got very uncomfortable and seemed to hesitate.

Not wanting to push, Tala took a long drink to give him time.

It was then that he nodded. “I’ll just come out and say it. We wanted to talk with you before we formalized our relationship.”

Tala spat out her drink.

She really couldn’t fall into coughing fits, but she definitely felt that some water had gotten into her lungs.

Her inscriptions removed it with speed and efficiency even as she forced out a slightly garbled, “What?”

Latna was frowning at Master Leighis, but he seemed to not notice. “I know it’s highly irregular, but I felt like it was prudent to consult you before I make her my mageling, officially.”

Tala blinked at that before asking, again, “What?”

Latna shook her head. “Master, I think that you gave her the wrong idea with how you asked.”

He frowned. “What do you mean? What did she…?” His eyes widened. “Oh. Oh! No, my apologies, Mistress Tala!”

He held up his hands, a look of genuine contrition painting his features.

“I feel that it is appropriate for the important people in a mageling’s life to approve of their master, before such a relationship is made official.”

Tala found herself nodding. That was not always the case, but it did make sense. A mageling-master relationship was a massively important one that often lasted for as long as the Mages both lived.

Master Leighis’s own obviously continued communications with his own master stood as testament to that.

“Well”—Tala cleared her throat—“what information do you feel is pertinent for me to know before I approve?”

Latna groaned before interjecting. Even though her tone was long-suffering, something about her made Tala believe that she was incredibly on edge. “*I* think it’s pertinent for you to know that I get to choose, and I’ve already chosen.”

Tala barely suppressed a smile as she gave Master Leighis a mock-serious glance, trying to draw Latna out of whatever was bothering her. “You certainly let your magelings speak disrespectfully toward those above them. Maybe we should discuss how you intend to handle discipline?”

He gave a half-smile. “The beatings will continue until morale improves?”

Tala chuckled. “That’s a good start.”

Latna glared at them both. “That’s not very funny. Beatings *aren’t* good for morale.”

Tala and Master Leighis shared a look before they both burst out laughing. Tala took it upon herself to address her sister. “That’s the joke, Latna.”

Latna froze, coloring slightly. “Right, of course.”

Master Leighis continued to chuckle.

Despite the awkwardness, it seemed that the odd underlying tension of the topic had been thoroughly dispelled.

As such, the three settled into discussing the specifics of what it would look like for Latna to be his mageling.

He specifically offered Tala the chance to fulfill the master role for Latna despite her sister’s clear hesitation.

Tala flatly refused. Though, she did thank him for checking with her and offering her the opportunity to refuse.

Where she was going, and what she was going to be doing in the near future, was no place for a mageling.

She had no way of healing others, either, and it would be irresponsible in the extreme to bring someone unsuited to danger into it without clearly set up layers of protection and recovery.

Tala might be a bit freer with danger than most Mages, but she only really acted that way with herself because she knew she could take the fallout.

Thankfully, she hadn’t been wrong yet.

That moved them onto the topic of her future plans, and their plans, and all in all, they passed the evening in incredibly pleasant conversation.

They only paused to grab dessert—a multi-layered fluffy delicacy with just the *hint* of coffee.

Tala was refraining from diving back into that black hole, even though it would likely be fine for her now.

Dark, rich, amazing—

-Tala!-

Hmm?! What? Tala almost jerked at Alat's outburst.

-You swore off coffee for at least another two months.-

I know, but…

-No coffee. This dessert is fine, but no liquid coffee.-

Fine…

It was nearly midnight when the two bid Tala good night, and she felt surprisingly tired.

Who knew? Being social is more exhausting than fighting a House's worth of arcanes.

-Every introvert, everywhere.-

Ahh, but how many have the actual experience to truly do the comparison?

-Yes, Tala, you are very special.-

You're not very nice sometimes.

-Go to sleep, Tala. I was derived from you, remember? And we're tired.-

She definitely was exhausted. Still, she took the time to walk to her room rather than simply cause Kit to move her. *I still need to study that more.*

-Not tonight!-

No, of course not tonight. Don't be silly.

-*…You're not in bed yet.*-

Tala huffed a laugh, pausing in the courtyard that surrounded her dais to look up at the stunning night sky for just a moment.

"Beautiful." She spoke softly, so it didn't carry.

She knew it was fake, but she saw it as a sort of living painting. It didn't matter too much if a painting depicted something that actually existed or not. It just needed to evoke the emotion it was intending to bring forth.

This did that in gold.

She drew her thoughts back together and walked into her room, pushing open the massive door and letting it swing silently shut behind her.

Her usually spartan room was now a little less so.

She'd added two little shelves.

One held a slightly wonky glass vase made with off-blue and brownish-red glass.

The other held a small cross-stitch of a wolf pack, held flat in a frame.

Dagan and Alva had insisted on giving her the gifts. They were her favorites of what they'd shown her, and she felt a smile tug at her lips as she glanced their way.

In their own way, the little works of art were just as lovely as the faux night sky outside. In many ways, they meant more.

The sky had been commissioned for an indentured servant and commissioned from a workman who had likely made dozens, if not hundreds. Oh, the arcane had done an excellent job, but it had been just that: a job.

The two pieces of art from her siblings were works of passion, given out of love for their big sister, and the very idea pulled at Tala's heartstrings.

She wiped away a tear and chuckled ruefully. “Rust, I really do need to sleep.”

Alat wisely didn’t comment.

Without further delay, Tala retracted her elk-leathers and glanced down at herself. “Well, that was pointless. I’m not going to get rid of the iron to sleep.”

There was no need for it to be in place either, but it felt more… normal.

-You’re sleeping, self-entombed in iron. Nothing about this is normal.-

Well, to be fair, ‘more normal.’

Tala huffed a laugh and flexed her willpower. The clothing regrew even as Tala sealed her own mouth and eyes.

She would sleep fully encased in iron, even if it wasn’t reasonable to leave herself so sealed while interacting with others.

It was a bit odd, sleeping without breathing.

At first, it had harkened a bit too much to her Refining, but through careful exposure, she was getting more used to it. By this point, it only *occasionally* caused dreams of drowning, or being buried alive, or suffocated, or…

Thinking like that isn’t helping…

She shook her head and stopped mirroring her own perspective, letting herself be enclosed in utter darkness.

Good night, Alat.

-Good night, Tala.-

Sleep claimed her quickly.

Chapter: 55
Family

Tala sat bolt upright as she felt someone knocking on her door.

Well, she felt someone knocking on Kit's door.

The knocking was transmitted to her via two methods.

First, it came to her as an odd vibration in her magic where it resonated with the power within Kit. That point was quite close to her gate, and thus, it was very startling to feel it vibrate.

Second, she felt like she could hear it as Kit transferred the soundwaves to her vicinity whenever something like this happened. Even so, with her ears completely covered, it wasn't really the same as hearing it directly. Kit couldn't transmit the sound past her iron layers, after all.

With a quick flex of will, she mirrored her perspective to her bloodstars, which were arranged around the bed.

She took in the overlapping perspectives with no little confusion, seeing that it was fully dark, and the night sky of her sanctum was still shining down outside her window.

What time is it?

-About two hours past midnight.-

Who is up at this hour?

-Well… we are, now.-

Not helpful… How long were we asleep?

-We only laid down about two hours ago.-

The knocking came again.

Tala pulled the iron from her eyes and mouth even as she sighed and called the door to herself, causing it to appear beside her and swing open.

“Yes?” Over the last weeks, Tala had taken to leaving Kit on the front door of her family’s alchemist shop. From the way the knocking came through, the person was knocking on the inside of the door.

Kit wouldn’t have notified her if someone was knocking on the outside. The alchemy shop, and Master Leighis’s healing establishment connected to it, often got late night visitors, and the Archon had set up magical relays to notify himself and the master Alchemists in those cases.

At her command, the door swung open, showing the dark interior of the alchemy shop’s front room and a little girl standing there, her hand raised to knock once again.

“Sella? What’s going on?” Tala frowned, swinging her feet out of bed. *Is she alright?*

-I don’t see any injuries, and she doesn’t look afraid.-

What has her out of bed, then?

The little girl brought her upraised hand to her face, rubbing at one eye. “I tired.”

Tala hesitated. “Yes?”

“I wan’ sleep.” Her posture was one of near-petulance, as if someone was denying her that which she most desired.

Tala was quite confused. Why would the little girl have gotten out of her own bed and come to Tala, simply to tell Tala that she was tired and needed to sleep? “Sella, it’s the middle of the night. What’s going on? Why aren’t you in your own bed, asleep?”

