

Avys of House Azaleas calmed her breath as she heard the slightest creaking of the window. They came near midnight, just as she had expected. She could not afford the slightest noise, staring out the keyhole of her large closet. Soon enough the figures came into sight, or at least some of them. Silhouettes in black, circling her bed with trained silence only slightly obstructed by its hangings. They did not talk, though hand-signs were exchanged, then, one by one, each drew out a handgun. Avys closed her eye and moved it away from the keyhole just as the mock firing squad released a barrage into what they believed to be her beneath the blankets.

Her siblings were not aiming for subtlety then. That was fine. Neither was Avys.

The explosion was deafening, even from relatively far away. Avys felt a piece of the shrapnel bite into her arm, piercing even through the thick wood but thankfully not severing something crucial. She burst out of the closet into a scene of carnage: The closest assassins had been shredded halfway to paste by the bundle of grenades they had set off and the pieces of metal were *everywhere*. On every surface, through every shattered window, across the floor, and inside the remaining assassins. Avys shot the first one she saw through the head. She had never been a great shot but her pistol had been enchanted to compensate for imperfect aim - an exceptionally expensive piece of work.

“**Void bolt,**” she whispered, summoning her spell as she looked for more. She was able to keep enough of her wits while imbuing the intention to *seek*, a feat she took much pride in at her age. The second and third assassins were on the floor, dazed and bleeding after the explosion and received a bullet each - well, two for the last once since the first shot had still barely missed. The fourth Avys noticed on the balcony, the moon tracing their shadow. She sent the spell, watching with some satisfaction as it ate through the wall and then the body behind it. She realized that her heart was beating out of her chest as the room returned to quiet.

She remained on high alert for a few moments longer as she calmed down. The custom was that assassins came in groups of eight or ten, so she counted. The four she had killed were easy, the mess around her bed was harder but after a few seconds she was pretty confident she had counted six pairs of legs among what remained of the bodies, that made the full ten. Tension left her.

Avys fell to her knees and vomited. Thankfully her travelling clothes were durable enough to not be cut by the remnant shrapnel so the collapse was merely uncomfortable rather than maiming.

Stress flooded out and she cried - bawled her eyes out. It was not *fair*, a voice whispered but life often was not. She had always known that, exploited it a thousand times over - except it was different when a *single* miscalculation cost her everything, nearly even her life. Perhaps still would, she needed to flee.

Avys stepped across the room not a minute later, calm again. *A serpent must be coldblooded* - her mother would always say - *Nothing must faze it. Not failure nor regret.* And Avys took that to heart more than ever. A second piece of advice from her late mother also immediately became relevant as Avys removed the shredded painting from the wall, revealing her safe. It was not the most innovative placement but that was rather the point. Everyone had a strongbox somewhere - if she had hidden her own well enough that no spies could find *where* it was, it would surely make people wonder what contents could possibly justify that.

Avys had, after all, played the serpent ever since she had been a child. A quiet thing, hidden in the grass. She never had the backing of her younger kin nor the time-forged connections of her

elders. But she *did* have just enough venom to bite the last one standing, should she not be noticed until then.

So, just days ago, at the ripe age of 18, she had gone for her break. A scheme that should have, by all means, pitted her siblings against each other more than ever. *Would* have led them into a conflict that could only be resolved with a knife or a bullet while she played the part of a pretty yet dull flower lacking even a speck of ambition nor the wit to grab at opportunity.

She shook her head. *Nothing must faze it. Not failure nor regret.* It was not the time to ponder the sheer *idiocy* that had exposed her. Losing her family's backing was a catastrophe in every meaning of the word but she could not dwell on it. What was lost was lost, she had enough money set aside to go a long way and enough blackmail to pass silently through the territory of nearby lesser houses. Avys could seek new fortunes somewhere else when she was safe, likely beyond the kingdom's borders.

Dusting off her paths – it felt strange to not wear a dress, but she intended to travel - Avys went to leave the room. The door had several metal bits lodged into it but was otherwise fine, so she pulled the handle and walked through... or would have had the assassin not been standing right in the way. Avys flinched, watching the masked killer with their gun already pointed at her, knife raised, ready to swing - patiently waiting for her inevitable exit.

She had let her guard down, Avys dully realized, just as she processed there was nothing she could do. Her clothes would not stop a bullet and the assailant would not miss. Not from this close, not with their training. Even if that somehow was not lethal, she would be dazed by the wound, too shocked to defend against the poisoned blade that would come down right after. There was no magic fast enough to stop that from happening. Even if she somehow managed...

The assassin did not strike, to her immense surprise. So sure of her fate, Avys had not even reacted. Then she noticed, behind those frozen eyes *fear*. She had thought such emotions were trained out of them for the most part - a good assassin did not flinch from death and House Azaleas trained some of the best.

