

BOOK II OF THE AURAMANCER'S EXORCISM
SAGA OF THE DEAD MEN WALKING

INSANITY'S RAPTURE

HE SET HER WORLD ON FIRE. NOW IT'S HER TURN.



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PROLOGUE

Pridis, the 19th of Riverswell, 513 QR

*Had I realized that the drugs were not the only demon
vying for supremacy in his flesh, much would have been different.*

*If I had known how deep his dependency on cocasa had grown,
I would have intervened himself.
It was, as most fights are with such things,
a demon that had to be slain from the inside out.*

*Had I realized that Basion City was not the safest place...
Had I realized that his suffering was being exploited...
Had I realized what game was truly at play...
But they didn't know. Thus, I didn't know.*

*A few murders. A terrible thing, but not uncommon.
A few missing. A distressing thing, but in a city the size of Basion?*

*A priest suffering a crisis of pain no prayer could reach?
The city holds one of the largest outposts in the Order of Love!
Where else would I send him to find peace but a place
designed to grant it, designed to study the faults of the broken,
and to put them on the road to well-being and health.*

*The only saving grace, if any were to be had,
was that he was both in the worst place I could have sent him,
and the best person to see where others were fractured, battered, and lost.*

*And while that may not be enough of a grace to let me sleep
without guilt and a crisis of my own conscience,
there was one thing that filled my heart with pride.*

*It was not that he held his faith. It was not that he held his morality,
no matter how much he bent it as he needed to ease his pain.
It was not the Love in his heart. It was not the relief offered by his Words.*

*It was that in the darkness, he found forgiveness,
and granted it in a way that only he could.*

*~Sir Steelhom
Office of Oversight
New Civa*

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He played with her. Almost every night, he played with her. With each stroke of his claws, he played. With each agonizing rake of his fingers, he played. With each touch, each twist, each gouging thrust of his nails, he played a symphony of pain in her soul.

It didn't matter how much pain he inflicted. How much damage he did. Nobody noticed. Nobody saw it. Nobody saw the handiwork he left behind nearly every night – nearly every night, except for the nights he had to feed. Those nights, he stayed away.

No, he was much better than that. He wanted to play. He wanted to make her suffer. He wanted a measure of revenge. He took it in the shadows.

He took it *with* the shadows.

No matter how often they sliced through her soul, his claws never once split her skin. They traced down and over every inch of her flesh and left rivulets of pain coursing through her spirit with every long, agonizing stroke. Though no matter how many times the shadowy claws raked just under her skin, they never flayed flesh from bone.

He could have. He could have left her body tattered, shattered, a testament to his skill at weaving exacting carnage on the unwanted and unwilling. He could have severed tendons and wrapped them around his fingertips as he pulled them free of her arms and legs one after another. He could have plucked the bones from her fingers out through the tips one after another. He could have twisted her tongue until it tore from her howling mouth with just a single nail.

He could have done that. All of that, and more. He knew he could.

She knew he could.

He'd done it before. She'd seen it. She'd cleaned up after it.

He chose not to. He chose, instead, to set her spirit on fire. He chose, instead, to pluck at her being in ways that you could not see unless you knew where to look – or how. He slipped his ethereal claws through her flesh and into her body and coaxed whimper after whimper, cry after cry, and tear after tear from her bloodshot, exhausted eyes.

Each time she asked why, the response was the same. "You know why."

She did. "Squistal."

"That is a place. That is not a why. You know why."

She whimpered in pain as he twisted something under her breast and sent fresh electric agony down her arms. "She wasn't... wasn't human. Wasn't... wasn't natural. Had to... she had killed. Had to... had to stop her."

Her answer made him do it again. Another slash of shadow against soul. Another twist of long black claws that plunged from the shadows under her bed to slice at her legs through the straw-filled mattress as if it wasn't even there. "I'm not human," she whispered, gravely voice snarled, "and she was *mine*." Zilyph. That was her name. You. You took her. You took my heart. I take yours."

"My... my heart doesn't belong... to you," she whimpered again as moonlight began to shine through the window in her room. For a moment, it

made the shadows go away. But not for long.

Never for long. “Yes, it does. Your Goddess hasn’t saved you. She won’t. She had Her chance, and your heart belongs to me now,” it purred. “*You* belong to me.”

“Punishment,” the exorcist whimpered as she covered her mouth to hide the scream she knew he was about to force from her lips. The staff at the Manor didn’t like it when she screamed. Some of them were nice. Others weren’t. It was easier just to muffle herself. He’d only be angrier if he was interrupted. She’d learned that lesson years ago. “This is a test. I will be... be rewarded. Test... test of faith.”

“Be rewarded with blood,” he promised. “You’ll draw blood for me. Be with me. You cannot give me back what I lost but I will make you into what she was.”

She closed her eyes and screamed into her hand as his shadowy nails ripped into her womb and *twisted* in a way he’d perfected long before he met her. “It’s... not... not just... my test.”

His shade moved up between the bed and the wall and leaned down over her as she thrashed under his touch in her nightgown. “It’s no test. You’re believed by none. You’re wanted by none. You’ve earned only me.”

The broken priestess looked up at his towering menacing form and weakly shook her head. “Faith... faith includes... trust. Induces belief. Trust when... trust when blind... is its own... reward... and its own battle.”

“Lost your battle,” he mocked.

“No,” she replied with the thinnest of smiles, “but I have seen. Heard. Heard the ether.”

He reached down and placed the tip of his index finger just to the side of her nostril. She knew what was coming. He loved to do this. The nose, the eyes, the ears. She’d learned – even before they’d ‘met’ – that he loved to remove the senses. He wasn’t doing that with her, but he relished the way it made her cry when he pushed through her spirit. “The ether doesn’t care. The Gods don’t care. The only one that cares for you is me.”

“Those not believed... they must... must have the most faith in what they know is true.”

“But that isn’t you,” he mocked. “None will believe you. They believe what they see. What they know. They know that this is a place that I cannot be, so they don’t believe you.”

She sucked in a slow gulp of air. “Another’s belief will... will... become their faith. His... his trust will... be my truth. And you? You...” she whispered as even more shadows began to dominate the walls. They blocked out the window. They hid the moonlight.

Annix, a monster born of darkness and shadows, a monster with more blood on his hands than she had in her veins, pulled his claws back and lorded over her as if he owned her. He thought he did. He believed he did. “What, Bistra? What will I receive?”

“You’ll have... you’ll have more than you... think you deserve.”

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He sliced down through her chest and ripped into parts of her soul she never knew she had. He laughed so loudly that the rest of the Manor should have heard it. His magic was the only thing that stopped the caregivers, the helpers, or the healers from rushing to her aid.

For the first time, as he laughed, so did she. She laughed, because she *knew* from what she could hear in the ether, she *knew* that someone's nightmares were coming true. She knew that *those* nightmares would bring the end of this one. *Those* shadows would *hate* this one.

She knew, because she was the Auramancer Exorcist. And the aura of the exorcist interred just a few rooms away was one that screamed for all those who could hear. Who would hear. Who would bother to listen. Bistra screamed. Annix laughed. Someone else cried.

His tears would end her suffering, in time.

Another slice. Another scream.

Even if now was not that time.

I. OF HEALERS AND THIEVES

Staddis, the 20th of Riverswell, 513 QR

“Do you see it?” the dead woman whispered in his ear, *“do you see what you missed?”*

He struggled fitfully in her arms, but her ruined flesh had him in a vice-like grip and wouldn't let him go. If she did, he thought was going to die – they were floating over frigid waters full of crashing waves and twisted shapes moving under them. She had one hand around his naked waist, and another wrapped in his dirty-blonde hair to force his eyes forward.