Sella walked with slightly unsteady steps through the open door and scrambled as she climbed up into Tala’s bed, dragging a blanket behind her. “I tired.”

Tala gave her youngest sister a confused smile. “Yes, Sella, you need to go to bed and sleep.”

She laid a hand on the little girl’s forehead, then cheek. *No fever that I can tell. No hostile magics.*

“Just like I was asleep in my own bed before you knocked,” she gently teased, with the barest hint of a smirk.

The little girl patted her new seat proudly. “Bed. Sleep.”

“This is my bed, yes. This is where I was asleep.” Tala felt herself smiling, even while she was incredibly confused.

To be fair, when she’d dealt with her younger siblings before, back when she lived with them, they’d all essentially been in the same room. It was also different because she’d been a lot younger at the time. Those two things—and many others—together meant this sort of interaction wasn’t something she had a basis for.

She felt completely out of her depth.

Sella seemed to want to come to the rescue, however. “You tired?”

“Somewhat, yes. I don’t need much sleep, but I do sleep.”

“I tired.”

Tala felt her mouth twitch as her mind continued to fill with a befuddling mix of amusement and frustration. “Yes, that’s why we both need to go to bed.”

Sella laid on her side, pulling her blanket over herself even as she patted the surface below herself. “Bed. Sleep. You and me.”

Tala took a long breath to level her emotions, fighting to keep a smile off of her own face. *Be strong. Don’t let cuteness rule.* “You need to go to your own bed, Sella.”

Sella shook her head, fiercely. “No. I sleep.”

“Sella.” Tala found herself rubbing at her temples while continuing to fight a smile. *How is she so frustrating and endearing at the same time?*

-She’s a child? It’s sort of what they do.-

Sella pulled the blanket a bit higher, snuggling down. “I sleep you!”

“Sella…”

“Pease.”

“Little one, you need to—”

“Pease!” Her little voice was filled with vigor and frustration. “I sleep bed. I tired.”

Tala was at a loss. “Sella, you can’t sleep in my bed. You know the house rules: everyone is to sleep in their own bed, unless they are sick or injured.”

She scooped up the girl with ease, hugging her close and carrying her through the still-open door.

“Let’s get you back in bed, little one.”

Sella curled inward, huddling against Tala and pulling her blanket up after her. “I tired.”

“I know, Sella. I know.” Tala was now openly smiling despite herself, unable to contain it now that the little girl had no hope of seeing it. “That’s why we need to get you to bed.”

She walked the familiar path through the alchemy shop, toward the girls’ room upstairs.

Her feet knew the way even though she hadn’t come this far into the building since she had left for the Academy.

It hadn’t changed much.

Her parents were creatures of habit and routine, as was required with so many children running around.

It was clean and well kept.

Anything else would lead to stress, frustration, and the beginnings of insanity.

The walls had been repainted, and the floors seemed to have been redone, or at least resealed, in the nearly a decade since she was last here.

Even so, the stairs creaked in an achingly familiar way as she carried little Sella up them. Though, they were louder than they had been in her memory. *I suppose I am older.*

-And heavier.-

That's true enough.

-And you have better hearing.-

Yes, Alat. As it turns out, there's a lot that's different.

She got up to the room with her charge and found the door open, the other girls sound asleep.

The doors to the boys' room and their parents' room were both closed.

Tala navigated the dark space with ease, her eyes capable of seeing in far less light than was in the darkened house.

She laid the little girl down in the bed that she had clearly vacated recently and tucked her in.

Sella straightened against her pillow, "I—"

Tala covered her mouth with a gentle hand, whispering quickly, "Shhh… everyone is sleeping, little one. We need to be quiet and courteous and let them sleep."

Sella nodded seriously, and Tala removed her hand. Sella then whispered back, "You sing."

"Sella, no. I can't—"

"Pease, sing."

"Sella…"

"Pease!" She was still whispering, but it was a near thing. She also reached up and latched onto Tala's braid.

It was coated in iron, but Tala had learned early to will it to act normally, otherwise it would stab her or inhibit her movement every time she turned her head.

“Let it go!” Tala whisper-shouted as the child tried to use her head as a bell.

The little girl pulled back with a pout. “Sawy.”

Tala pressed her lips together in a firm line, but the little girl’s pleading eyes were the only response. Finally, she let out a defeated sigh, fighting back a smile. “Fine, but quietly.”

“Thank you.” Each of those two simple words were spoken slowly and distinctly, causing Tala to once again smile at the small girl.

She is too precious…

-You’re going to spoil the child. You should be firm. You told her ‘no.’-

I know… but she’s so cute.

-Too cute for her own good…-

She sighed. “Sella, even though I said ‘no,’ I have decided that I was too hasty in that decision and singing to you would be alright. That is why I am going to sing. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Tala searched her mind for an appropriate song. She knew several from recent plays that she’d seen with Rane, but none were really good lullabies.

So, she dug back, and back, and back, until she found one that appealed to her, and she began to sing.

She was able to modulate her volume using her inscriptions so that she could sing properly while still keeping it at a soft volume.

As the words came from her mouth, she remembered her father holding her and singing this song to her when she was sick.

One particularly vivid memory came to mind, where she'd had a particularly pernicious stomach bug, and while they had waited for an anti-vomiting tincture to take effect, he had held her, despite her continued disgorgements.

It had seemed to take forever to work, but looking back, it had likely been less than ten minutes.

Less time than hunting down a healing Mage would have taken. After that, they'd kept her dosed with the proper remedies until she was fully healed.

-He was always good at what he does.-

That he was.

Tala remembered snuggling against him and his sick-covered shirt and him hugging her securely as he sang, uncaring of the mess.

That was only one of many, many times he had sung this song to her, and she felt her nose tingling and tears building in her eyes at the many memories.

Blessedly, it was too dark for little Sella to see, and besides, the little girl was asleep before Tala finished the second verse.

"Sleep well, little munchkin." Tala shook her head affectionately as she retreated from the room, pulling the door closed.

The house was silent as she made her way back to Kit, opening the door into her sanctum and directing it into her bedroom once again.

The dark room seemed a little more barren after hosting the precious little one, even for only a brief time.

Regardless, Tala was still emotionally and socially exhausted, so she wasted no time in returning to her bed.

As she got resituated for sleep, her mind was filled with the better memories from her childhood. There was unquestioningly a wide spectrum from the awful to the sublime to choose from, but she found that even her sleep was filled with only recollections of those happier times.

* * *

Tala passed the next day and a half in companionable gatherings, discussions, and play with her siblings.

Terry was around still, but he hadn't sparred with her since the oddly intense match that felt more and more like a duel the more she considered it.

But those considerations were an unneeded distraction from the task at hand.

Her family had bid goodbye to the second set of twins that they were sending off to the Academy, and now Tala was walking them, alone, to the teleporter.

They had requested this exact situation, and they walked with firm steps, each holding one of her hands.

Tala felt a bit awkward, but that awkwardness was dulled by the warmth in her chest.

The trip wasn't that long since they only needed to go from the residential ring into the central area of the city, the teleportation tower being on the nearer side of that part of the city.

No one talked, but it wasn't an awkward silence.

Dagan and Alva didn't have any bags or packs, as nothing would survive the teleport.

Tala had covertly let them know that they could *probably* sneak something through, as long as it wasn't too big, and they tucked it under their clothing.

She hadn't verified what they'd done with the information, but both had scampered off for a short time after she shared the secret, and Tala would have sworn that their clothing was a *bit* lumpier than it had been beforehand.

Tala would be returning with their winter gear so that the teleportation workers wouldn't have to deal with delivering it, and it wouldn't just vanish in the transportation.

She couldn't honestly remember if she'd worn her coat onto the teleportation pad so long ago. After all, she'd been focused on her grandmother's pillow, tucked within her shirt at the time.

-Focused on that, among other things.-

That's true enough.

Still, she didn't allow herself to fall deep into contemplations. Instead, she forcibly turned her mind back to her siblings, engaging them in some small-talk.

They chatted about what the two expected from their time at the Academy.

Apparently, Illie and Nalac knew that they were coming, and they were supposed to be waiting for them at the teleportation receiving area.

Tala let Dagan and Alva know that it might not be quite that seamless and emphasized that even if their siblings weren't within sight right away, they should be there to greet them soon.

Tala actually vividly remembered quite a few of her classmates being called out at various times because some sibling, friend, or relative had arrived.

She, herself, had only been approached once, when a slightly younger classmate from her Marliweather school had arrived at the Academy, but they hadn't known each other well in school, so Tala had declined.

Looking back on that, she regretted the choice.

