

Liam lay on the persian rug, it was difficult to breathe. His left arm was broken in several places, his ribs bruised or snapped, probably both, left shoulder and left clavicle in no better condition. It was hard to summon the will to move, harder still to actually do it.

But there was a growing red stain near his foot, one leading up to Aisha. The woman held her stomach, blood trickling between her fingers, eyes open, breathing shallow.

Alive, but barely.

Alive, but not for long.

His gaze traversed to the broken black block of wood on the floor. A box enchanted specifically to catch his attention and to pull Maridah's divine knife like a magnet. This exact Imani-containing box had been left inside a room that had been sealed from the world. The Imani that he had not seen last night. Imani that was now covered head to paw in metal-plated armor, the sort of gear that turned Ilana's enchanted wire mostly harmless.

The Goddess of Secrets had known and prepared. It was like a puzzle that had been waiting for that last piece. Maridah hadn't pulled him out of Doeta the instant she had discovered this plot. That could either mean she had intentionally put his life at risk without telling him, or... seeing the multiple instances where he had found his knife without charge, he had been told and agreed to go along with it.

That meant they had gotten Aisha into this.

"Fuck."

Gritting his teeth, Liam pushed himself to stand up on wobbly legs, certain that he had to get the magic seal open and soon. It was only now he acknowledged the fight that was taking place closer to the door. Ilana's body glittered with the glass-like full-body armor, while Imani pounced and weaved around, covered from head to paw in plated armor.

"Titan-armor," he barked out between coughs as the leonid barrelled against the surprised High Priestess, pushing her further away from Liam and Aisha, and towards the sealed entrance of the room. "Invulnerable to damage and greatly improved strength. Will last up to a minute tops."

The only acknowledgment he got that she had heard him was a redoubling of her attacks.

“Wire is super sharp, but can’t cut metal. She might still have some other enchanted item.” He wouldn’t put it past Thalgrim, but from his point of view, everything the High Priestess had worn when entering this box had already been overkill.

The two opponents were going at the battle ferociously. Imani was decked in armor, proper heavy-class armor, metal plates and leather covering most of the front portion of her body and the flanks of her feline body. On her left hand was a metal shield, on her right a scimitar, her visored helmet masked her face, exposing very little flesh. It was clearly heavy, cumbersome, slowing her down. But they were in a room too small for comfortable combat, there wasn’t that much space for the centauroid to maneuver.

The leonid was weaker in terms of raw strength, but she wielded her weight expertly, shoving Ilana back whenever the High Priestess tried to barrel through. The elf, on the other hand, was desperately looking for a way to disengage and go straight for Liam. Her attacks were wild swings, punches, and kicks that were dodged or parried, never blocked.

Liam dragged his half-broken body towards the nearest shelf. With one arm hanging limply at his side, he reached up and began shoving every piece of parchment and paper down to the floor. It was desperate work, stomping everything and anything containing written words down to the pooling blood.

All the while, his mind was running several tracks at the same time. None of them were useful other than for the adrenaline they supplied. Anger, guilt, fear, hesitation. Every thought concluded on his need to hurry, and so he continued to work.

Ilana’s voice rang out, “Out of my w-”

“SHUT UP!” Liam roared with such ferocity it echoed, anger like a red-hot poker burning inside his chest alongside the pain. It was like a floodgate, leaving him wishing it were him pummeling the High Priestess against the wall rather than Imani.

His focus returned to Aisha; she was staring up at him with half-lidded and unfocused eyes. She was struggling to breathe, the only sign of life other than the slow blinking.

Not much time unless Imani had also been geared with a divine healing item from some Goddess of Healthiness. Liam’s right arm continued to dig into the shelves, pulling out scrolls, books, and parchment, dropping them all to the ground. He kept whatever attention he could spare between Aisha and the fight.

Ilana was growing bolder and better adjusted to her situation. The elfin woman had thrown aside the sword and was using her invulnerability to launch herself at Imani's limbs, fully intending to grapple the leonid. At the same time, her left arm kept swinging around wildly, the wire striking the armor and leaving behind angry scars. Twice she'd very nearly found purchase, tearing at the protection with fingers strong enough to bend metal.

Only Imani's incredible reflexes and limber feline body allowed her to twist out of the elf's grasp at the last second. She'd punish the attack by kicking or slashing at the High Priestess, the scimitar the perfect weapon for the relatively reduced size of the room. The blows were only ever aimed to buy some distance and to stall. It was a countdown to see whether Ilana could land enough damage before her magical spell-armor ran out of juice.