Being dead might have been an improvement.

What he saw was almost worse than being held tight to a corpse ravaged first by flames at the end of her life and then by flames from a stint in the Abyss. While she had been beautiful in life, death offered no such kindness. Exposed and splintered ribs pressed against his naked shoulders while her remaining breast obscenely pressed against the side of his head.

And yet...

The boat was another story. He saw crewmen in Dawnfire attire fighting each other on the deck under the midnight sky. Someone was trying to light a fire in the middle of it; at first he thought it was to see. Then he realized they were desperately trying to set a barrel of pitch ablaze. The shipman was panicked and he carried the barrel like a desperate madman. A few other sailors were attempting to guard him as the rest of the crew tried to attack. Others threw themselves onto their own blades, and he watched as one man hung himself off of the mast.

“Don't see it yet, do you? Shouldn't need two eyes to see. Just one should work. Listen to them, look at them,” she commanded.

He knew what it was. He knew what they were fighting. He obliged anyway. He didn't have a choice. She'd made sure of that. The sailors didn't have a choice, either.

Thick, black, oily tentacles started to rip out of one body after another. They

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thrashed on the desk and wildly knocked down anything and anyone in reach. When the mast collapsed, the defenders quit trying to fight back, and started to take their own lives.

The man trying to light the pitch almost made it.

Almost.

A tendril of black fog the size of an ox reared up from the center of the ship with a multitude of faces writhing just under its surface and all along its length. It crashed down on top of the silvery-haired officer with the force of an avalanche – which obliterated him and destroyed the barrel at the same time.

A few minutes later, and the dying was effectively done. Blood flowed down the side of the ship, and loose limbs tumbled overboard. Slowly, as she held his head locked forward, as she slowly carried him over the boat – he couldn't make out the name on the side despite his best efforts – he watched as the central tendril plucked body after body out of the water. He watched as it collected each corpse, and dropped them into the belly of the ship.

He watched as the creature cleaned up its mess. After what felt like an hour, the boat was clean of broken and bloodied sailors. Once the last one fell into the hold, the tentacle vanished behind them and all was left in utter silence.

"You know what it is."

"I destroyed it."

"You know what it is," she repeated.

"I watched it get ripped to shreds. The Abyss consumed it. It didn't belong here. It wasn't supposed to be here. I sent it to the pit, and every corrupted soul it owned found release."

"I didn't," she replied with a slow hiss.

"Daringol lost its hold on you. You earned the one the Abyss has."

"Did it let me go? Did it truly?" she countered as she turned him around in her arms and lifted him slightly. She grotesquely licked what remained of her melted, distorted lips and gave him a mockery of a seductive smile. *"Why do you think I force you to see?"*

When she pressed her lips to his, he screamed in fresh terror...

...and didn't stop until Seline pulled his head into her lap and quieted him with a finger placed to his lips. *"Ah. There you are."*

The world spun around his head. Crashing seas faded and were replaced with wooden slat walls; a derelict ship turned into an old bed and bear-fur blankets; and the dead woman turned into a very calm, very soft, and very tired blonde-haired woman only a couple of years his senior. *"Seline? I...? What? What... how'd I get back in my room?"*

"Carried here, by cot," she replied as she wiped his face off with a small cloth, *"five days ago. We weren't sure how long you were going to be out, in all honesty. We've been talking about what to do with you if you were asleep much longer."*

He tried to lift his head up from her thighs but couldn't do more than weakly struggle before he gave up entirely. *"Five da...? I was just in the atri...?"*

"You were in the atrium on Wundis. Today is Staddis."

"But I just...?"

She placed her finger back on his lips and shook her head slightly. "After what you did in the garden, you went straight to surgery. After – Keto sends his regards, by the way, and said that it's easier to work on you when you're not thrashing about – you went straight to an examination from Lady Ridora and then Maiden Prostil. Lexcanna had final say over you before you were brought back here, where you've been ever since."

He blinked and tried to rub at his forehead before he realized that his hands were tied to each other. "What happened? *Why am I tied up?*"

"Let's start with your leg," she began. "When you fell, you tore it open. You were right to be complain about pain, it turns out. You had an abscess. Keto had to scrape it out. Never seen anything like it before, he said."

He struggled to remember the last few things he could. He had been looking at the statues of Isamiae, Solinal, and Niasmis in the garden when he'd seen a glimmer behind the edifice of Love. He'd reached for it and there was a flash of light and... burning. A lot of burning.

Then an eye that peeked out of the side of his leg. The eye that belonged to the fog that belonged to a spirit he had personally sent screaming into the Abyss. "Wasn't... infection. I saw it," he mumbled as he began to struggle against her grip a little more. He kicked at the blankets on his lap and couldn't get his legs to move either – and realized that they had tied his ankles to the bedposts, too. "Daringol, saw it, saw the tentacles, I –" he ranted as he tried to twist his leg under the covers before he let out a pained cry.

The healer stopped him with a gentle squeeze of his cheek and waited for him to settle down. "No, Akaran. No tentacles. No demons. Just an infection."

"It's not a demon," he countered, "it's a spirit. Angry. Wraith, nesting wraith. An *arin-goliath*. I saw it, it was there, it's there. Let go, I –"

"No, Akaran. You screamed about it a few times in a few very brief lucid moments. Catherine was so worried she personally worked on you to make sure that there was nothing there. You're okay. I promise."

He shook his head as much as he could (and ignored how nice it felt to lay on her lap). "No I'm not. I don't remember what happened. Just that I saw it." That's when he realized that there wasn't anything he could remember after. "What... what DID happen?"

Seline sighed softly and went back to work cleaning his face off. "You fell, and you banged into the wards in the atrium. They had an... um... an *adverse* effect on you."

His eye went as wide as his face went pale. "On *me*? What kind... what kind of *adverse effect*?"

"From what the ladies said, whatever is wrong with your aura caused all of the wards to react as if you were... what was the word? Oh yeah. 'Inimical.' Like your soul was hostile to them," she said as she continued to soothe him with the cloth across his stubble-covered cheeks. "On the other side of the coin, you

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did demonstrate that they still worked.”

The horror in his eye sunk to new levels as she talked. “They treated me as... defiled?”

“Yes, I am afraid that they did.”

Akaran sank down into her lap and gave up struggling against the ropes. “I'm... defiled...”

She shook her head and dismissed the dejected tone to his voice. “No, you're not. Your aura is a little unusual. That's all. It's hard to say *what* magic will do to you right now, given your state. Even before that.”

“Nothing good, apparently,” he muttered with a defeated sigh. “What did the wards do?”

“You'll have to speak to Ridora for a full breakdown, if she offers to give it,” she returned. “But to watch it? First, you banged into Solinal's statue. It made you glow blue and you froze the grass. Then I... I accidentally knocked you into Isamiae's.”

“I... froze the grass?”

“Solid. The caretaker is *pissed* at you. I'd keep away from him for a while.”

He grunted in vague annoyance as he tried to imagine what could've happened. “Yeah well, Yannis doesn't like me anyway.”

“Likes you a lot less now,” she warned, “though Keto was *really* interested in what happened after you triggered the ward from the Lady of the Hand.”

“What did it do?”

Seline cleared her throat and started to count the effects off on her fingers. “Let's see. First, you suffered minor burns around the scar on your upper arm – from the wound you had when you first got here. There's matching burns on that mess on your chest, several other scratches. More or less, any injuries you had when you arrived at the Manor blistered like someone poured hot soup on them.”