It would have taken so little effort and would likely have meant a lot to the other student. After all, if someone else had been available, they wouldn't have approached Tala to go for the meet-up.

They had crossed paths later, Tala and the other student, and there hadn't been animosity, but even Tala had definitely detected a bit of a chill.

The regrets of youth. It's amazing how we view priorities when so young.

-Weren't you just reading at the time? Sitting in a corner of the library, alone?-

It was a good book, Tala thought defensively. *Or… I think it was. I don't really remember which one I was reading at the time.*

-That tells me all I need to know on that account.-

Tala huffed internally. *Well, I was quite a bit younger then.*

-It was less than ten years ago.-

Almost half my life ago, you mean.

-Just because you can say it in a way to make it seem longer doesn't actually change the timeframe.-

Well, ten years is still a long time.

Tala returned her focus to Alva, who was in the process of asking about the food offered at the Academy… again.

Tala found herself smiling as she once more went into the details of how tasty the food was, along with how closely they had to moderate and balance their intake with their exercising.

The Academy also paired it with strict coaching so that students didn't swing too far either way and maintained a healthy view of themselves.

Even so, a lot of it was moot until each student stopped growing. It was more important to have the proper nutrition to grow than to maintain a perfect balance of intake and usage.

Tala didn't go into *all* of the details, not by a long shot, but she did briefly hit the highlights.

It was still enough to fill the remainder of the time until they arrived at the teleportation tower.

Two older-looking Mages met them just inside the doorway.

It was funny; looking back, Tala remembered being met by similarly old-appearing Mages, and she realized that they were actually just that: Mages, likely stalled out in their advancement. Even so, they were selected to meet with children heading off to the Academy because they had the appearance of being older and more distinguished.

Like convincing mundanes that a common bit of magic is special and difficult.

-I don't know of anything like that, actually.-

Well, no… Maybe some farmer convincing people that rotten meat or moldy cheese was a delicacy?

-Oh! Or some worthless, incredibly abundant creature is actually a sign of class, if eaten?-

Yeah, something like that… has that happened?

-Probably. If so, I bet the thing is pretty disgusting…-

The Mages both smiled at the children and bowed deeply to Tala. The woman who stood in front of Dagan addressed Tala directly, deference still clear in her tone, "Mistress, thank you for bringing these charges this far. We can take them from here."

Tala gave a slight nod back in return. "Thank you for the offer, but I will accompany them until they depart."

The two exchanged a look, and the man spoke next. “We do not want you to have to spend your valuable time in such a manner. I assure you, we are quite practiced in seeing off the future defenders of humanity.”

She frowned, glancing at Dagan and Alva.

The two returned her looks with a mix of confusion, concern, and pleading.

Tala turned back to the two Mages and shook her head. “Again, thank you, but I will be accompanying my siblings until they teleport away.”

“Siblings?” The older woman glanced to the man, and they both bowed once again. “My apologies, Mistress. We were told to expect the two Academy entries, alone. We assumed that you had simply accompanied them after seeing that they were traveling alone through the city.”

“Oh.” Tala blinked a couple of times. “I suppose that is an understandable assumption. Now that it is resolved, shall we proceed?”

The five made their way through the tower, the Mages engaging Dagan and Alva in conversation, dispelling any trepidation and hesitation with obviously practiced ease.

Tala took the twins’ winter gear, tucking it into Kit as they pulled it off one piece at a time.

It wasn’t a long walk before they arrived at a room with two teleportation circles inset side by side.

Simultaneous teleportation was fairly common when teleportation was used since each circle could only take one person. Thus, the towers were set up to accommodate side-by-side activations in at least some of their main rooms.

Tala called out Terry, and he gave a goodbye snuggle to the twins before returning to Kit, much to Tala’s confusion and the obvious relief of the Mages.

We need to talk with him.

-After.-

Yeah, after.

All the human goodbyes had already been taken care of, save one.

Dagan and Alva tackled Tala almost in unison, hugging her tightly.

Tala returned the gesture carefully, ever cognizant of her own strength and their frailty.

-You know, they're basically your height.-

Hush you. "Be safe, you two. Have fun, make friends, and learn all that you can."

"We will," they returned, speaking at essentially the same time.

"Give Illie and Nalac my best, but don't feel like you need to attach yourselves to them. Make your own friends. Find your own path."

They nodded against her.

Tala just stayed there, holding them for a long moment.

The Mages, for their part, didn't interrupt or hurry the process along in the slightest. While they hadn't expected anyone to be with the children this time, they were clearly experienced with Academy students saying goodbyes in the teleportation rooms.

Eventually, the twins pulled back.

Dagan smiled. "Thank you for coming with us."

Alva nodded in agreement.

"I was happy to."

Without another word, the two walked to their respective spots and let the Mages know they were ready.

Alva shifted slightly, looking to the older man beside her spot. "How long will it take?"

He smiled reassuringly. “Ten seconds from when I say ‘now’ until you depart, and you will arrive in the same instant.”

Tala didn’t think that was *quite* accurate, but she wasn’t about to argue with the man in front of her siblings.

“Now.”

She felt the buildup of power and waved. “Messages are hard to get in and out of the Academy, but I’ll try regardless.”

Alva rolled her eyes and smiled, and Dagan shook his head as he responded, “If you send anything, we’ll respond.”

“Hey. I’ll send something.”

-Well, you mean I will.-

And you are me.

-True, true.-

Alva twitched her head in a way that immediately drew Tala’s attention, likely that had been the girl’s intention. With a mischievous smile, she spoke quickly and softly, “We love you, Tala. Take care of yourself.”

Before Tala could open her mouth to respond, the teleportation magics activated, and they were gone.

Oh, that tricky munchkin. She waited until they were about to vanish to say that.

-Because she didn’t want you to be pressured to respond.-

I suppose…

The Mages went through the process of prepping the room for the next teleportation without actually refilling the now-spent spellforms.

It only took Tala a moment to notice that they were putzing.

When she oriented on them, they bowed yet again. The woman addressed her, “Is there anything else that we can do to assist you, Mistress?”

“No, thank you. I will leave you to your work.”

“You are most kind. Thank you.”

Without another word, Tala turned and left, heading back toward her other siblings as she tried to ignore the bit of tightness firmly lodged within her chest.

They’ll be alright.

-That they will.-

Chapter: 56
Questions and Departure

Tala was just leaving the teleportation tower, after dropping off Dagan and Alva, and she had set her sights on having a discussion with Terry.

She almost headed back to the alchemy shop to set Kit on the door and speak with Terry in the sanctum.

Instead, she hesitated. If she did that, she knew that it would be noticed and set off a cascade of questions as to how the twins got off, if they were alright, and things of that nature.

It would take quite a long while before she could take time to speak with Terry.

Therefore, she went to her bench in the park near the family house.

It was where she'd met Nalac on his way home from school nearly a year and a half ago.

There wasn't much snow about; spring had begun to fight back winter, leading to more melting and less snowfall.

The bench was vacant, so she sat down and opened Kit.

"Terry? Can we talk?"

Terry flickered out, standing on the bench, sized to put their eyes at an almost equal level. He had a stern, stiff demeanor about him.

"What can I do for you, Terry?" Tala kept her voice calm and level, while also making sure that the warmth of her affection for the avian came through as well.

He cocked his head to the side, awaiting her explanation.

“Something is wrong, I can tell that much. What do you need? Do you need me to take you beyond the city’s defenses? Do you need something different to eat?”

He seemed to hesitate for a long moment.

Tala felt a building nervousness that she couldn’t explain, like a thousand voices—just outside of her ability to hear—were screaming at her that this was important.

No, not out of hearing range, maybe behind some sort of barrier, blockage, dampening field, or wall.

-Maybe the fourth?-

Yeah, it could be the fourth.

It felt like a thousand voices were trying to emphasize the importance of this talk with Terry from just beyond a metaphysical wall.

“Terry?”

The avian shook himself in the negative, indicating that it wasn’t either of the things she had offered. He then hunkered down, looking up at her questioningly.

“I assume you don’t want to spar again.”

He tilted his head and squawked irritably.

“Right, hard to answer that. Do you want to spar again, now?”

He shook himself.

“Do you want to discuss the bond?”

He hesitated, then let out a tentative trill.

“Yes, but not how I mean it?”

He bobbed to that.

“So, not a soul-bond, but our friendship? Our partnership?”

He bobbed slowly.

“Close…”

Terry started flickering to two spots, just as he had so long ago. He showed two terror birds fighting, growing together in ability. This time he didn’t go for nearly as long, as he was seemingly referencing that earlier time.

“Training together? Growing together.”

He bobbed.

