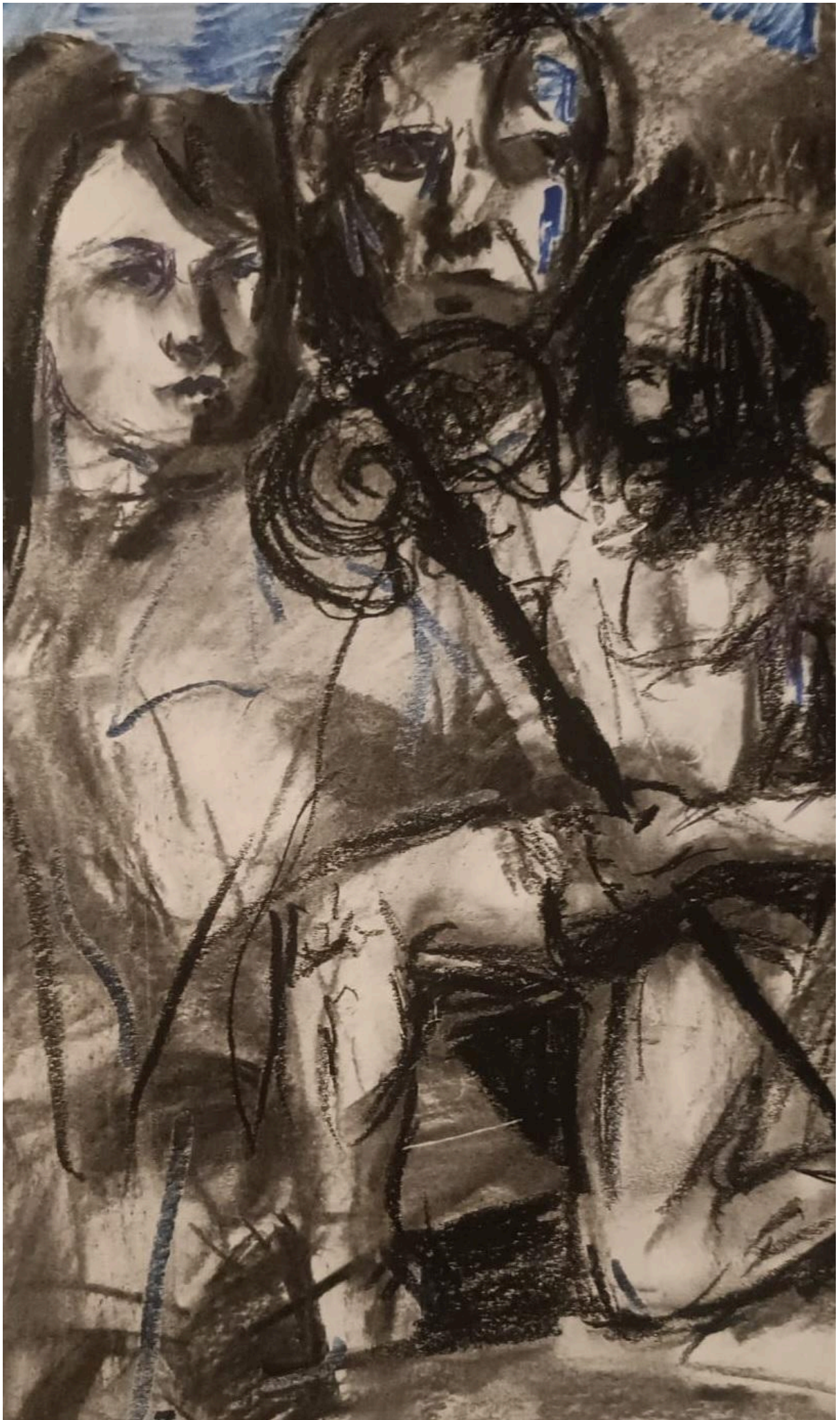


Witch of Anvil



Story of Things Less and More True, Optimism, Adventure, the Road and Strange Things.
With thanks to many whom I would spend eternity thanking.
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Vlljami Heinonen for cover art.

It is fall upon the plains of Farhome, newly colonised by the human population on the largest continent upon this ball of light orbiting another.

It is called Anvil.

It exists by the mercy of the Triumvirate who saw it fit to be as it is.

It is the year 456 after the first invasion of demonic forces, nearly 200 years after the Second Hero has fallen.

From half destroyed realities they breached into Anvil, bringing death and devastation and legions of eight metre tall infantry to make all submit.

Inhuman, merciless and fueled by pain, directed by will with a lust for conquest.

Constructed soul and saboteur, a lynchpin of the invasion inured to the workings of the Divine, the Demon King.

Twice he has fallen and had his breach aborted, twice he has remained among the living, locked outside the realm of Anvil, once by treaty gained on the battlefield, once more by force of arms in personal combat.

But the Demons will come again.

600 years since the beginning of written history being committed to libraries of the Empire.

Men, and the various races upon Anvil are ruled by a fair Monarchs of the bloodline of the first Hero, by mercy of Writ Divine from the hand of the Goddess of Light;

"Provide men and women with arms."

Other tribes and species exist, northmen, elven isolationists, some just are free men on the road.

And beyond the continent of the Empire, more remains unknown than found.

Anvil is at war, with itself and with forces outside of it.

To be upon Anvil is to risk life and limb to monsters roaming its vast forests and wilds.

Men exist upon anvil in many forms.

Elven hands wrote themselves out of matters of mortals long before the threat of demons existed, seeking perfection inward some 800 years before. Now only borders of elven civilization exist as a reminder of the realm, Timeless Forest and the Coast Invisible.

Tales tell of elven infantry and battlemages in the first war but no diplomats have emerged from their lands in an age.

They have passed into myth, save for a few seeking lands elsewhere due to circumstance or another.