He tilted his head down and for a brief moment, was grateful that he was swaddled up in the blankets. “That's first...? Is there a second?”

“Yes, actually. Not only did you suffer burns, Keto thinks it turned the mass in your leg into a solid rock. Said it looked like charcoal when he pulled it out. Also, you may notice that a couple of your scars are simply *gone* now. Said he'd like to start experimenting with directly touching patients wounded by magical means against the statue in question.” Seline blanched and looked out the window. “I've never heard Ridora say ‘no,’ so forcefully before...”

Meekly, he found the courage to ask, again, “What else? I have a feeling there was an else.”

“Well. I'd like to say that good things happened when you activated the Niasmis ward. Do you remember telling me that the spell read more like a threat than it did a warning?”

“I... think so? *'Trespass against the lost and Love will trespass against you,'* wasn't it?”

“Yes.”

Akaran swallowed slowly. "Did it think I was the lost or the trespasser?"

"There's a charred imprint of the back of your head in the dirt now," she slowly replied. "Yannis is *really* pissed at you."

"Fisk."

The blonde-haired healer nodded understandingly. "As for what *actually* happened? How the magic worked on you? I don't really know. I don't know if Ridora will tell you."

He frowned up at her. "I'm the one that set them off. I think that gives me the right to know," he retorted as he struggled against the bonds a little. "Do you mind taking these off?"

"I suppose you're lucid enough. You start moving around in your sleep again, and expect to be chained down every night."

"Start moving...? You said I was unconscious?"

Seline started to carefully work the linen cords off of his wrists, one knot after another. "You have a habit of being insufferable while you're awake. When you're asleep, you're an outright pain in the ass. You fell out of bed once, and nearly knocked Abbagail's head off when she was trying to feed you."

He sunk even lower into her lap and mouthed a quiet, "Oh."

"Oh, indeed."

"But the wards...? Why don't you think Ridora will tell me? It's my body. If I caused them to activate, I should know what happened."

"Oh, you did indeed set them off," she replied as she finished untying his hands. "The ladies are not happy with you for doing it. Regardless of fault or intent, you caused... a situation."

She guided him upright and he trepidatiously looked down at his still-covered knee. "What do you mean by situation? Please Seline, tell me what in the name of the Goddess happened already."

The healer took a deep breath and caved. "To hear them curse about it – and they've been cursing about it – triggering all three spells at once caused some kind of feedback loop that amplified the effects that each of them felt. Instead of a simple tingle or noise in the ether, they –"

He tensed up and interrupted her before she could finish. "A feedback loop? Oh no. How bad? Tell me it wasn't bad."

"Ridora was taking a well-deserved nap when you did it, and she kicked her puppy off the bed and into the fireplace," she replied with a cringe. "The dog is fine but her bedroom has an odor now."

He slammed his hand over his mouth as his eye went wide all over again. "Oh Goddess. I'm so sorry."

Seline went on as she scooted away from him and began to work on the knot holding one of his feet down. "They say that Lexcanna passed out in the middle of service, and a room full of worshipers thought that the halo that appeared around her head was a sign from the Pantheon. Figured she was either ascending to the Divine or had done something heretical that she was being punished for."

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"Oh. Oh dear. Were they appropriately mollified?"

"Yes, but the members of the Odinal delegation she was preaching to were unimpressed."

A mental vision of a bunch of armed barbarians standing around a service grumbling their displeasure in the middle of the Ellachurstine Chapel flashed in his mind. "Pits..."

"The one you must apologize to the most would be Maiden Prostil," she warned.

He cringed and painfully stretched his good leg once she had the ropes undone. "What happened that was worse than charbroiled puppy?"

"The feedback caused her to throw up."

"Oh. Well that's not so bad, is it?"

Seline brushed a lock of hair from her eyes and shook her head. "She was holding her niece's daughter when she did it. Her two-winters-old daughter."

That image was worse than the barbarian one. "Oh... my Goddess. Oh no. Oh no."

"None of them felt too sympathetic to the sounds you made while Keto was operating on you," she added. "I'm not sure they will be too sympathetic to your current state now."

"Oh... no. No I don't... imagine..."

"Suffice it to say that the three did as you said they were designed: the Solinal ward attempted to calm the disturbance in your aura, the Isamiae ward attempted to heal you, and the Niasmis ward attempted to purge you of the effects that ravaged you."

He took a deep breath as she finished the knot on his bad leg and slowly pulled the blankets away. "Why didn't they ever do it before?"

"I asked the same question," she said. "Catherine assumes it's the same reason that the wards in the Repository have yet to have a negative effect on you – you never physically touched them, thus the otherworldly magic infesting you directly came into contact. Whatever *was* wrong with you is bottled up inside your flesh, much like Adept Lolron pointed out."

Thankfully, his leg was bandaged. Even better, he hadn't bled through it. "No, if it reacted to the energy then it should've worked even if I wasn't touching it unless..." he replied as he thought on it for a minute. "Oh! I served as a direct conduit. Connecting the spells directly to me and bridging the gap... they haven't reacted to me before now because the magic from Tundrala isn't mixing with the ether in this world and as long as it's just in me it's contained and not spreading... and if it isn't spreading then the wards won't work," he rambled.

"I do hope you understand I don't know what you mean."

"Well, like you said. What Lolron said. It's like... oil and a glass jar. You can press the glass against something, and the oil won't do anything... you can put the glass in a fire, and it'll just make the oil hot until the jar breaks."

"In this example, should I assume the magic inside you is the oil?"

He nodded. "While the wards were the fire."

"And your jar broke when you touched it," she added.

"I broke when I touched it," he agreed with a frustrated sigh. "If it wasn't so terrifying to *be* the damn jar right now, I'd be excited that I think I just figured out a new metaphysical concept that could have some implications on how the Order handles exorcisms."

Seline shook her head at him, desperate to understand how he could go so quick from 'deeply embarrassed' to 'lost in discovery' so quick. "Nothing is new in this world Akaran, we're all old souls."

He rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck. "Fairly sure I'm new."

"No, just rare," she countered. "You've told me as much with your studies."

The priest just sighed and tried to work a kink out of his neck as he thought about his reply for another few moments. "I'm fished over a barrel is what I am. Can't coat that any other way."

"We can't as long as you have that attitude," she argued. "What it *does* mean is that you are restricted from entering the atrium again, under any circumstances. Same with any of the shrines in the city or places where someone might've set up warding. Maiden Prostil has her own new rules for you, and I imagine that Ridora has a few suggestions on how you should spend your time now as well."

"Fisk. Just... fisk me."

"The circumstances don't really present themselves for certain acts of dalliances, I have to admit," she muttered in vague disappointment.

"Why should now be any different than any other point in my life," he grunted.

Seline caught herself blushing as she raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you suggesting you —"

"What happens to me now?"

"Not fiscing, apparently," she started to say before she caught herself. When he began to protest, Seline quickly cleared her throat and replied before he could utter any indignancies. "For now, you rest. I'm sure Ridora will be in to see you tomorrow. Nothing else you're doing right now is, or will, matter."

That made Akaran shake his head a little too vehemently. When the room quit spinning, he put words to his disagreement. "Wait. No. In the garden, there was something behind the statues. That's what I was reaching for when I fell."

The healer frowned at him and tilted her head a little to the side. "No? There wasn't anything there."

"Yes there was," he argued. "Looked like a necklace of some kind. Silver chain."