“And that, along with the previously indicated partnership… are you talking about us being a group or… herd?”

He squawked loudly in irritation.

“Right, right. Herds are groups of prey.” She suppressed a smile. “How silly of me. You are thinking about us as a flock?”

He slowly bobbed. The motion conveying importance and seriousness rather than hesitance.

“You are trying to decide if we can grow together or if it is time for us to part.” It wasn’t a question.

He bobbed again.

“So… what are you thinking?”

He gave her an unimpressed look before standing up and sinking back into his previous position.

“You’re saying, ‘I’m here, aren’t I?’”

He trilled, and the tonality and timbre carried a note of ‘obviously.’

“Well, that’s good. So, you’ve decided to stay?”

He hesitated before finally bobbing his assent.

Tala felt a wave of relief as the tension she'd felt building was released. "I'm glad."

She smiled and scratched the side of Terry's head.

"So, you wanted to discuss it?"

He bobbed.

"But you've decided."

He bobbed yet again, making sure to keep her hand in scratching range.

"So, you wanted to tell me that you'd decided." She nodded to herself. "You want me to know that this is important and significant. So, what does that mean?"

Around the scratches, he gave her a flat look.

"Right, right. You can't easily answer a question like that." Her smile grew. "So, do you want to bond?"

Terry shook himself.

"That's alright. Do you think you might ever want to?"

He immediately bobbed, then shook himself again.

"You think that you might, depending on how it goes?"

He nuzzled her hand before flickering to her shoulder.

"You want to test things out, operating under this new framework?"

He headbutted her cheek.

"So, more sparring?"

He chirped happily.

"But not today."

Terry trilled.

"Right, right. You already said that. Then I'll look forward to our match tomorrow."

He hunkered down on her shoulder, clearly content.

-Well, that's progress.-

Yeah, he's with us for the time being. I can understand not wanting to soul-bond.

-It did seem like he was interested in the idea, but still wanted to think on it, or try out something, or…-

Yeah, didn't have a definitive answer… She glanced over at Terry.

He cracked open one eye to look back at her.

"So, we're testing out being a flock, eh?"

He cooed, closing his eye.

"What does that mean?"

He opened his eye again and shuffled his feet a half-dozen times before letting out a huff.

Tala grinned. "Not now? Let you sleep?"

He headbutted her cheek and hunkered back down.

"Alright, alright." She scratched his head and neck. "We can talk through the specifics later."

He pushed into her hand even as she stood up and headed back toward the shop.

The remainder of her time with her siblings passed in a similar fashion to the first weeks, simply with two fewer siblings to spend time with. Well, and Terry was around a lot more, which made everything even better.

Tala intentionally filled her days with as much time with her siblings as possible. She also sparred with Terry when he was amenable and she had time.

The first time, the day after their discussion, she noticed something important: the effects of her working within the sparring circle had remained.

As soon as she noticed, she honestly wasn't surprised. Her gravity enhancements were similarly enduring, and the banishing trigger that she'd imbedded in her mindset for the working hadn't been broken.

Tala called over Master Simon and asked him to analyze the space.

After an initial sweep, he began to frown and proceeded to perform rather intensive scans, refusing to say more than that the results were odd before he finished.

When he did finish, however, he expanded on what he meant by that, "I wouldn't say that the integrity of reality is greater, here. Whatever you did, it didn't change the nature of the space, but it *is* more stable." He scratched his chin as he went over the results of his scans, displayed on the slate before him. He was still obviously trying to wrap his mind around what he was seeing.

"So… what does that mean?"

"If reality was a cracked plate, you didn't heal the cracks, but you did dip the whole thing in glue."

She tilted her head to one side. "So, I'll ask again. What does that mean?"

He chuckled. "My apologies, yes, yes. Analogy isn't an explanation. This means that this area mimics unbroken reality in many ways, but not nearly all. I *think* that this section of your sanctum should be more resistant to degradation, but that would take a lot of testing. It is also more dimensionally resistant, so I think it would be harder to expand or enact other similar magics within." He shook his head, a frown creasing his brows. "Even though you don't know *exactly* what you were amplifying, what level of amplification do you think you reached?"

Tala thought back on the fight, checked with Alat, then shrugged. "Honestly? A couple of trillion times."

He blinked at her. "Come again?"

“I think that I amplified the metaphysical forces involved by a factor of at least two trillion.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his off hand as he grimaced. “You grabbed onto an unknown… something and amplified it to an *insane* degree?”

“Yes? Well, that is assuming that I was getting a similar recursion to my gravity amplification.”

His now open eyes allowed her to see one twitch. “You can amplify gravity that much?”

“Well, yeah. That’s how I can make these.” She reached out toward him, one of her siege orbs appearing in her hand.

He took it gingerly, starting to nod. “You mentioned these, but I suppose I didn’t consider exactly what it meant.”

“To be clear, I can’t do this on a wide scale, but for a discrete target-set?” She shrugged. “It’s very possible. So…?”

“We don’t know what you amplified, exactly, nor really to what extent. We have no basis for comparison, so I can’t possibly tell you what you’ve done or the results.”

“Should I… stop?” She was quite hesitant to agree to that. Even though she didn’t exactly understand what she was doing, it *did* seem to make Terry have to work harder, and Tala felt like she needed every edge she could get, especially now that the sparring was so much more important.

He gave her a flat stare. “The rationalist in me begs you to undo whatever this is…”

“But?” Tala hid a hopeful smile.

“But… I cannot detect any specific danger from this, and with how wide-ranging my information gathering artifacts are, I *should* be able to detect at least an inkling if there is any.

Additionally, I am curious beyond what I would think reasonable, were I in a standard, Constructionist position."

"So?"

"So, I think that you are somehow affecting my rationality." He gave her a narrow-eyed inspection.

She huffed a laugh. "I'll follow your recommendation."

"I gathered that." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Let me check on the progress every day, but otherwise, keep on, I suppose. It looks safe from everything I can tell. If I remember correctly, your magics have the ability to be broken by yourself?"

She nodded. "I leave a trigger within my workings that allows me to break them, yes."

"Alright then." He looked down at the slate, longing clear in his eyes. "How about I watch from the sidelines whenever you are using the working, and if I tell you to break it, you break it instantly and with no questions asked?"

Tala smiled. "That sounds like a good plan, and I accept the conditions." She glanced over to where Terry was sunning himself while waiting. "Ready?"

His answer was to flicker into position on one side of the sparring ring.

"Alright, let's do this."

So, every day Master Simon monitored the aspects of reality and existence around the sparring ring while Tala and Terry sparred.

Every day, Tala continued to amplify the connection between the pieces of reality, slowly making it harder and harder for Terry to use his movement abilities.

After their matches, Tala would go over the results with Master Simon and discuss the insights and thoughts he had on all aspects of the fight he was able to observe both with and without his artifacts.

Thus, the month was spent, and before she really registered the passing days, it was time for Tala to depart.

While she didn't make a big deal about it, her siblings all knew she was leaving, and they each said their goodbyes.

Sella, in particular, tried to make demands for Tala's quick return.

For Tala's part, she promised to communicate more often and to return during the following summer—if not before—when Nea would be making her final choice about whether or not to go to the Academy.

The siblings shared a final dinner together, Mistress Petra going above and beyond to make it a special one.

The Zuccat children—Karsa, Segis, and Metti—dropped through to bid goodbye to the Karweils, as well. The children had actually played as a group quite a bit over the previous month, so the goodbye was a bittersweet one.

Karsa was actually planning on leaving for the Academy in just a few months, so she would see Dagan and Alva there, and if Nea joined them, she'd have another friend, too.

Terry joined the siblings for the full dinner, and they all enjoyed throwing out bits of food for him to snatch throughout the meal.

The next day, Tala was up and ready for departure before daybreak.

Kit had been left on the alchemy shop front door, so when Tala exited, she chose to exit outside, where she found her father sitting, just where he had been when she had arrived.

How long was he out here to make sure to catch me leaving?

He was in the process of standing as she stepped out, likely having heard the door open, and she didn't pause, closing the door and pulling Kit to her belt.

He gave a short, respectful bow. "Mistress Tala."

"Master Alchemist."

If he was insulted or saddened by her address, he didn't show it. "Thank you for the kindness you showed to my children. I know you care for them, so I don't intend to say you would have acted otherwise, but I wanted to specifically express my thanks."

Tala *almost* bristled, but in the end, she decided it wasn't worth the energy. "You are welcome."

"Thank you, also, for talking with Dagan and Alva about their futures as Mages. From what I was able to gather, they did seem to have more realistic expectations than I'd previously intuited."

"Oh?" That was news to Tala.