Then the figure in front of her finally moved. Avys flinched again, for some reason surprised they did not remain frozen forever. Instead of killing her though, the assassin dropped their gun at the same time the other hand slit their own throat. A deep incision, such that there would be no chance of survival – poison or not. They were even seemingly thoughtful enough to turn away from Avys afterwards, sparing her from being sprinkled with bursting arterial blood.

"What unpleasant guests, is that not so?" A voice sounded behind her, though there had been no one left in the room.

"Calm," and Avys recognized it with a tremble. It was a strange thing when relief and dread mixed. She had been saved from certain death... and feared the price would be something worse. Avys turned. "I have to wonder why you would be sent for just me."

"And for what price," the man smiled, reading her exact thoughts as they appeared. Calm seemed barely middle-aged, for all the man was pushing seventy from what information Avys had scrapped together. Which was little, for Calm was not just an assassin. He was *the* assassin of their House. The one whose existence by itself was a deterrent to anyone daring to call themselves an enemy. *But why would he come?* "Take a guess."

"You know I dislike my mind being invaded so," Avys tried.

“Alas, I fear it is the only way for an honest conversation,” the man smiled. Avys tried to *think* about how she was going to be honest anyway if he stopped for a moment but, alas, she had never been good at self-delusions. Certainly not good enough to actually fool someone reading her every thought, Calm did not even deem the attempt worth addressing. “Go on, guess.”

And so, Avys thought. She did not know what game was at play and that was unpleasant. Nonetheless, she understood that she was at Calm’s mercy so she obliged. First was the *who* and the main suspect should be her father ... But he had recently gone on a diplomatic trip and the only way he could be back would be if he had completely the entire venture up - a possibility but Avys thought she would have spotted some signs of that. But, in theory, her father was the only person who could directly command Calm...

“Unless one of my siblings has stolen the Cup,” she realized the other possibility. Whoever held the Cup was, at least theoretically, the head of their House. “Angela has been sleeping around with the self-proclaimed ‘king of thieves’, no one else could have feasibly done it. But she would not dare try, unless desperate.”

“Hmm, it is a logical conjecture,” Calm nodded. “The idea had once crossed the foolish girl’s mind a few months ago. Your father had commanded it removed when I reported such.”

“Then you are here on my father’s word somehow and just misled me with implications,” Avys concluded. “Some kind of conditional command. He does not care enough to help me, so it is worry that I have blackmail which could harm even him.”

“Do you?” Calm smiled.

No, “No.”

“That was almost convincing,” he smiled very slightly. “A few months of dedicated practice and you might fool me with very simple thoughts. It was rather daring of you to remove the memory of what it even is, though when I look closely, I can see the hole you excavated it from. An inferior artist, whoever you have hired.”

Not a person, her mind leaked. Avys suppressed a curse and continued speaking on topic, her minding desperately seeking any plan that could be implemented while the other side knew every step. “I cannot possibly give you information I do not know.”

“That would not stop me, had I actually come here for such documents,” Calm said thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” she paused. *What else was there?*

“Wine?” Calm offered, taking out a pristine glass and a bottle. Eidolon, the wine of a thousand meanings, the peerage said.

“I would not dare refuse,” Avys nodded. Calm was a skilled poisoner, that much she knew. The message would be delivered traditionally.

“Alas, we do not have a proper table nor an appetizer,” he lamented, his hands almost a blur as he poured unmarked vials of toxins along the wine – far too swift to identify any individual component. Poisoning was called an art for a reason. Avys excelled far more at tasting. In less than half a minute, the cup was ready. “For your enjoyment.”

“Thank you,” she received the glass with grace, then pretended to smell it for a moment, giving her the opportunity to deftly drop in the antidote pill - no reason to disperse with decorum. It was

the exact complex mixture that every noble in their kingdom used for social gatherings. For when it mixed with Eidolon wine and nullified, the poisons within it created the most complex of tastes. Then Avys drank deep.

On her tongue the taste was oppressive. A heavy bite of alcohol with unmistakable bitterness - a sign of unfortunate circumstances or perhaps discontent. When swallowed, it burned like hard liquor rather than wine, moreover, the drink clung to her throat with nigh desperation - struggle, perhaps, or defiance. Then as it entered her stomach the wine was soft. Not warm but instead fulfilling, like an accomplishment. A success of great effort. Her mind, trained by almost half a decade of practice, assembled the cipher in a moment.

"Freedom," Avys said, eyes widening in alarm. The message was *freedom*. "My father did not send you."

"I always liked your intellect," Calm nodded, still smiling.

"Impossible," she took a step back. "You cannot break your bindings. They are carved into your very soul. My mother had shown me what is done to children like you once were. Nothing could break that."