"No, there wasn't anything. I promise. I went back to look after."

He shook his head again and immediately felt worse for Lexcanna's nausea. "I'm *telling you* that I saw something. I think it's important."

"In your state, I imagine you saw a lot of things," she replied as she gave him a reassuring little smile. "Don't let it trouble you."

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"Fine," Akaran grumbled. "Then Bistra. I need to speak with her."

That earned a more forceful condemnation. "No. There will be no speaking with anyone. There will be no more of your investigation. Catherine and Ridora had a very animated chat about that – you are no longer to do it."

It also went over like a herd of dragons. "Wait, what? Why not?!"

Seline pointed a finger at him. "We can ignore the fact that for an exorcist that *can't*, you've been waving your sigil at anyone that might pay attention to it. A person with your fragility has no business being around *anything* that might have a relation to magic."

"It's a magical world out there. For the sake of the Pantheon, even *this* place is steeped in magic!"

She nodded at that, and pointed out a flaw in his argument he hadn't considered. "Yes. It is. Be happy that they decided it was still reasonably safe to allow you to stay. They could have easily determined you'd be best off in a monastery, or a hermitage."

"They wouldn't."

"They nearly did," the healer warned. "*I'm* the one that talked them out of it."

The realization sunk onto his shoulders and made his head sag. "Piss."

She reached over and placed her hand on his good knee. "Please don't make me regret that choice, Akaran. While I realize that it isn't your fault for what happened with the wards, you've proven to be a very dangerous patient – all other things set aside. Your *intention* may not be to harm those around you, but *unintentional* harm is still harm. There are many people here that are weak and innocent that need to be protected from threats."

"The wards treat me as defiled and the staff now thinks I'm a threat," he lamented as he scrunched his eye closed. "Isn't all of that wonderful?"

"*Please* don't make me regret it," she implored a second time.

"Fine," he reluctantly assented. "Fine. What do I have to do for now?"

Seline let out a breath she barely realized she'd been holding. "For now, rest. Ridora wants you active and stretching your leg as soon as you regained your senses. You can expect a long conversation with Adept Lolron and others in your near future as we figure out what exactly has to be done with you. Waiting for things to change does not seem to be the wisest course of action to follow."

"No. No I guess it doesn't," he said after a brief internal debate. "At least it means I'll get back to normal soon. Can deal with that damn malignant specter on my own terms."

She tensed up and squeezed his leg a little harder. "There's *no* specter, Akaran. No wraith, no ghost. It's in your head," she reiterated. "I'm going to assume you had the same dreams while you were out of your head?"

"Bit different this time. She was showing me a ship. I didn't get the name. *Hull...* something. Dawnfire colors. Daringol was there, too. Ripped the crew to shreds," he said. "It was... bad. It felt real. I thought it was."

"That's the demon you have to battle then. Don't worry about any others. Defeat your mind, the rest will follow."

"It's real. It's in me."

"It's in your head," she clarified. "The demon is the trauma you're fighting. Whatever damned soul that you took a blade to *is* gone. Long gone, I promise," Seline added with an encouraging smile. Then, unexpectedly, she added: "You *will* get through this. You *are* strong. I have faith in you."

"Thank you. And... Sel?"

"Yes?"

He looked down at his hands and rubbed his fingers together absentmindedly. "In the Academy, we were told one thing, one little bright lining that was supposed to work in our favor. It's not. I don't understand why."

Perplexed, she straightened up a little. "What isn't?"

"Abyssians," he replied. "They're not like this. The one that took Liv? It's an aberration."

"An aberration?"

"It's *smart*," he complained. "Yeah. Some of them are sentient. Some are intelligent. Upper-end daemons? The Fallen? Beyond comprehension. Beyond understanding. Those things though? They're all *in* the pit. They're not up *here*."

She bit down on her lip and silently begged him not to say what she thought he was thinking. "I don't know what you're trying to get at."

He started over at the door and refused to meet her eyes. "Something from the dark has figured out how to hide in the light. Figured out how to circumvent the wards here at the Manor. Figured out how to kill with impunity. Figured out how to hide," he answered. "Yeah. They hide. They want to stay here. Survive. Avoid the pit. But that's *hiding*. This bastard... he's hiding. Still doing it."

Seline took a deep breath and squared her shoulders back. "Akaran, no. It's not pitborn. For all the reasons you said it can't be. It's just a man, doing what men do. Killing other men."

"Has to be," he retorted. "It *has* to be. Makolichi figured out how to de-power wards. He used Daringol's nature to do it so he could act with impunity and hide from judgment. Now this thing. Whatever this thing is. I don't know what it is and I can't find it and it's going to kill again."

She reached over to him and made him turn his head to face her. "The Garrison will find out who did it. It's not your worry. It's not your fault. It's not some boogeyman. It's just a man," she said as she stood up and handed him a cup of water. "You need to rest. I'll be back soon with food. I promise."

"Not a man," he grumbled. When she slipped out of the room he tossed the cup into the corner with a clatter and shouted at her. "IT'S NOT A MAN!"

The only thing that greeted him was silence.

"These things aren't supposed to be smart. We are. I have to be smarter than it. All of it," he growled as he tried to get comfortable on his bed. "I'll be smarter than you, I promise," he grunted as he squeezed his thigh just about his knee so hard it left marks. "Gonna kill you before you kill anyone else ever

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again... and then I'm going after the rest..."

That wasn't to say she didn't hear him. It was more to say that she found her attention focused on someone else: the Lady of the Manor herself, Ridora Medias. "Are you alright, m'lady?"

The obvious answer to that question was 'no.' Normally, she presented herself as regal as regal could be without owning a crown. You almost never saw her wearing anything other than a linen maroon robe with gold trim stitched down the center. You almost never saw her without her auburn hair pulled up into a bun, and you almost never saw her with anything but firm conviction and compassion in her pale-blue eyes.

You also never, ever saw her showing signs of weakness.

So when Seline saw her resting against the wall, holding her head in her hands, it came as a shock. "It's just... I have this splitting headache," she half-groaned through clenched teeth.

The healer reached over and tried to touch her forehead, but Ridora flinched away before she could. "I'm sorry, m'lady. Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing touches it," the much older woman lamented. "Comes and goes. I swear it gets worse whenever I get near him."

Seline frowned and tried to pull her disheveled strands of hair away from her elegant face. "Is it from the feedback? Or is it that he's a stubborn mule?"

"Yes to both, I am afraid, but it's not just that," she replied with a pained sigh. "It was even before his experiment down in the garden. Do you know the feeling when you hear people talking? But you can't tell what they're saying? It's like that. But not. And it's making my head simply pound."

"Like that, but not?"

Ridora ignored her confusion and went on like it made perfect sense. "Yes. It's not 'people' talking. It's just one. A woman. She's screaming. Angrily. Almost like... well. Not to brag about my experiences in such matter, but the last time I heard that tone, I was expressing to my husband what a necessity he should find it to keep his manhood away from the maid."

"Maybe you've been spending too much time with some of our patients, m'lady," the healer slowly suggested. "Should I have Prostil come back and –?"

The Lady gave her a withering glare. "One headache is enough. I do *not* need that witch to come give me another one. Listening to him right now only compounded it."

"He is showing more signs of delusions," Seline sighed as she looked back over her shoulder. "I am very concerned for what being cut off from the natural order of the world is doing to him."

"There is no shortage of that causing him grief, I am sure. I also think the cocasa is compounding matters."

"It might be. It's a poor sign that we had to continue to administer it while he wasn't in his right mind. I'm grateful we were able to find a way to feed him..."