"Yes, it was a small thing. They seemed to be approaching the prospect more like a career path than a storybook to step into. Thank you for that."

"I'm not sure that was due to me. It could just be that they were faced with the growing, very real truth of their own departure."

"In either case, thank you."

"You are welcome."

They stood there for a long moment, silence filling the space between them.

It was not the comfortable silence of new-fallen snow, nor the deep inhalation before a storm. It was simply an emptiness.

There was nothing between them at all.

“Was there anything else?” Tala finally asked.

After a brief, final hesitation, he nodded. “Just to say, your mo—” He closed his mouth and eyes, shook his head and restarted, “My wife and I are here if you ever wish anything of us. Even if that is just to yell or rail or… anything. We will be here… until we aren’t.”

Tala had been building toward irritation as he spoke, ready to snap at him that she would never want anything from him, but the final sentiment stopped her in her tracks.

They would be there… until they weren’t.

They’ll be waiting… until they die.

-Which won’t actually be all that long. At least not in the scale of your life now.-

Tala grimaced.

She didn’t want to do this, now.

She didn’t want to do this, *ever*, but certainly not now.

Still, she couldn’t muster the rage to snap back at him, not anymore.

Thus, she gave a simple response, the depths of her emotional exhaustion leaking through into her tone. “I will keep that in mind. Goodbye, master Karweil.”

Without another word, she turned and strode away.

Her mirrored perspectives saw him watch her go.

By his movements, even though he didn’t reach after her, he seemed to want to.

Finally, he bowed at her back and muttered too low for him to have thought she could hear, “Goodbye, Tala. Goodbye, my daughter. I love you.”

She didn’t change her pace or give any indication that she had heard.

She did flex her will, rolling her iron over her eyes before the building tears could break free.

That rusting man. Why can't he act like the monster I knew?

-Would you really want him to be that man to your siblings?-

Tala growled internally. *How are you so calm?*

-While I am you, I am not you. *While he is my father on a soul level, that is all the connection I have ever had to him. Everything else has just been through you and your memories. Because of that, I don't have the emotional weight surrounding him that you do.-*

That makes no sense.

-We can debate my nature later. Do you really want him to be who he was?-

Tala made it out through the southern gate of Marliweather before she answered, Alat giving her the long minutes of silence that she needed in order to start to organize her tumbling thoughts and emotions. *No. I am glad that he is not that man to them.*

-But it's not enough,- Alat guessed.

Enough? That has nothing to do with it. He was that man to me. *He misused our connection to the point of breaking it, and I don't trust him enough to allow it to be rebuilt.*

-There is a difference between rebuilding a father-daughter relationship and having civil interactions.-

I don't want civil interactions with him.

Alat sighed. *-No, you want him to be your dad, but he broke that.-*

Rusting right he broke that.

-And you are so broken over that loss that you can't let anything *exist in that space?-*

Why should I?

-Isn't that like having a one-of-a-kind piece of art that gets shredded, then, instead of finding something to fill that space on your wall, you just leave it blank and grumble about the shredding

every time you pass by? Maybe even leaving up the irreparably damaged piece in place as a monument to what was lost?-

Tala didn't seem to have a response to that, and Alat was wise enough to not press the issue further.

Thus, Tala's mind was unusually quiet, overtop her turbulent and unsettled emotions as she began her run back to Bandfast.

Chapter: 57
Fight!

Tala… may have gotten carried away.

She pulled the metal away from her mouth as she spat blood to the side.

The iron was instantly stripped away as the thick fluid left her mouth, leaving a clear splatter on the rock beside her.

A hundred yards away, her opponent hunkered low and let loose a roar that shook the ground and caused the nearby trees to tremble.

The sound was like a mix of a heavy, rasping breath and the beginnings of a growl, projected at volumes that would break mundane eardrums.

Yes, this fight might have been a bit much for her to take on while simply traveling between cities.

Tala had been nearly halfway to Bandfast when she decided to divert into the mountains just north of that city as a way to take a new route back there.

As she traversed the increasingly rugged terrain, she had sensed a powerful collection of magic coming from within a moderately well-hidden valley, easily a dozen miles deeper into the mountains than she had planned on going.

Even so, she'd been curious.

It had led her here.

The valley was only two or three miles long and just over a mile wide, tucked high in the mountains.

A lake dominated one side, trees filled much of the remainder, snow capped the surrounding mountains, and the air was positively dripping with power.

Tala could sense no less than a dozen founts in caves surrounding the valley, all of which *felt* like they were earth- or plant-related, at least at a cursory inspection.

Alat had checked immediately, and Tala was *not* authorized to remove these founts. They were known and allowed for various purposes.

Since she was in the area, she was offered two gold to investigate the integrity of the area and ensure that nothing odd had cropped up.

As it turned out, something had.

Tala had noticed unusual movements in the zeme of the area near a cave in the northern most extreme of the valley. She had barely drawn near, in order to investigate, when this creature had lunged forth.

The magical beast was seemingly a newer addition to the valley, as it hadn't been there a decade earlier when the last Archon passed through the area.

As Alat reported the situation via Tala's archive link, the reward had been upped to ten gold if she slew the creature and brought back the body. That said, defeating the monster was only to be her third priority, behind maintaining the integrity of the valley and keeping the corpse intact.

She should have asked for more.

The magical beast was a compact, four-legged, feline beast.

Its muscles bulged and flexed, looking more like those belonging to a bodybuilder than a standard specimen.

The flesh and fur were striped with browns, greens, blacks, whites, and oranges, letting it blend in perfectly with the surroundings to her mundane sight.

Its eyes were a bright blue, like a glacial lake, and its fangs and claws were the pure white of new fallen snow.

The big cat registered as green to her magesight, and it had a depth of power within its own body that would make chasms envious. Additionally, it was intimately connected to the valley in which she stood.

While she had fought magical beasts previously, she'd never actually fought one on its home turf before, in the seat of its power. The prospect had seemed intriguing.

All told, the big beast looked reminiscent of a mundane tiger save its coloring, and its size.

It was as large as two caravan wagons and built like a city wall.

Magical beasts… A check through her memories—of the books that Master Grediv had given her so long ago—told her what it was.

It was an upland tiger.

The name was insultingly mundane given the truth of the creature.

It was *quick.*

Not in the way Terry could quickly reposition himself around a battlefield, but in the sense of reactions, reflexes, and the flexibility to distort in seemingly impossible directions to avoid her blows.

They had only clashed once in a rapid series of strikes given and received.

Tala had scored a cut deep into its side, causing clear blood—drained of its iron—to splash the ground beside them. The tiger had ignored the hit in order to backhand—*back paw?*—her so hard that her mouth had filled with blood even before she'd slammed into a rock formation more than a hundred yards away with shattering force.

Thus, she had spat out her own blood as she pulled herself to her feet. It roared at her, and she realized that she might have been a bit hasty to pursue this fight.

Her magesight easily saw the torrents of power being drawn into the feline from the land around it, the slice on its side sealing in barely a breath.

Just like the book said…

-Well, we can only see information on the Refined version.-

Yeah, even so. It seems like it can't heal while attacking like the Refined variant can. It is using its roar as an area effect to give it space and time to enact its healing.

-Yeah. It also does seem to be tied to the land even more closely than most magical creatures that have areas as their bound source.-

The only hope is overwhelming power before it can heal; otherwise, we're fighting a well of resilience equivalent to a mountain valley.

-A magical *mountain valley.-*

Yeah… that does probably factor in.

-We also need to keep in mind that it could be more powerful or more capable in some aspects. Hopefully, its known weakness still holds true: it can't heal from anything that would instantly kill a normal animal.-

That's basically only a beheading or brain obliteration. Even ripping out a heart takes a moment or two to lead to death.

-Severe trauma can kill something instantly. I'd recommend a dissolution breath to the head—like with the thunderbull, but more powerful—but we have to keep the corpse intact.-

Yeah, but I don't think we're going to be able to enact that level of trauma on a Paragon creature without ruining the body… Wait, is it more correct to call it Honored?

-Seems like either is correct. But more importantly, the fight?-

The tiger crouched, the very ground around it seeming to compact and harden beneath its paws before it launched forward.

Tala grinned as she called Flow back to her hand, pushing power through it to change the form into a glaive as she set her feet against the charge.

In the second that it took the massive feline to close the distance between them, Tala felt her footing shift.

It was so unusual a sensation that she oriented one of her mirrored perspectives specifically downward.

For the fraction of a second that she had before impact, she watched in fascinated horror as the very ground beneath her feet seemed to break apart into loose sand and gravel, undermining her footing and stealing her ability to brace against the oncoming assault.