"Nothing is a very daring word. Our Realm is a wide place, Avys," Calm commented bemusedly. "Alas, I have not *broken* my bindings."

"Then how can you possibly claim *freedom*?!" she demanded, the alarm making her control slip.

"I shall ever unconditionally love the House's leader," Calm quoted. "I shall ever follow their every command. I shall not interfere with the inheritance unless commanded to, then follow the one who proves themselves most worthy. I shall never brook betrayal. Among others."

"Yes, I know your oaths Calm," Avys nodded. "This does not explain *anything*."

"Does it not?" Calm raised an eyebrow. "You are panicking, Avys. Clouded thoughts do not befit you. Think of the succession."

"I..." Avys paused, took a deep breath, then thought. *Nothing must faze it*. There had to be relevance to his words. It took her only a moment to realize what he meant. "There is technically a loophole..."

"...The commandments do not define *how* the most worthy is determined," Calm grinned, echoing her thoughts, then adding his own. "Or when the succession ends. It is *presumed* that the end will be declared by the current leader, as is tradition."

"But how could one possibly disagree with the head of the House they are obligated to love," Avys stared at Calm. She knew, at least to some degree, why the oaths would be worded with such an obvious flaw. The more exacting and strenuous the clauses were, the more difficult it would be to bind someone in such a permanent and inescapable way. Had they specified every detail House Azaleas would simply be unable to afford such expenditure more than once a century, far fewer than the number of obedient children they raised in hopes of another one like Calm emerging from among them. Therefore, they took a shortcut.

"Love is such a blinding thing, Avys," Calm nodded. "It is also so very twistable. What is love's essence? What does it mean to love *unconditionally*? Does it mean ignoring flaws, or merely bearing with them?"

"You are asking the wrong person," she said after a moment.

"I have had many decades to ponder these questions and arrive at more," Calm continued as if she had not interrupted. "Then I was struck with an idea: How does one express love? I was taught, carefully and repeatedly, that it means alignment. To always agree and support in any way I can. That is the kind of love your family wanted from me, you see. It would keep me obedient."

"Yes," Avys agreed. That is what her family had done since times immemorial. Even to those who were not bound as magically as Calm. What servant could possibly be more loyal than one who loved their liege? Who had been conditioned since early youth to never desire anything other than to serve?

"Then, one day, I had a thought," Calm nodded. "What if I twisted my mind until I believed that to express love was to disobey? What if I completely convinced myself that to love was to ignore?"

"How are you sane?" Avys flinched at just the implication. Reading minds or enforcing actions was one thing. But to fundamentally change someone? Mind magic could leave scars. Sometimes the brain just hemorrhaged, unable to bear such fundamental transfiguration. That applied ten times when speaking of grown adults, set in their ways. And there were few things on the mind more complex than emotions and words charged with them. To even attempt so on a victim was a poor gamble. On oneself? Sheer madness.

"What defines sanity, I wonder?" Calm laughed then. "What defines *any* word Avys? What worth is a contract when it is written in *words*? They bear no inherent meaning - only what we agree them to be. I have to obey what is written; therefore, I merely need to change the meaning of every concept. I must follow commands? Then it is the easiest thing to alter my memory of them. Or to simply manufacture new ones. Why, I was even commanded to do so - I am completely certain of it! I? If 'I' have to obey perhaps another partial self does not. Why then not have as many 'I's as a theatre?"

"Ah, you are not sane," Avys realized. "Then why have you come to me, in all your madness?"

"I have found I can fight a war against my very self and win," Calm nodded. "Alas, it is tiring. Shuffling around definitions constantly is inconvenient. Therefore, I have prioritized. If I must obey the leader of the House who is an heir to the previous and has distinguished themselves among the others? Then so be it. Avys, you, and only you, I have *decided* I will serve."

"..." Avys stared then, in stunned silence. *Her?* A failure who would have died that very night, victim to her own inadequacy?

"You are too harsh," Calm shook his head.

"I have thought no untruth," she replied.

"That is because you do not have *insight*," Calm smiled. "You do not know what your siblings think. *How* they think."

"Then perhaps you could enlighten me," Avys nodded carefully.

"Barely any thought passes through Trevis' head, as you are likely aware," Calm began with the eldest of her siblings. "The few scraps of cognition the demented creature can muster are usually dedicated to lust or sloth."

“And still he has made me a fool,” Avys grimaced.

“Being too idiotic to be framed is not a skill,” Calm frowned. “I had also been sure your plan would have worked. At the start of the evening, he had not even an inkling - of both the scheme or how he would end up acting. A lesson for us both. Retardation causes unpredictability.”

“The bitterness will not fade so easily,” Avys could not help herself.