"As am I."

Seline sighed and ran her hands through her ponytail. "Well. At least now that the abscess is cleaned out, he should be able to have his daily dosage reduced."

The older woman nodded in agreement. "Yes. When he leaves the Manor next, go through his room with a brush and make sure that he doesn't have any stashed."

"You think he's been getting it off-grounds?" she asked, then paused before adding, "Oh, and you're thinking of allowing him to continue to wander outside in the city?"

Ridora rubbed her temples and glared over at his door. "When he's here, my head starts throbbing. I can't afford to *not* have him go out and about. As far as the other," she continued, "I do not know. Yet, it is a truth that addicts always find a way to hide a supply."

The healer pursed her lips and had to agree again. "Unfortunate, but true. Lady – I really am concerned for his nightmares. A man like him shouldn't be left to his own devices if he's terrified of sleep. He might start trying to find drastic measures to stay awake."

"We will address that soon enough. Now is not that time, I am afraid."

"No, not with... everything else. Soon, hopefully."

"Yes, soon," Ridora replied. "Did you tell him about his friend?"

Seline couldn't stop herself from cringing. "No. He'll find out sooner than later. He doesn't need to know right now."

Her boss nodded in complete agreement. "Hopefully a great deal later. I can't imagine how he'd react in the state he is."

"That his friend has been accused of multiple murders? Including Lexcanna? That Raechil is missing and they think he had something to do with it? I'm still amazed that Hender hasn't had him hung already."

The Lady bowed her head at the name. "Raechil... I am terrified for her, I truly am. As far as the Lieutenant-Commander goes, he spoke to me this morning. Executing the mage has been forbidden."

"Forbidden? By who?"

"Paverilak," she replied. "As far as Maiden Sanlain's Betrothed is concerned, the culprit being arrested and out of sight is good enough. A public execution of one of the Queen's men could be seen as a weakness in the eyes of the midlanders."

Seline couldn't hide the shock on her face. "Surely you'd think that they'd be more impressed to see justice carried out swiftly?"

"One would," the Lady agreed. "I suspect if it was anyone other than one of her soldiers, a pyre would already be lit. And an officer of the Crown, no less?" She paused and shook her head. "They haven't even bothered taking him before a Justiciar or a tribunal. Ordered held without companions, for now."

Seline glanced back at Akaran's room and leaned in close to the lady of the manor. "Do you... do you think he did it?"

She started to rub her temples again and finally shook her head no. "It isn't

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my place to assume either way. I don't... I don't know. With blame being foisted onto the shoulders of the Mother Eclipsian at the same time? It is... it's hard to imagine that our city would be home to murders at all. Let alone someone like her plotting them."

"She's well-loved, too."

"So was Lexcanna," Ridora pointed out. "Jealousy between the light and the dark is not unheard of."

"If she wasn't hiding, maybe we could make sense of it. Not that I blame her. Half of the city wants her head and the other half wants her vindicated. It'll be a nightmare once she's found, either way. But Raechil... has he found *anything* that might give a clue? Anything at all?"

The Lady closed her eyes and felt her shoulders slump. "No. Henderschott told me he had gained nothing from interrogating the mage. As far as anyone can tell, she's vanished with no trace."

"Another one of Akaran's alleged disappearances, do you think?"

"I don't want to think anything that may prove him right," Ridora tersely retorted, "so come join me in prayer that he isn't."

Of the numerous Guilds that worked in, out, and around Basion City, there was one above all others that was respected, revered, and cherished. They worked in secret, they lived in shadows, but if you ever crossed them – you'd not wake until you were safely on the other side of the Veil. They were not to be trifled with, and those rare days when their entire council convened, you'd be best off if you not uttered a word out of place or time.

They didn't bother with lofty titles. One of them didn't bother with a proper name at all. Most never admitted their real or their names, though everyone on the council knew them. It was the nature of their business, and the nature of their game. Their business was in knowing everything that could be known at any time it could be, because simply, one couldn't make a profit unless one knew from where to steal.

Each district of Basion was represented by their own local leader. Yuchin sat patiently, a graying man with wrinkled, leathery skin and calloused hands. He hailed from the District of Piapat, where tradesmen and Guildsmen from all around worked tirelessly every day. Across from him, Bantia sat straight up with her hands daintily crossed over each other and her white robe with gold trim flowed across the tabletop. "I don't see the necessity for all of us to meet today," she demurely muttered to none of the other managers present, "for there are other things that I must do in preparation for the day of worship in the morn'."

Yuchin gave a dirty snarl at the pristine (on the outside, at least) woman from the Chiadon district. "Can't peddle whores to the faithful as they march up and down the streets if you ain't there pushin' tits out to 'em, eh?"

She let it slide even as Rodric, dressed in the finest attire that a mere goldsmith could afford retorted with a guffaw. "Like you'd know," the trader from Akkador West accused with a sly smirk. "Only whores you do business with are the ones that pay me."

"Gold's gold," Yuchin countered, "an' my boys make their livin' doing more honest work than yours."

"My 'boys,' as you call them, sell to everyone. What good is a city of commerce without a firm hand guiding its center?"

"No good if that hand don't have a sword in it," one of the other guests interrupted. That was Raes – a former Huntsman-turned-enforcer. His holdings were reflected in the darkened shadow of Akkador East, and not a single mercenary or soldier looking for a little bit of *extra* income made a deal near any gate without him knowing all about it.

That earned a soft rebuke from Bantia, though it was the self-proclaimed 'Lady' Aldeina Hessmage who countered his blunt assumption. She was one of the few of the Guild that made sure that her name was known everywhere it could be heard, and she made a point to make sure it was heard often. "You say that as if you don't respect the edicts of the ruling class of the city," she scoffed. "A sword is no good unless the hand that it's in can be claimed as coming from the hand of the Crown."

"You'd be surprised what good a sword can do," one of the two remaining souls yet to speak up interrupted. "Come talk to any of the sods that keep my caravans up and running and they'll tell you all about how important the Crown is or ain't."

"Oh, Hammer," she scolded, "your sods are the same sods that answer to Raes. Truly the worst of us, they are, for they get taxed twice over."

Before Hammer, or Raes, or any of the others could add their two crowns to the discussion, the woman that had the distinction of owning the fine establishment they were whining and not dining in spoke up after slamming a heavy copper tankard down on the oblong table they sat around. The basement of the *Drunken Imperial* offered many things for many people – and the representative of both Upper and Lower Naradol found it a useful nexus to hold the occasional meeting of the Fleetfinger's Guild. Not that she had any authority to call one on her own, of course.

Or hadn't, before recent events.

The last person that could – Liona Reanage – had been butchered at her day job, though everyone else in the city had known her as Livstra Oliana. For the Fleetfingers, she'd been known as the Gambling Mind. Or as otherwise known, the Boss of Basion City. Her death at the hands of a murderer (or *murderers*) unknown threatened more than most people would know. "Alright. That's enough shit outta all you. Didn't bring you all here for us to piss about," Celestine 'Cel' Navarshi growled out as loudly as she could.

"Don't think you needed to at all," Hammer grumbled from the door.

"No, she was right to do so," Bantia interrupted. "As grim a task as it may be,

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the Gambling Mind has moved to a place of rest. We would be advised to replace her rank, though we can never replace her spirit or place in our hearts.”

“You grift the shits on temple row, woman, you aren’t one of them,” Raes retorted, “so don’t go tryin’ to talk to us like you do. The city’s been doing just fine with us leading our own districts and you know it.”