Well… rust. That wasn't in the book.

-We did only read about the weaker version of this creature…-

Flow still took the tiger in the upper left shoulder, digging deeply even as the impact drove Tala into a backward slide.

Its right paw came in from the side in a sweep containing power closer to that of a battering ram than a conventional melee attack.

In response, Tala willed her upper layer of iron to aspect mirror Flow's resistance to damage. After all, Flow—in sword form—was effectively just a wire, and yet it had never bent or deformed, regardless of what she'd put it through.

She hadn't actually attempted this aspect of her power, having only seen it as theoretically possible in the vision she'd seen when merging Flow with the dasgannach.

There were several things that Tala did not account for.

First, and possibly oddest, was the fact that *all* the iron containing the mirrored aspect both heated up and vibrated to a crazy degree under that first blow.

It *all* began to glow a dull red almost instantly, having absorbed roughly half the kinetic energy of the hit as heat, the rest being converted to a buzzing vibration which rattled her teeth and almost caused her to lose her grip on Flow's haft.

Second, the focus and willpower required to maintain the aspect mirror skyrocketed as the aspect was stressed by the blow.

The heat imparted to her outer layer of iron radiated inward almost instantly, but Tala was able to cool the white steel with an additional flexing of her will.

All told, it was too much. She couldn't hold the new aspect mirror under the stress and her concentration shattered at the second blow, this time from the tiger's left paw.

Blessedly, Alat was able to help keep her cognizant enough that she didn't lose her hold on Flow or her footing.

The first two strikes were far from the last, as the tiger's front legs were long enough for it to immediately begin a surprisingly rhythmic series of slashes, tearing through Tala's iron, white steel, and flesh with equal ease, the left paw strikes only marginally weaker than the right.

That wasn't to say that her defenses did nothing.

The feline forelegs bulged with straining muscles as it powered through each swipe. Its back legs shifted and braced to continue to push forward, lending it more power than even its considerable weight should allow.

Tala stalwartly held onto Flow, trying to shift to minimize the damage she took, even as she healed after each hit, pulling together and attempting to thicken the metals struggling to protect her from the beast.

Flow continued to work deeper, the clear liquid that flowed down the shaft mirrored by a stream of iron that she could feel flowing into the dimensions of magic around the weapon.

Despite what the books indicated about the lower powered variants of the upland tiger, this one seemed to be able to heal while it was directly engaged, even if not to the same extent as when it was able to dedicate its focus.

The wound was actively closing around the still-embedded glaive-form Flow, even if the gash was leveraged open again almost immediately afterward. Additionally, the amount of blood-fluid and iron freely leaving the beast indicated that either it had some form of dimensionally expanded spleen or it was generating new blood.

Or, it just has a massive volume, given the fact that it's massive.

-*Yeah, we haven't been fighting it very long.*-

Still, they looked at the increasingly slushy ground all around them, and they had to admit that it *should* have been at least slightly negatively affected by the loss of blood.

There was also the fact that they could see power flowing into it from the surrounding land, coalescing all through its body in patterns reminiscent of Tala's own healing magics.

For her part, Tala wasn't using *that much* of her reserves. The swiping claws certainly rent her open, but they didn't actually remove that much material. As such, the wounds were magically expensive to repair, but not materially so.

Even so, she could easily see an issue.

They were both ‘take the damage and heal’ type fighters, and between the two of them, the tiger was doing more damage and looked to have deeper reserves to draw on.

True, Tala was fighting with several rather frustrating handicaps, but the state of things was still inarguable as they stood.

She could change the odds by using Flow in a void-form, but that would likely destroy at least a good part of the corpse, if it was effective at all.

It *should* be effective, but it would either be devastatingly effective to the point of being harmful overkill or it would be useless. Thus, it wasn’t worth testing.

Or, I could just ignore the stipulation to preserve the body? She seriously considered it, but she was tired of doing things sloppily. She wanted to learn how to do things properly, and as she aimed, without unneeded collateral damage or unintended results.

She briefly considered using a siege orb, but those had the same issue as Flow’s void-forms, plus more besides. Not only did she not trust that one would be sufficient to instantly kill the creature, she’d been asked to minimize damage to the valley and maintain the corpse, if possible.

All told, she was operating under pretty crazy restrictions.

It highlighted all the more clearly an issue she’d been noticing in her capacities. She could easily deal with weaker threats, and she could respond with hopefully overwhelming force against more powerful foes, but she had little that she could do in delicate situations if the threat was anywhere near her own power.

Then, as she was temporarily disemboweled for close to the fiftieth time, an obvious thought flickered into her mind, *Well, you know, I don’t* have *to do this alone.*

-*Yeah, you are a flock now, right?*-

Tala willed Kit to open at her waist, even as her abdomen was riven open yet again.

She was continually sliding and stumbling backward, even as she continued to leverage and torque Flow to cause damage, and her lungs were only functional every other second or so.

Still, she managed to shout, "*Terry!*"

Slice, lungs venting, and unable to hold air.

Heal, quick inhalation, and, "*Fight!*"

That was seemingly sufficient as the terror bird flickered out with an aggressive screech.

The avian's eyes widened as he took in the creature Tala was facing, but he didn't retreat. Though, Tala left Kit open so that he could if he needed to.

After all, Terry was only an arcanous creature, however powerful, and the upland tiger was a magical beast of significant advancement.

It was almost immediately obvious that Terry would have the same issues against the tiger as he did against Tala.

His talons couldn't seem to pierce the fur and flesh, nor were his strikes strong enough to break the underlying bones.

Even so, he was strategic in his attacks, stealing the beast's footing and allowing Tala to finally set herself enough to push back, even with the ground beneath her seemingly animated to rob her of footing.

Her surface-area-enhancing scripts were proving their worth as she could tell that she'd likely have sunk in deeply without them, rather than simply struggling to maintain balance and stability.

Additionally, she internally blessed the little furball of an Eskau, De-arg, for all his stability training. That monster of an animated teddy-bear-look-alike had put her through training and fighting on *far* worse footing than this.

Even so, it was still *incredibly* difficult.

Terry took up a harrying role, even as the tiger pulled back and drew power into itself to quickly close the deep, gaping wound in its shoulder.

Tala tried to press the momentary advantage, but it roared again, forcing Terry to flicker away and Tala to grimace against the pain of enduring it from so close this time around.

Her ears were magically reinforced, as well as being encapsulated under iron and magical steel, and she still felt like they were in danger of succumbing to the force and magic within the sound.

As soon as the roar died down, Terry was on the offensive once again, his talons now focusing on the feline's eyes and other vulnerabilities.

The tiger was *livid* at the bird's assault, but Tala was able to close the distance despite the increasingly difficult terrain.

With a bit more time to line up her strike thanks to Terry's distractions, she managed to hit the front leg of the beast just where it joined the paw, and Flow cleanly severed the appendage, skipping off the bone to glide smoothly through the joint.

She had only an instant to grin in triumph even as she continued the attack sequence by driving Flow up to its sword-hilt in the tiger's chest.

Her mirrored perspectives saw the severed paw reverse course mid-fall and seamlessly rejoin its limb just in time to slam into her side and throw her, skipping across the ground once more.

Rust. I thought that would give us a momentary advantage.

She righted herself, thankfully not needing to clear her mouth this time. She'd managed to twist with the blow, dissipating much of the damage potential of the swipe, even though it had still thrown her with ease.

As she considered, standing up once more, she realized exactly what that meant.

To anything else, she *should* have the inertia of a couple of thunderbulls, but this upland tiger was tossing her about with relative ease.

It was *ridiculously* strong.

Even with Terry's help, this might be an impossible fight given the restrictions she was operating under.

Her avian friend seemed to have reached the same conclusion because Terry took that moment to flicker to Tala's shoulder and rock backward, pulling her directly away from the tiger.

She frowned, slightly surprised that they'd come to the same conclusion. "You want to flee?"

Terry trilled, the sound containing the increasingly familiar sense of 'obviously!'

"Are you sure?" Tala looked back toward the tiger as it crouched low. She *really* wanted to beat the big kitty despite the difficulty…

He bobbed before flickering away, appearing far behind her, turning back to regard his partner.

Tala *almost* shook her head in frustration, ignored the bird, and settled in to continue the fight.

He wants to be a flock, to test that out. Being a flock, fighting together… that requires trust.

So, that was the question: did she trust Terry's judgment?

No one's life was on the line.

She was fighting for a few gold at the most.

If she left, some other Archon would be dispatched to deal with this overgrown tiger.

With that understanding solidified, she made her choice.