Meanwhile, Liam just grabbed more and more fistfuls of paper, throwing them down to the ground, emptying everything he could reach. "Aisha, listen to my voice," he called out as he worked his way closer, dropping more and more bureaucracy, aiming for the pooling blood. "Don't fall asleep, please don't fall asleep," he was lisping, his right eye had practically swollen shut, his left arm hung entirely useless, legs shaking. "Just listen to my voice, we'll get help. Just gotta--"

Ilana screamed out in rage, hammering away against Imani. The High Priestess finally managed to grab something, sinking her fingers into the buckler and ripped it out of Imani's arm, reaching out to grasp at the plate as her left arm was flinging the wire around blindly, tearing at everything around her.

Imani didn't pull away but doubled down, thrusting herself against her opponent, knocking her off her feet and shoving her against the wall. The mercenary used her scimitar as an impromptu block for the whip. But now that she was pressed against the wall, Ilana used it as leverage, letting out a roar and leaning forward, shoving Ilana back.

But her moment of advantage came too late.

The crystalline armor around her body flickered, signaling it was about to die any second. And in that moment, Imani stopped pushing, abruptly moving backwards as she pulled the High Priestess with her.

The instant the shimmering armor vanished, Ilana's push faltered.

Imani moved with the swiftness of a professional wrestler, locking Imani's head under her left armpit while she brought down the scimitar into the High Priestess' back. The attack was brutal and fast, a singular stroke that pierced into her chest that made the elf

freeze and let out a gurgling gasp. Imani did not hesitate to add five more such wounds before Ilana could even think of fighting against the stranglehold.

With a grunt, the leonid dropped the elf and followed by stabbing her blade into the back of Ilana's head, pinning the corpse to the floor. She didn't even wait to quickly yank away the wire and the blade from the elf, watching intently in case some other magic activated.

None did.

Liam was not about to wait a few more minutes to safely assume Ilana was dead.

"We don't have time. Take Aisha to that corner, the one with the icicles. Move her carefully," he ordered the leonid between his own troubled breaths. "Have her hug one to her stomach wound. Then help me pull everything with text out of these shelves."

The leonid stared at him for a moment, then at Aisha. "She won't make it."

"I KNOW!" Coughing, he grabbed more paper. "Not if we wait for the lock to open naturally."

"A healer mage won't have the time to—"

He whirled around, meeting her gaze, glaring into the holes inside her helmet, jaw clenched tightly, and breathing troubled, pained gasps. It stopped her from finishing the phrase, Imani hesitating.

"Liam," Aisha whispered the name, pale, looking up at him through half-focused eyes.

"Don't go to sleep; we'll make it through this. Just need to get the doors open and everything will be ok," he promised, kneeling down to squeeze her hand. "Just listen to my voice; can you do that for me? Focus on my voice."

"Liam," she repeated. "Did we... win?"

"Yeah, yeah, she's dead. We're safe," he spoke back.

"Please..." Aisha squeezed his hand with bloodied fingers. "Are you a demon?" There was a pained smile as she asked, a small laugh that came out as a wheeze. "Is that why you... glow?"

"Just human, just human," he moved alongside her as Imani followed his instructions, pulling her to the corner with all the remains from the ice attack. "I glow because of another reason. I'll tell you when we get out, ok? Promise?"

“I...” She took a soft breath. “How?”

“How? How do we get out? That one’s easy; it’s the damn coin,” he forced himself to laugh, to ignore the pain and fear, a laugh that turned into a coughing fit. “That damn coin, it’s sympathetic magic, it’s... Aisha, you need to stay awake,” he glanced at Imani as the mercenary kept doing as instructed, pulling paper and parchment to the center of the room, emptying what remained from the shelves. “A second for every hundred words. But if there are no more words...” He grasped a piece of parchment and crumpled it into a ball, using a tiny spark of electricity to ignite it. “Then it can’t stay shut.”

“That’s... my work...” Aisha groaned in complaint, glassy eyes watching as the pile at the center of the room caught fire. “So much... work...”

“All the work in the world; don’t worry, I’ll let you complain about it after,” he forced another laugh, more coughing. Liam was having trouble breathing; it felt like he was running out of air. “Just gotta hold out until all the words get burnt out.”

Imani loomed over them, the leonid working her fingers to remove her armor. “Liam,” she called his name firmly. “Are you sure?”

“We’ll probably choke on the smoke, Aisha and I are the weakest, we’ll...” He squeezed Aisha’s hand, barely getting a reaction, her breathing was growing shallower. “The moment those doors open, call for Maridah, say her name.”

He had to trust the Goddess was waiting for his signal. He wasn’t going to give up; there was no other option he could consider.