Yuchin shook his head. “You know as well as I do that won’t last. Never does. Even if we work out together, once word gets out that this city lacks a Chairwoman? We’ll be fighting for our lives.”

Rodric snorted and flipped a golden crown into the air. “You say that but be honest now: nobody’s dumb enough to move in and try to stir shit up with the way that the Guard is acting.”

“Yeah and what about *after* the Guard calms down?” the extortioner-of-tradesmen challenged.

“Then we’ll pay them off,” he replied quickly. “Like we’ve *always* done.”

Aldeina ran a hand through her platinum-blond bangs and rolled her eyes. “Which one of us? They do not tax our holdings the way Liona did. We have no combined fund to pay them with. You all know as well as I that if they come for one of us they will come for us all. The Mind took care of all of that.”

“Liona was a businesswoman,” Yuchin retorted. “We just... do what she did. It isn’t as if we don’t all know our way around a ledger. Or a banker.”

“She was more than that,” she replied with a sad smile. “She was *fair* and *understanding*. She settled our disputes – in and out of the council. Before she came in, things did *not* run so smoothly. My predecessor learned that the hard way.”

Cel sighed and took a drink. “An’ now she’s gone. She’s gone and I ain’t got a lick of trust for any of you to abide by the decrees of a dead woman.”

“The innkeep’s got a point,” Bantia replied. “No disrespect to anyone here, of course. But do any of you trust *me*? Or do you expect me to idly and blindly trust all of you at once?”

From the door, Hammer dropped his hand to the heavy iron namesake he always kept on his belt. “I sure as fisk don’t.”

“Your sister did,” the thief-of-priests snidely snapped back.

“Only thing my sister had was her ears stuffed between your legs. If she knew what –”

“*Enough* about that, you two,” Aldeina hurriedly interrupted. “The point stands. Not only does the point stand, your dispute of who worships where and how is exactly *why* we *need* a new boss.”

Yuchin shook his head again and banged his fist on the desk. “We do not. The Fleetfinger’s Guild has existed just fine for centuries in situations like this where the ruling council – *us* – divvies up a city and operates it accordingly. Much like we *already* do. All the Mind was good for was to keep the Guard happy.”

“You would suggest then, what?” the woman with the nearly perfectly white hair demanded with a fire blazing in her brilliant blue eyes. “That one of

us go and speak to Hannock or Henderschott and tell 'em 'All is well, we'll behave?' Do you think they'd respect that, let alone believe it?"

"Yeah," the tradesman grunted, "I do."

"And what if the 'one' says something else? 'All is well, we'll behave, except for Yuchin?' I don't think you'd like it none that much if I did, would you?"

"You wouldn't," he snapped.

She gave him a venomous little smile. "You wouldn't know. Not 'till you struggled to stand on your tippy-toes with a noose around your fat neck."

"Then we drag the Overseer in here in front of all of us an' tell that fat asshole who *really* makes the rules in 'his' city," Hammer suggested with a hopeful grin of his own.

Bantia gave him a sly little look from the corner of her brown eyes. "I would much rather prefer that neither he or the Lieutenant-Commander have no knowledge of my face," she said, and then as Hammer opened his mouth and showed off rotting teeth all over again, she interrupted him with a firm, "And no, I will not wear a bag over my head."

He grumbled something disparaging about his sister under his breath but otherwise stayed silent, which gave Aldeina another chance to run her mouth. "Then what do we propose to do? Bantia is correct, it will only be a matter of time before someone attempts to undermine our authority. We have grave enough concerns with what's unfolding as it is. The intruders are already past the damn gate, as far as our business is concerned."

"Who dares?" he demanded as he suddenly gripped the handle of his hammer tight.

"You already know him," Cel responded with a disgusted look. The innkeeper rapped her knuckles on the wall behind her three times in a row and a moment later, a wiry-looking thug shoved a hooded, tied up man into the back room. "Ladies, lords. This is Donta, and he's the bodyguard to the woman that keeps involving herself in our business – that so-called 'Lady' Anais."

Bantia looked him up and down and took note of how nondescript the bodyguard was trying to look. There was nothing special about his outfit, no sigils or other markings. He'd have fit in as easily in the merchant's quarters as the priestly one. The only thing that made him stand out was that his arms and hands, what little could be seen of either, were decidedly paler than your average man. "Been doing more than asking questions, has she?"

"Not that I've seen. Just that she asks a lot of questions," Yuchin muttered, "though she tends to spend gold as if she shits it."

"Asks questions. Buys land. Buys favors," Rodric added with an unpleasant sneer. "She's made a name for herself recently in certain circles. She's the hushed talk of the town over in Giffil. Made me a fair amount of coin in West, won't lie, and fairly sure she's lined Aldenia's purse in the East."

Cel scoffed at him and dismissed him out of hand. "Liona didn't trust her, and now she's dead. Makes a bitch wonder."

As she talked, her man ripped the sackcloth hood off of the mercenary's

head. He was bald, navy-blue eyed, and furious. "You stupid shits," he snarled with a grave, gravely voice.

"Oh shove it, baldy," the innkeeper snapped. "You don't come walkin' into our city and start undermin' what we're doin' without there being some kind of punishment. Don't care how many crowns you've been makin' some of our less-demandin' members – 'bout time to pay up."

Aldeina gave a grave nod and addressed him directly. "I have spent a great deal of time looking into you and your employer. I am aware that she's traveled wide and far – from Civa to Dawnfire to the Midlands and back – and now she's here. Here, and dipping her toes up to her thigh in all manner of businesses."

"She's worked more of the merchants in Piapat than I have," Yuchin agreed. "You think I wouldn't notice? Think that any of us wouldn't notice? Or talk to each other?"

"Worked deals with half of you," he grunted. "You weren't complaining then."

"People weren't being murdered in the street *then*," Bantia stressed. "Now they are. This is a problem for us. All of us."

"They were, just nobody important," Hammer pointed out.

Donta gave her a foul look. "You think she's doing it?"

Raes cleared his throat and slipped a wickedly-serrated blade off of his belt and menacingly laid it on the table. "I think that even if she *isn't*, she knows who *is*. It didn't start until she showed up."

"Now that ain't entirely true. The missing people..." Yuchin started before Cel interrupted him.

"You. You and that crippled priest," she grunted. "Bringing that shit up again and again. People *leave* the damn town. It fisking *happens*."

The tradesman from Piapat shook his head and wagged a finger at her. "Cel, I know your father did, but most of the time people *don't*. Move, sure. Get up and vanish in the night an' leave their babies behind? No. There's *fisking off and away* with the town's chief whore and then there's *missing* and it's been going on longer than we wanna admit."

For the first time since the meeting was convened, a voice spoke up from the back. It was rare he attended such events, but their former boss had a soft spot for him – and he knew more about what she did than most. "Yuchin is right," Ronald Telpid, the Sergeant-at-Arms of Medias Manor intoned from back in the shadows. "The Guard's known about it. Hender just hasn't given a shit."

Bantia glanced over at his direction with her turquoise eyes piercing the darkness. "Why are *you* here anyway? You're not part of the council," she told the middle-aged, slightly balding, and slightly out-of-shape for a guard.

"The *saa* is Liona's former right-hand," Cel interjected before Ronald could explain himself, with a distinct pronunciation of the title as 'sahh'.

"The pits," Hammer grunted. "Errand boy, at best."

The sergeant made a rude gesture at the thief from Akkador West. "She meant a great deal to me. It pained me every time she had to pretend she

didn't know me.”