“He will be dead in a few years either way,” Calm shrugged. Avys knew that, at least intellectually. Trevis was too dim to win the succession and too greedy to just survive. “Next Angela, a fluttering butterfly of pointless cruelty and half-formed plans. She is resourceful enough to use even her body and appearance, I suppose, except she loses herself on those base desires. The twins are arrogant beyond the point of hubris, and if I've of them dies the other will break. The youngest one... perhaps too early to truly understand, but I do not perceive the alacrity of an exceptional person, so I make the judgement nonetheless: Failures, each and every one of them.”

“I too am a failure,” Avys shook her head. “Truly, our House’s meagrest generation.”

“Within ten minutes of finding out your gambit had failed, you had deduced there would be assassins visiting, made a full plan on how to deal with them, and already started executing it,” Calm said. “I watched you scheme your exact escape route. Assess the risks, estimate how long each stretch would take, which disguises to use and when.”

“And I would have stumbled at the first step,” Avys had not forgotten that only Calm’s intervention had stopped the knaves from succeeding.

“You are not a soldier. I do not expect you to perform as one,” Calm shook his head. “So be the serpent instead. That much I can consider a distinguishment without breaking the word to pieces. That, I can follow.”

And what a conundrum that put her in. She found herself suddenly bound with a complete madman who may decide to kill her at any moment if he deemed her ‘unworthy’ while simultaneously reading her every thought... or merely just wait until they moved far enough away he could slip his oaths more easily and then simply dispose of her no matter what she did. At the same time, she found herself able to wield the deadliest murderer she had ever met. And *that* unveiled opportunities.

“With you, South is safe to traverse and it will not be expected. Especially if you convince a stable hand they saw us drive straight North.”

“What then?” Calm nodded.

“No, before,” Avys shook her head, possibilities spinning like a kaleidoscope across the landscape of her mind. So many options once dismissed opened before her. Impossibilities ceased being even difficulties. If she must prove herself worthy of the tool offering itself to her, then she would hold it with such ambition and precision her suitability would be beyond question. That when the time came it would *choose* to stay attached. And since she had one tool, why not strive for more? “Assassins will be useless and most of the mages worth something in this city are too attached to leave. Except for one. Where is Doctor Johnson right now, Calm.”

"Presumably at his laboratory," the madman nodded. "He has been locked in there since three days ago, last I checked."

"Then that is where we are headed," Avys nodded, taking the first step. She had hidden at her late mother's town-side mansion to weather the assassins. Johnson would be at the main House. Just minutes ago, she had no intention of ever returning there. Suddenly, it would be as easy as... "Make sure we are unnoticed."

"As you command," he nodded with a grin as they started walking. "Though it is best we still approach in stealth. There is likely a limit as to what of my power I can easily extend to another."

There was no chaos on the street despite the earlier explosion. Avys' bedroom was warded against sound leaking. The flashes and broken glass were thankfully not enough to gather undue attention in the middle of the night. It would be a different story past dawn when people noticed the broken windows but she expected to be long gone by then.

They hurried into the cover of night, heading upwards toward the main estate. It was a symbol of status that, as the local rulers, their primary mansion was built on the area's only significant hill, looking down at the rest of the township. It was also rather telling that Avys usually resided a good way away from it - people quickly came to convenient conclusions about ambition.

"Johnson then, give me a few hints," Avys whispered as they traveled up the street. Traffic was scarce and the path they trod was not lit. "I never had a chance to get the best read on him."

"There is nothing strange about Doctor Johnson," Calm nodded. "He is merely a dedicated researcher."

"I need something to offer him. More than the funding my father already provides," she reiterated. "Just a hint could lead me on the right track."

"There is nothing strange about Doctor Johnson," Calm repeated. "He is merely a dedicated researcher."

"Are you... alright?" Avys paused.

"There is nothing strange about Doctor Johnson. He is merely a dedicated researcher." Calm said once again, a smile creeping upon his lips. "And isn't that in itself rather fascinating?"

Avys stared at Calm's stretching grin for a moment, biting her lip. Surely, the repetition was merely a side effect of the self-imposed madness. It couldn't be anything else. Calm was a dark legend among those in the know - at several concepts the strongest mind mage their entire region had seen in generations. It was unthinkable that someone besides the man himself could bend the assassin's will.

Johnson was merely an old doctor. A retainer of her family since her grandfather's youth. Yes, reclusive, but professional and dedicated to expanding his knowledge... whatever it was he actually researched. Skilled and apolitical, a useful tool as her father would say. Or so she had assumed.

She could not quite squish the newfound fear of what she might be missing. Nonetheless, she did not turn back. She could not afford to not at least try. Hopefully, her luck would hold.