“But-”

“There are knights out there, knights that will kill us in a heartbeat the moment they find out the High Priestess is... well, dead,” he gestured at the corpse. “You’re good, but they’re at least a dozen of them, heavily armed. I just...” Closing his eyes, he gave her an apologetic smile. “Trust me, please.”

Imani just stared at him through her visor for a very long moment, then sighed, beginning to take off her armor.

“I want a raise.”

He glanced at her, blinking rapidly. “Yeah, sure, that’s fair.”

Bunny's fists hammered against unmoving doors, each blow a cannon-shot that echoed across the estate. The scent of blood was thick, armored mortal corpses lay strewn on the ground, mangled beyond recognition. The temple knights hadn't even realized what had hit them; by the time any of them had managed to string together the coherent thought that alarms had to be raised, most of them were missing vital organs.

Inside the center of the garden, behind Bunny, was a chair, a simple wooden stool, and a female dwarf sat upon it, her skin as dark as midnight, her body made of the void.

It was she who would flick a single meaty digit towards any new mortals that stumbled onto the scene, the witness instantly slumping into unconsciousness, their body dragged to the side where it would not be in anyone's way. It was by her magic that Bunny's attacks on the Amil's door were not heard throughout the city. And it was by her will that a draxani servant nervously knelt next to the Goddess, head bowed, yet eyes focused on that very same door.

"Call Wolf!" Bunny snarled, not stopping for a moment as she continued to punch and kick.

"I am already here. There is no need for her to come," Maridah replied evenly, not bothering to care for the currently-present mortal hearing their exchange. As an avatar, there was much she could get away with, erasing a few hours of memories wouldn't even register as an effort. "We can only wait until that room opens."

"Fuck!" Bunny punched again, ignoring the aloofness of her Origin, or how she could sense the relic that had been snatched out of the temple. Or how Origin's focus was on slowly wearing the relic down to be able to properly absorb it. "Liam could be hurt. He could be dying."

"We knew the risks; he was the one that proposed this," Maridah's meaty fingers twirled the pearl-sized mana-singularity, looking at it with mixed feelings.

"We put him at risk."

"I think you don't appreciate how much of a madman he is for conceiving the very thought that I, in my current state, would be able to rob everything from a temple of a Pantheon deity. Relic and all," she twirled the stone between her fingers. "A part of me shudders at the thought that it actually succeeded. This relic has enough power in it that the Weaver could've unmade this avatar without any effort."

“Yeah, good for you, you got to recoup your losses and then some,” Bunny snarled, punching harder. “You got everything you wanted, everything you could’ve dreamed of. You even got to see us running around like puppets on a string.” Another punch, heat and cold and lightning exploding out of the impact. “Now even if he dies, it was worth the investment, right? One tiny little mortal life, just another number to scratch off.”

She wasn’t being helpful. Snark wasn’t helping anyone, much less Origin. Bunny loathed the tone, the way every word tasted like ash. She wasn’t being helpful; she should just shut up, do as she was told.

Bunny punched harder, ignoring how she could feel Origin’s gaze squarely on the back of her head as if carrying its own physical force, needling her. Would the Goddess absorb her? Just unmake her and recreate her into something more convenient, less troublesome?

The thoughts weren’t dwelt on; there was a shimmering of mana, and the barrier surrounding the room released. Bunny didn’t wait an instant, pulling the doors off their hinges and plunging into a room with too much smoke and too little oxygen. Despite the lack of a mortal nature of her physiology, her heart clenched almost painfully at the sight of three bodies.

“AISHA!” The draxani mortal screamed out, trying to rush into the room, but being plucked off of the floor by Maridah’s telekinetic grasp.

No room for questions or hesitation, Bunny summoned sheets of force to lift them and drag them out of the room. She hadn’t even crossed the courtyard before the Goddess had taken over, her form shifting to that of a dryad, tall and elegant, with vines of darkness reaching out and caressing the three mortal bodies. The servant hastily knelt next to his owner, fussing over the body, even if he acknowledged there was nothing he could do.

It was then that the Goddess turned to Bunny, reaching out telepathically. *"Liam will live, as will the mercenary. That much I owe them,"* she declared, then gestured down at the third, at Aisha. *"She, I can save as well."*

Bunny hesitated. *"But... you won't?"*

"You've worked very hard these past few days, Bunny, and I've been listening. I don't see why I couldn't do this for you. Her heart stopped before she left the room; her soul lingers, but it won't for much longer." Maridah’s thought rang out with a neutral tone, ignoring the Amil’s servant that knelt next to the injured human. *"You can even erase the memory of this exchange; the knife is right there."*

The aspect scowled at the mortal woman, then at Liam.