“She didn't pretend, you ass,” the walking pile of muscle grunted. “She just didn't give a shit.”

“Oh she gave one,” Celestine contested. “How much is the question. I brought him here to get his thoughts on her successor. But first, this fool.”

Donta whipped his head around and unsuccessfully (though not entirely seriously) fought against the wiry enforcer holding his arms behind his back. “Fool? Try saying that again.”

“Fool,” she repeated, “a *damn* fool. You and your boss move in, start getting people in our territories to owe her *favours*, then our boss drops dead? Then a whole bunch of others? A hunter, the Priestess of Stara, and that Granalchi? You two think you can come in and start clearing house like that?”

“Clearing *our* house like that?” Hammer added.

“Yet we don't know if they had any direct involvement in each of those, do we? There's a great number of sinners in this town, and I have yet to see solid evidence that says –” Bantia tried to interject.

“There's reason enough,” her counterpart from East Giffil interrupted. “A mage, a hunter, a priestess? And all the while this one and his employer are asking question after question about what's stuffed in that Oo-lo fortress?”

“It is a temple, not a fortress,” she corrected. “You and I have discussed this.”

The white-haired woman rolled her eyes. “We've discussed how you think that the Goddess of Love tolerates Her followers playing in the underworld.”

“Love can be found anywhere and everywhere,” the thief-of-priests scolded.

“An' so can this cock,” Yuchin said with a foul gesture at the restrained assassin. “Think it's any coincidence that I just got a letter from a guy from *Gonta* that said there's an interest in us by the Guild over there?”

“You got it? Why you?” Hammer demanded.

“Don't know,” the tradesman answered honestly. “Pretty smile? But *his* boss? Last place she came from. *Gonta*. And now we're getting messages from the Guild *from* *Gonta*. Ain't a coincidence.”

Cel felt her lip upturn and gave the gray-bearded thief a nasty look. “Oh we'll be talkin' about that later, Yu,” she promised before turning her attention back to Anais's agent. “If you've got any words to speak in your defense baldy, you'd best speak them now.”

Donta flexed his shoulders and twisted his arms away from her enforcer. “You get one chance. One,” he cautioned.

“Oh? We do?” Bantia retorted with a bemused grin. “From a man tied and bound, that's not much of a threat.”

“Guard just arrested someone for killing Lex,” the thief-of-mercenaries responded with a grunt. “Blaming him for Liona – or maybe he just knew her as Livstra? Either or. Her *and* the Hunter. He didn't do the mage, but they are hunting for his bitch now.”

“His bitch?” the thief-of-priests charged with a disbelieving, insulted look on

her face. "That is a cold way to describe the Lady of Shadows."

Raes nodded and stretched in his seat. "Ah, yes. They arrested a battlemage, didn't they? A Specialist-Major? They seem to think that he is working closely with the Mother Eclipsian herself."

"I've *met* the Mother Eclipse," Yuchin added. "Erine is one of the holiest women I've ever known. Sure, she worships the darkness and all that, but even the ones that've crossed her have never come to an end befitting' their sins. She would never seek to draw blade against *anyone*."

"I'll second that," Hammer agreed. "Ain't no chance she had a hand in any of it."

Cel nodded her head and rapped her tankard on the wooden desk again. "Thirded. Council agrees – there's no way that our precious Erine would have *anything* to do with *any* damn murder. Not today, not tomorrow. Since she's taken such a likin' to that Badin fellow, safe to say he didn't do it on her behest, either."

"That battlemage drinks like a fish. That he could drop anyone... I would decline to believe it. A soldier, yes, as I imagine his superiors could force him sober long enough to deal with a threat to the Kingdom from time to time, but to murder of his own accord? Doubtful," Aldeina retorted. "Quite surprised the fumes on his breath don't catch fire when he lights his sparks."

The innkeep leaned in and gave Donta a wicked, toothy smile. "So you bald little shit, if it ain't *them* then it's probably *you*."

"Have we ruled out the midlanders?" Bantia quietly asked. "My understanding was that both the regional Consort-Blade and the Betrothed seemed to believe that it may just be politics as normal?"

"Have you *ever* known a midlander to gut anything bigger than a cockroach and not brag about it?" Cel countered. "If it'd been one of those tall, dark-haired hunks of dickmeat and abs they'd have hung a sign on the city gate proclaiming it."

As Rae laughed from across the room, Aldeina pursed her lips and gave a slow nod of agreement. "Crass as it is, Cel has a point. So, yes, Donta. We do have one chance to make this right. It is fitting that you happen to be her messenger, because it seems you are to be our message *to her*," the thief-of-nobility said as she voiced the implied edict to the rest of the council.

Donta's eyes narrowed and he gave the white-haired woman a murderous glare. "*Last warning. Let. Me. Go,*" he demanded.

"Don't think you grasp the situation you're in," Cel retorted. "See, if you hadn't killed Liona, we wouldn't be without a boss. With a boss, we might be talked outta having you hung in the square."

"Yeah," Raes agreed. "Now we've had weeks to fume about it and talk to each other and come to a *group decision* about you."

"Hated every minute of it, too. Just didn't know you were the one to do it," Yuchin added. "Had big plans for the sod that took her, no matter who it was."

Bantia nodded along in agreement. "Truly. It is reason itself, to nominate

someone new. Telpid, who would she have suggested?"

The saa of Medias Manor looked at her in surprise and gave a vigorous shake of his head. "You're getting ready to take his face off and you're asking the only person in this room that doesn't own a district his opinion? What if I choose *wrong*?"

"Choose wisely, would be my suggestion," Aldeina answered earnestly.

"I'm not gonna choose at all!" he shouted. "I *like* my head where it is!"

As he exclaimed his objections, Donta just shook his head and muttered something under his breath.

"What was that, cockmunch?" Cel asked with a smirk. "Couldn't make it out."

"Said *too bad*," he snarled. They all heard a sudden wet ripping sound and the thug holding him steady cried out in pain and doubled over. The mercenary flexed his arms hard and ripped free of the ropes that had kept them behind his back. As he whipped them back around to the front, a pair of spikes jutted from his palms and ripped his captor's stomach out in two different directions.

Hammer tried to free his namesake weapon, but Donta spun around and drove his right-handed spike up and through his cheekbone and into his brain. The thief from Akkador East crumbled against the basement wall and died without another sound. As blood pulsed out of the former enforcer's face, his killer jumped up onto the table as the other Fleetfingers tried to scramble away or bring a challenge to his rampage.

Not that it did any good. Yuchin died next; and Donta made sure that he suffered. The spikes went into and through both sides of the tradesman's neck and ripped his throat clean out. A fountain of blood sprayed on Bantia's white robes. Her blood joined his a scant five heartbeats later when Donta ripped his bony blades free and left a gash from her shoulder to her eye.

As she crumpled, the assassin jumped off of the desk and made sure Yuchin was dead with a single thrust into his heart. Telpid, to his credit, attempted to cut the killer down with a swipe of his sword, but his attack was easily dodged. Donta backhanded him with a blow hard enough to knock the saa to the ground and bloody the side of his face. He would've died then and there, had the lady that spoke too much not screamed in terror.

It was the last sound she made.

Donta perforated her throat first, and then took care to stab both of her lungs. As Aldenia died in her chair, he took a moment to drive the sharp tip of his left-handed spike into the center of her forehead. Rodric was quick to join her when he tried to lunge at the inhuman murderer with a pair of curved daggers.