Rocking backward, she leapt away, following after Terry.

The tiger paused, clearly surprised by her retreat.

It didn’t relax, nor lower its guard, but it also didn’t pursue.

It was protecting its den, its land, its source of power.

It seemed to have no need nor desire to pursue her.

She blinked at that, then began to laugh internally.

She had suppressed her through-spike.

She was covered in iron.

She wouldn’t look like a human, magically speaking, so the odd almost-compulsion that magical creatures seemed to have to attack humans didn’t seem to apply.

It would have had flickers of that while it was tearing into her, which likely explained its ferocity and persistence during those attacks, but now? Her power was effectively veiled, and it didn’t have a compulsion to pursue.

A minute later, she was out of sight of the tiger.

Even so, she and Terry didn’t slow down, and soon, they were at the southern end of the valley, in the pass through which Tala had entered.

Terry flickered to her shoulder and headbutted her cheek.

“Thank you, Terry. You were a big help.”

He chirped happily.

“You were wise to have us retreat, too. It was a dangerous fight with little reward. Thank you.”

He trilled happily and settled down.

She briefly informed him how the fight had come about and about the restrictions she had been operating under.

That seemed to help him relax further, the little bits of confusion she'd detected from him leveling out. When she finished, he headbutted her again.

"You were confused why I wasn't using certain tactics and skills?"

He bobbed, chirping in affirmation.

"Yeah… I actually think I could have taken it out with relative certainty, but it would have been… messy."

He gave a warbling, undulating, and descending note.

Tala snorted a laugh. "Yeah, that was a bit of an understatement, wasn't it?"

He bobbed one final time and then flickered away, heading out of the valley.

"Yeah, let's get back on the right track."

She turned to look south and a little east, to where she knew Bandfast lay.

It had been an interesting diversion, but she still wanted to get there that day.

"Alright, Tala, let's get to it."

Chapter: 58
A Temporary Goodbye

Tala arrived at Bandfast after sunset, approaching the city through the darkening twilight, Terry at her side.

Alat had sent messages ahead, so she'd be grabbing a late dinner with Lyn and Kannis before leaving for Alefast the morning after next.

Rane was already gone, presumably in Alefast, Waning ahead of her.

Likely dealing with his family in one way or another.

-Yeah, I wonder if there was any fallout from him breaking Furgal's staff… thing.-

Well, Master Grediv was fine with it, but that likely won't stop other members of the family from being irritated with him.

-That's true enough. I'm glad we don't have to deal with idiocy like that…-

At least not often, yeah. Though, she was aware that, given her friendship with Rane, she might be pulled into the matter while in Alefast. She hoped that wouldn't be the case, however.

-Hope springs eternal.-

She could have bypassed Bandfast and gone straight to Alefast, Waning, but it really wouldn't have saved her much time, and she did need to actually say goodbye to Lyn and Kannis.

She was changing her base of operations away from Bandfast for the first time since her graduation.

Well, the first time I'm doing it of my own volition.

-Yeah, being forcibly relocated to Platoiri really wasn't the same.-

Not at all.

There was also her meet-up with Master Cazor.

The Mage Hunter had agreed to spar with her and test her iron usage.

He'd even indicated that his duties would bring him through Alefast, Waning, on occasion in the next years, so they could continue such experimentation then. Even so, they'd already agreed to spend a day on the project in Bandfast, first.

But that was for tomorrow.

With those contemplations set aside, Tala turned her focus back to her direct surroundings.

Even at night, the fields, orchards, and farms were familiar, and Tala saw the plants beginning to sprout and grow as spring grabbed greater hold.

She'd gone between Bandfast and Marliweather quite a few times by this point, and this was the path she'd always taken, once through the outer edge of the city's defenses at least.

The outer gates into Bandfast were still open when she arrived, as expected. Human cities didn't tend to close their gates, except under extreme circumstances. After all, the magical defenses were generally all that were required to maintain an acceptable level of safety for the citizenry.

She didn't dawdle, but she did try to soak in the ambiance of this city.

She wasn't saying goodbye forever, but she was going to be leaving it behind for the near future.

She'd be back every so often to visit Lyn and Kannis, but overall, her time in Bandfast was over.

I suppose that was true even before I left for Marliweather.

-Yeah, but there was too much going on. Tacking on saying goodbye to this city, and Lyn and Kannis, would have been too much. It would have felt too drawn out.-

Yeah, I suppose so…

Tala was far from alone as she walked through the streets. Even though the short days of winter had mostly transitioned into the regular days of spring or fall, leading toward the longer summer days, people were still about after dark, doing what they needed to do before they closed themselves in their homes for the night.

Some people called generic greetings to others, including her. She responded to those with a smile and a wave without slowing. People were just being polite.

After all, they were all human, all in this city, this life, together.

It was important to focus on what unified them rather than what divided them.

Her feet almost unconsciously took the incredibly easy route to Lyn's house, across from the park blossoming with new growth, visible even in the dim light from the streetlights.

When she came to the front door, she hesitated.

This isn't our house anymore. She felt that clearly, even though she still had a key.

The key that she held in her hand as she hesitated.

I shouldn't unlock someone else's house… That's just weird.

Even so, it felt like it would be strange to knock.

Thus, she was left standing on the front step, indecision trapping her rather effectively.

Nearly a minute passed before the door opened, revealing Lyn just inside. "Tala?"

Tala had stepped back at the sudden opening of the door. "Oh! Hi, Lyn."

"What are you doing? We're going to eat, right?"

“Yes.” She took Kit and tossed the pouch at the open door. Kit flowed over the slab, blending in perfectly.

Lyn glanced at the door with a raised eyebrow. “Alright, then. What were you doing out here?”

Tala grimaced, then held out the key that she still held in her hand. “I need to return this. It didn’t seem right to use it since I don’t live here anymore.”

Lyn snorted a laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous. Keep the key. You are welcome here, and to use that key, for as long as I own this house.”

Tala felt herself smile, her indecision wiped away. “Thank you, Lyn.” As she followed her friend back inside, Tala frowned. “How did you know I was out there?”

“Tala, your aura is projected in a sphere around you by your illusion thing.”

“Through-spike.”

“Yeah, illusion thing. In any case, it lacks teeth, but it is *very* easy to sense when I am within about twenty feet of you.”

“Oh… I didn’t really realize that, I suppose.” She pushed on the still open door, and Kit opened up just enough for her to toss the iron key inside, allowing her sanctum to close once more.

Lyn shook her head. “That still looks odd, even though I know exactly what is happening with it. It’s no wonder that so many syphons can exist within human cities, when they have the ability to hide like that.”

“Indeed, yeah.” Tala nodded solemnly.

Kannis had heard her arrival, and she was standing just inside the sitting room, looking their way. “With all due respect, master, with regard to the first topic, I can’t sense her. I feel it would be unkind to Mistress Tala to misrepresent the reality of her illusory aura.”

Tala waved to her old classmate. “Good evening, Kannis.”

“Good evening, Mistress Tala.”

Lyn was shaking her head. “You would sense her if your magesight were active.”

“Absolutely, Mistress Lyn, but not without it. You, on the other hand, sensed her without use of magesight.”

Tala looked to her friend, eyebrows climbing.

Lyn shrugged. “That’s true enough.” The older woman smiled at her mageling. “Thank you for clarifying, Kannis.”

“My pleasure.” Kannis gave a small bow.

Interesting... “So, Lyn, do you think it’s due to you being Fused?”

Lyn shrugged. “Let’s discuss it on the way to dinner, shall we?”

“Yes!” Kannis grinned.

Tala chuckled. “Sure. That sounds great.”

The evening passed with pleasant conversations, amazing food, and promises of future visits.

Even though it was a fun time, there was a tinge of sadness throughout the evening, and she realized that it wasn’t quite the same without Rane with them.

He’ll be in Alefast.

-That he will.-

For food, they grabbed little cheesy caravans before going to the large square that Lyn had taken Tala to on her first night in Bandfast.

Gretel was still there, peddling her pies, and the older woman seemed genuinely pleased to see Tala once again, but whether that was because she genuinely remembered Tala or she was experienced enough of a saleswoman that she pretended to, Tala couldn't tell.

In either case, Tala was grateful for the interaction and the tasty pies. They were just as amazing as she remembered, though in comparison with Mistress Petra's cooking, they didn't seem *quite* as uniquely incredible as they had the first time she'd had them.

Speaking of the cook, Tala had informed Mistress Petra ahead of time that she wouldn't need dinner, having decided that it was acceptable to miss a single meal of power infusion in order to share some reminiscence with her friends.