"Just... just save her." She let out a long, suffering sigh. *"I wouldn't be a good friend if I let the dumb mortal die."*

"Certainly not a **best** friend." Maridah teased. With a wave of her hand, Aisha's heart began to beat again, drawing breath.

Bunny bit her lip, staring down at the mortal woman and at the draxani that was singing praises to the very Gods that would've seen them dead. She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. *"Am I... was this helpful, Origin?"*

"I can take advantage of it, certainly, but there is no sense in measuring its usefulness when I'm the one making the offer as a gift," she chuckled amicably.

The aspect didn't answer, her gaze lingering on the three mortals, their bodies seeped in darkness as the Goddess carefully and discreetly worked on healing them. The avatar could've easily just snapped her fingers and put them back into perfect health, but to do so would leave glaring traces that would linger for days.

Bunny glanced at the knights and grimaced. "Did I overdo it?"

"You do need to learn how to hold back, but it's nothing that can't be managed," Maridah shrugged, sparing a small gesture towards the carnage, flesh, blood, and bones sizzling and boiling, leaving nothing organic behind. Another gesture, and the mundane gear and clothes repaired and neatly stacked. A third, and the enchanted items vanished into thin air. "Ah, I do think this reward is one you will enjoy."

Maridah snapped her fingers, reaching out towards Bunny, pulling the aspect closer. In a flash, the human-like disguise was gone, the aspect now forcefully turned to her base form. The Goddess took the tiny Bunny, lifting her up and pressing her forehead against the fuzzy creature.

The world exploded into light, and Bunny felt herself being absorbed, unmade, partitioned, broken down to the tiniest component until consciousness became meaningless. She felt the Goddess' gaze to stare onto every fiber of her being, every thought, and every emotion she'd ever had. The scrutiny was like a toothbrush against her fur, the attention like a warm summer day. For an eternity that lasted only a second, she drifted, feeling as the same hand that had unmade her built her back up, until she could think again.

"You looked at the secrets Liam gave me!" It was the very first thing that came to her mind, a concern that the Goddess had been **too** thorough in her work.

"I was tempted, but that would be cheating," the deity laughed, poking her nose.

It was only as she leaned away that she noticed something had changed. The avatar had returned to her own base form, a wolf. Except there was now a newer addition, a set of stag horns, and more importantly, a set of fuzzy rabbit ears.

"Uh, what is that?" Bunny asked, unable to hide a growing, bubbling excitement.

"You proved invaluable for this mission," Maridah spoke, lowering her head to show off the new fuzzy appendages. "If anything, it's been proof that I need to shift in the strategic paradigm. As such, I've taken aspects of you and integrated them... with priority. It is time to forego some of the survivalism and use a bit more social tact moving forward."

The aspect was vibrating, practically hopping up and down. "Permission to cheer?"

Maridah rolled her eyes. "Go jump into the lake."

Bunny wasn't listening; she was rushing, blasting through the city at a blitzening speed. A tiny ball of black fluff and shadows stirred whirlwinds in her wake as she plunged into the lake like a cannonball, letting out an ear-splitting scream that killed all fish within a few hundred meters and stunned those further out. Everything that could move did so, rushing away as the aspect just kept laughing, screaming, and surging with every satisfying ounce of power she could let out.

It was only after an hour that she realized something was off.

"Wait, my sex memories!" She screeched out at Origin through their link. *"You... you did something."*

"First, they are my memories, not yours," the Goddess answered calmly.

Bunny grimaced. *"What did you do? They feel... different."*

"They don't feel like they're yours because they never were," Origin shrugged. *"I would've thought you'd be thrilled at the prospect of having permission to make some of your own."*

"Wait... you can't mean...?" Her eyes widened.

"Seeing how capable you were, I will be loosening your restrictions further," Maridah declared with an overly magnanimous voice. *"You are free to interact with mortals outside of mission parameters. Just don't cause a ruckus."* A very familiar grumbling came alongside the words, one Bunny was a little happy to recognize as her own. *"The*

followers of the Weaver will cause a stir when they start packing up, and we can't risk being noticed just yet."

"I... uh, thank you?"

Floating deep underwater, staring up at the sun that lingered on the surface, Bunny felt a sudden and unexpected sense of apprehension. This... was what she'd dreamed of her whole life. Years of raging, sneaking, plotting, and failing. And now Maridah had given it to her.

"You don't like it?" The Goddess asked with a slight tone of confusion.

"No, yes, I... I like it, this is..." Bunny gaped, trying to put her thoughts in order. She could now do all the things she'd been forbidden from doing. All the possibilities, all the tastes, all the experiences, all the things she'd been wishing for... *"It's everything I ever wanted."*

It was everything she'd ever wanted...

Right?