His knives proved to be no match for Donta's blades. He was dead before his body toppled to the floor and the impact sent Aldenia's dying body the ground with him, which left Celestine and Raes as the only two left standing (and Ronald bleeding on the floor with his sword casually knocked under the desk). "Don't. Even. Try," he whispered with a tone to his voice that echoed in the

basement and made their souls feel like they were having an audience with the damned.

They didn't know it, but they were.

"You can still breathe," he growled. "We need the underground. *You will give it.* Don't give a *damn*. Not about your Guild. Not about your people. Not about this city," he continued as they moved closer to each other and held whatever weapons they managed to pick up as tightly as they could in their hands.

"What... what the pits do you want?" Raes demanded.

Donta wiped a blotch of someone's blood off of his face and flicked it into the saa's general direction. "Want what we want. When we have it? We're gone. Until then? You are *mine*."

"Fisk," Cel muttered under her breath.

"WHAT WAS THAT?"

She huffed and puffed up her boisterous chest and crossed her arms in defiance. "I said '*fisk*,' you bald bastard. Fisk, fisk you, and fisk this," she continued before raising her hands slightly when he took a step closer, "but it ain't like we've got a choice, now do we?"

The assassin smiled coldly at her and the lantern-light in the room made his eyes glow (or at least, that's what she told herself). "You don't."

Cel looked down at the dead councilmen and moved away from a quickly growing pool of blood from Yuchin's still-twitching corpse. "Did you *really* have to kill everyone?"

"You wanted me dead. I did them first," he retorted with a huff.

"Fine, granted, self-defense *here*," she admitted. "But Liona? Did she not want to play with you? You royally fished with the whole damn city when you did that. And Lexcanna? I wasn't her biggest fan by no means but she was *kind*."

Donta shook his head and his spikes slowly retreated back into his hands. "We didn't. That hunter? That was me. The rest? You've got bigger problems," he swore. "They've got fangs."

Outside, a towering man with a hand on his sword and a nasty scowl listened close to the exchange before he crept away quieter than should've been possible. Aside from 'big' and 'tall,' he had few impressive features – except for a scowl. It was the type of scowl that only came from getting bad news when you knew that you had to take it to someone worse. After weeks of traveling from Gonta to suss out the lay of the land, Austilin just *knew* his boss was going to decide to be *worse*.

And he made sure he was long gone before Donta or his surviving victims ever realized he'd even been there.

Ronald's day wasn't over – no matter how much he might've wished otherwise. Or rather, while his day was over, his night was just beginning. He

saw the soldier coming in the torchlight around the manor, though until she got closer, there wasn't much he could tell about her. It didn't help that his left eye was swollen half-shut, or that his face was still throbbing like mad.

He recognized her a moment later, and immediately wished he hadn't. She'd arrived in town just three nights ago and had quickly made her presence known to an unlucky few – himself included. There wasn't any mistaking who she pretended to be, though he knew damn well that there was more to her than just her old rank-and-title in the Grand Army of the Dawn or the dragon tattoo on her cheek.

Her name was Sherril, and while she claimed to be a Specialist-Major from the 5th Ray of Dawn, the truth was that she hadn't been on the Army's roster for a long time. "Oh. It's you," he grunted by way of non-welcome.

She was, however, in the direct employ – if you could call it that – of Ronald's *third* boss, or at least, his blackmailer. "You expected other?" the smokey-ash-haired woman with a dragon tattoo on her cheek slyly responded.

The Sergeant-at-Arms shook his head and gestured back at the manor. "Other's already been."

"Oh has he? Gone already?"

He looked at her with a bland, bored glare. "Don't you know?"

"Perhaps," the battlemage admitted. "Perhaps I thought I'd come see where he spends all his time."

"Spending his time getting me in trouble," the guard retorted as he gestured at the bruising on his face and a scratch down his neck.

"Having a bad day?" she mocked. "A patient take a dislike to you?"

Saa Telpid took a few steps closer and whispered just loud enough for her to hear. "Someone hunting you and yours did. You-know-who has made enemies."

Sherril pursed her lips and wetted them with the tip of her tongue. "By his nature, all are enemies. Who, pray tell, has he angered now?"

"That killing spree he started on a couple months ago? Just caused the Fleetfinger's to turn upside down. Now they've got a new boss, and most of the council is dead because of it. They're gonna hunt for him next, can all but promise it."

"Bodies dropped a month ago causing upheaval now?" The mage rolled her shoulders and made her chainmail tunic clink as she shifted. "Causing chaos in the shadows, hmm? And you think they are after our Meister?"

"I think there were powerful people that wanted the streets to be unwatched by the Garrison. Now there's eyes all over the place. They ain't happy about it," he retorted before adding: "and he ain't my 'Meister' or whatever else you call him."

"To you, he is whatever he says he is," she snapped. "Do not forget that. For us, you are eyes and a gatekeeper."

Telpid glowered at her and decided to leave out the part where Donta had named the killers for what they were. That, he decided, was information that may save him from a noose if it came down to it. "Whatever," he grunted. "I

couldn't care less. Just hurry and get what you want and out of this damn city and get out of my damn life. He already took Liona... Livstra... from me. I don't need him taking anything else. It's not safe for any of us."

"I am not concerned with *safety*," she countered. "I *am* concerned with *names*. Who is it that hunts for us, Sergeant? If we are being stalked, then the favor will be returned."

Ronald grunted and looked away from her. "Who haven't you two pissed off? The Guard, the Guild, the Annex, the Staras? They all want you two dead. The whole damn ruling class is furious over Lexcanna's murder, and whatever happened to Erine has everyone in the alleys ready to riot. *As if they needed the encouragement*," he stressed. "Pits. You've even managed to upset one of the *residents* in this damn place so much that he keeps asking questions. Him, the bastard that messed up my face, and *his* master, some bitch named Anais? They don't have a clue who you two are but they aren't feeling *picky* as long as someone gets blamed and it *stops*."

"That is a list," she agreed after a moment to think about it. "I'm surprised, though. Meister Annix has had free reign over the city near-on half a decade now. Suddenly everyone wants his head?"

"He wasn't dumb enough to assassinate the Fleetfinger's chairwoman back then," the guard argued. "Or one of the Annex's Adepts. I *warned him* that if he just stayed quiet that nobody'd know. He didn't listen. What'd you expect to happen?"

She gave him a wicked, content smile in response. "What happens is whatever Meister wants. He has a plan for this."

Ronald dismissed her with a grunt. "Hope he has a plan to run. You two have stirred a hornet's nest I've never seen in my life."

"He has had a very, very long life. Why would you base your expectations on the scant few years you've had in yours?"

"More than you've had," he retorted. "Be careful of what cart you hitch your horse to."

"May have only had a few years now, but I have centuries to explore the world with his gift. You never know, Ronald, you may yet get to enjoy timelessness as we do," she said with a laugh. While he glared at her, she flicked her fingers and sent a thin arc of lighting up and into the dirt by his feet.

The saa flinched back and stomped at the smoldering ash left behind. "Both of you are fisting mad. Any more of your ilk coming around?"

"Where we go, more of our 'ilk' can always come around, as it were," she said as she opened her mouth wider and showed off a pair of glistening fangs that protruded from her incisors. "Now, perhaps you can tell me the names of those whom have an interest in us? Start with the patient of this hovel."

Ronald Telpid, Sergeant-at-Arms of Medias Manor, former confidant of Liona Reanage and her alter-ego, Livstra Oliana, and current blackmailed-assistant to the Butcher of Basion City, looked back at the manor and sighed. "Well. His name is Akaran, and he's something of a whining asshole. Honestly? I just want

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to punch him in the face.”

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