The Zuccat family was also taking a good deal of time the next day to visit with those they knew in Bandfast while Tala met with Master Cazor.

The conversation that the three women had while walking ranged from what Kannis was learning and her future prospects to Lyn's new duties and coworkers. They briefly touched on differences in magical perception based on advancement, but none of them really had the knowledge or inclination to experiment with such theoretical things while on a night out.

As to the things that they did discuss, funnily enough, both Lyn and Kannis had dealt with several potential suitors even in the last month.

None had worked out, obviously, but the women were drawing increasing attention, and they both found themselves more than a bit intrigued at the prospect, at least if the right someone expressed interest. Not that they had anyone specific in mind, of course.

Additionally, they didn't have time to go hunting for their own prospects, at least not yet.

Finally, the three discussed what Tala expected from her time in Alefast, Waning.

Honestly, Tala's contribution around her upcoming plans was the smallest portion of the overall discussion. After all, part of the reason she was going was to experience the waning and learn exactly what it entailed.

It was a big prospect, honestly.

There were just about twenty-one years until that city would be fully abandoned. Tala was barely older than that, and she was making a decision that would set her course for as long as she'd been alive.

And yet, it will just be a blip on my life to come.

-It's rather exciting, isn't it?-

And overwhelming.

They talked about that, too, the Refined, Fused, and mageling. They discussed the long span of years before them all.

Even though many specifics couldn't be discussed in front of a mageling, they mainly wanted to discuss the vague aspects anyway. This wasn't a time for planning or academic discussion; it was simply three young women contemplating the river of time.

Thus, they passed the evening, enjoying each other's company along with the tasty food.

The next morning, Tala woke bright and early.

She stretched, ate the breakfast prepared by Mistress Petra, and left for the training arena where she was meeting Master Cazor, Kit hanging from her belt.

She'd bid a temporary goodbye to Lyn and Kannis the night before. So, she felt no need or desire to seek them out before departing.

The tentative plan was for her to come back in a few months and take them to Alefast, Waning, so that they could see the city for themselves.

The more she considered it, the more Tala realized that her life was going to be filled with temporary goodbyes.

Most of those she would interact with would be incredibly long-lived, and they had a limited number of cities to move through. Almost universally, they'd cross paths again eventually.

So long as they all survived.

Yes, happy thoughts, Tala.

-Realistic thoughts, though.-

Yeah, I suppose.

The training arenas were as familiar as ever, and she was directed to a much more reinforced one than she'd needed in most cases in the past.

They had discussed performing the experiments and training within her sanctum, but they both thought that it would likely be best to not do larger scale—or more experimental—tests with iron while inside a magically created and maintained space.

I grow in wisdom.

-That you do.-

What, no sarcasm? Tala felt herself smile internally.

-No need. You are getting wiser, and I am glad for it.-

Master Cazor was awaiting her as before, but this time he was waiting without preprepared bags of iron.

He gave her a rueful smile. "Well, Mistress Tala, I would not have thought it possible, but you have somehow added *more* iron to yourself since last we met."

She grinned in return, her metal moving along with her face to allow the expression, mirrored as illusion by her through-spike.

“That is… marginally creepy since I can at least partially sense through it.”

With a sigh, she pulled the iron away from her mouth, nose, eyes, and ears. She only had the single external layer of metal at the moment. “Well, I definitely wasn’t going for creepy.”

“Then you need to get better control of your illusion. The unblinking eyes are odd enough, but the features portrayed have a thick, stiff quality as if you have on *vastly* too much makeup or something like that.”

She found herself nodding. “I hadn’t actually considered that. The layer of iron would act as a smoothing agent… What does this do?”

Tala shifted the metal, layering it over her face until it was built up to the point of being a relatively featureless mask. The main benefit of this was that there were no harsh angles for an attack to catch against.

Master Cazor’s left eye twitched just a bit. “Well. The illusion is *trying* to fill in the details, but it clearly uses your face as a map.”

Tala turned one of her mirrored perspectives to specifically examine her own face, rather than simply seeing it from the corner of that vision.

Oh… that is uncanny.

-Just a bit, yeah.-

The face was definitely human, and it even looked mostly like Tala’s, but it was utterly devoid of any expression, and the eyes were staring forward, sightlessly.

“It doesn’t help that I can sense—and basically see—the flat plate of iron slicing through where the illusion appears to be. I’ve got to say that, to me, it isn’t fun to look at.”

The iron flowed away from her face once more as she smiled mischievously. “Just what every girl wants to hear.”

He snorted a laugh and shook his head in response. “In any case, shall we begin?”

“Of course. What were you thinking for the first test? I’ll also disable my through-spike so we can better observe the results.”

“That seems wise. As to the test, I have been working on my wide-area-effects. How about I attempt to pin you down using purely magnetic fields?”

She frowned. “Wouldn’t that require our auras to clash? That’s hardly fair, given I’m Refined.”

He shook his head. “That’s the whole idea. I’ve been working at controlling two distinct points on opposite sides of a space and inverting them from each other, turning them into massively powerful poles on a non-existent magnet.”

She felt her eyebrows rise. “So, you don’t have to affect the space between them directly?”

“Precisely.”

She felt ideas begin to spark within her own mind. *Oh, that’s clever. I think I could…*

-*Yeah, but not now. Focus on* this *while you are here.*-

Right, right. “So, let’s see it.”

He grinned, and Tala felt the zeme of the arena begin to shift, two bright points of power building on either side of the space.

It took a minute as the magic continued to build, but Tala began to feel pressure exerted on the iron on her skin.

She kept it under her control; she had to do that anyway in order to allow for normal movement. Thus, while the pressure was noticeable, the forces involved weren’t in danger of taking any from her.

Master Cazor was obviously using a tremendous amount of power to amplify this effect. His straining voice sounded hopeful as he asked, “Are you feeling restricted yet?”

Tala moved through some stretches before shaking her head. “I can feel the pulls, but it isn’t inconvenient. Not yet.”

He nodded. “And you’re maintaining a willful control over your iron, correct? Quite similar to your aura?”

“Similar, yeah, though my aura is contained at the moment.”

“It’s…” He tilted his head to the side. “Can I try something?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

Without further warning, the two poles of the non-existent magnet rushed inward, the bi-directional pulling force increasing exponentially.

Tala gritted her teeth as she set her will against the massively escalating power.

“If you’re not maintaining aura control of your surroundings, and if your aura is bound within the iron, then you can’t contest this, can you?”

The poles stopped three feet to either side of her, just out of reach.

Tala couldn’t muster the focus to answer, her mind entirely bent on keeping the iron in place against the unnatural pull.

“Yeah, I thought not. Well, let’s test the limits, then. Resist and overcome the magics if you can.”

Tala couldn’t keep her arms down, and they were pulled outward, her fingertips falling short of the magical beacons, which were the magnetic poles.

Her iron began flowing across her skin, gathering around her hands in increasingly large spheres, barely held from moving farther by her will.

The surface of the collected iron dust rippled and writhed under the influence of the clashing forces, but Tala held firm.

Master Cazor was visibly sweating as he strained to control and maintain his working. He wasn't trying to increase its power anymore. Simply keeping it going seemed to be his limit.

Tala, for her part, was under *immense* strain. It honestly felt like someone was attempting to rip off her arms.

Blessedly, only her outer iron was being affected, for the most part. That which she held within her body, and that within the dimensions of magic, was being sheltered to a far greater extent.

Then, her eyes locked onto Master Cazor's, and she smiled, the apparent strain melting from her face.

It hadn't been entirely an act, but she wasn't under nearly as much pressure as she'd allowed it to appear.

With her iron pulled to her hands, to a large extent, she was free to extend her uncontained aura outward.

At the same time, tendrils of iron reached out, surrounding and squeezing down on the magnetic poles.

The massively powerful magnetic field winked out in an instant, and the two Archons fell to their knees almost in unison, gasping from the magical and mental strain they'd both experienced.

As Tala took in the sand around them, she felt a smile pulling at her lips.

Lines of dark iron dust were striated through the otherwise tan sand, creating clear lines, demonstrating the influence the magical magnetic field had had.

“Well.” Master Cazor forced himself back to his feet. “That was a fun first test. Shall we try others?”

Tala stood as well, showing greater ease in the movement as befit her faster recovery rate and higher advancement. “Absolutely.”

Author's Note

Thank you for taking your time to read my quirky magical tale.

If you have the time, a review of the book can help share this world with others, and I would greatly appreciate it.

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Thank you, again, for sharing in this strange and beautiful, magical world with Tala. I sincerely hope that you enjoyed it.

Regards,

J.L.Mullins