The Dwarven capital fell during the first invasion, they now practise revenge and hone the art of weapon making beneath mountains. If a demon is to come, it will be met by dwarven metal. Exiles and apprentices from dwarven holds offer fair smithwork for a fair price to various authorities of the world, and occasionally carry wares of artefacts and magical tools from deep holds where no other mortal than a dwarf may enter by tradition.

And it will most likely be carried by human hand as multitudes of human tribes inhabit Anvil and far outpopulate the other races of Men on Anvil.

Far be it from Men to deny their birthright to humans, the Hero was human, and he led by example. The Man, the Hero, may be long dead, but his inspiration lives on in the men and women in the drill grounds, example set and with divine backing, to be levied is honourable trade to ply and few avoid it when called.

She knows these details from books, sermons and from the dinner table.

Her name is Iza of Featherhome.

Of elven descent, possessing many a question and of eight years of age.

She stands on a meadow and focuses. Occasionally falling leaves beat against the plain cotton tunic two sizes too large in the warm winds.

Mana, the raw unformed magic swirls in the Wilds easier and there is something more to the atmosphere here.

Elves were made for the hardships plaguing Anvil, they see farther, hear better and live more in harmony with nature than other races.

She can see a butterfly in a meadow two hundred yards away and tell you its species. She smells a deer in the forest before seeing it and can track a rabbit by hearing alone.

This small family of Featherhome lives away from the village proper, tending fields and a young daughter.

Her father is a dour but deeply loving man who makes his living farming fields of herbs and some occasional hunting. For he is so blessed. Her mother works as a hedge mage, occasionally divining and identifying the rare magical item that finds its way here, so far from civilization.

They make fair coin and are by no means poor, and few luxury items here and there in the house tell of long life lived in such a way.

Mostly she sees the chores of the house, a few farm animals we have and young Iza.

She rarely talks about her past, if ever.

They are exiles of the Elven Realms, a rare few that have left the utopia to seek their happiness elsewhere.

And that they have found here, in their own way, there is much joy in house Featherhome.

On the meadow Iza focuses on the light, power she feels from simple cantrips, mana can be bent, by imagination and fortitude of will pressed to serve.

She holds one component of a spell in her mind and attempts to hold it steady.

Know.

Rune on paper, vocal component.

Concept of the word.

She twists the idea in her mind to find a way to make that word become real.

And just like that she stumbles on it, her first spell, *identify magic*, cast not from mantra but her own mana and brief realisation hits before a young child runs to the edge of her non-trained reserves of mana and loses her senses.

Iza of Featherhome learns a lot in that brief moment between the light of magic igniting and an elf falling to grass like a ragdoll, it will take time for her magic to mature and be understood.

And the turbine whirrs to life, a spark ignites.

Divine poured haste to the cup to speed the journey.

Accident sees the same journey with a dozen eyes.

Third hidden thing sees the end, the path, the start and the choices along it and chooses insensate rage, hungry for victory, igniting ambition.

That autumn wasn't any stranger than the ones before it, if family Featherhome had noticed something strange about their child, they never mentioned it, most likely assuming any changes were a normal part of growing up.

She is a mage and children play with things.

In a year her mother has taught her the basic spells and she hungers for more.

The young prodigy of Featherhome had an awful lot of questions, and an insatiable hunger for knowledge for even the smallest of details.

It took quite some time convincing her parents to allow the young girl to visit the village but it didn't take long before the villagers had to get used to the insistent questions and antics of a young elf.

But she is reserved in a way that makes other children wary of her and she in turn seeks the company of makers, artisans, elders and merchants.

Polite as she is, and attentive, none turn the curious child away.

Her first meeting with the Divinities of this world was when a Priestess of the Moon, who had come to pay homage to Farhomes, had blessed the elven child and surety had set in.

Moon came from the sky, touched her head and gently patted.

The world bent and the weight of divinity was with young Iza in that moment.

Scared and startled, young Iza glanced at her feet.

Whispers from Godhead spoke a language unknown and incomprehensible, laid a blessing on her, elevating her soul and a gentle hug warmed her in that moment separated from time.

Gods weren't matters of faith on Anvil, they were forces of nature with agency.

Moon kneels to her and lifts up the chin of the young elven girl up gently.

"And if you have any secrets.. I.. I like secrets. Um, don't tell anyone okay?"

Words aren't said, messages conveyed by manner unknowable.

For divinity, she is awkward in her manner. Some youthful essence radiates from her concealing badly the eminently present-knowing steady stare in her gaze, yet held true to the blue eyed wonder of a young child as an ideal. Blushing cheek and wary look. A child, hoping for a friend. Iza feels familiarity with that.

She could no more hide her manners and what she was, no more than the moon could stop being the moon.

Her eyes reflected the entire world, and she felt the insignificance of herself compared to such, realising that she hadn't come here from no place, she had merely turned to face her, and had *paid attention* to this one place in time.

Hers was the right to all knowledge, hidden or otherwise.

Her silky smooth black hair hid half of her face, within it danced magic, mind bendingly radiating colours within the black and obscuring the shape of a black dress, equally swirling with the raw potential of magic.

Moon looks at her and sees something that widens the smile and awkward wave sends time back moving again.

The Priestess looks at her knowingly and winks, smiling at the girl.
Darkness Eminent, Knowledge Untold, Secretkeeper and Moon Capricious.
Source of all Magic.
The Seat of the Moon of the Triumvirate, Lunar, The Goddess of The Moon.
Every full moon since, she never misses her prayer and remembers to tell the Goddess of the Moon a secret to go along with it.
And so with childlike curiosity and innocence, under all knowing stare, a new tool is gifted to an ambitious mind to wield.

Master Dharri wasn't used to children alone, his usual clientele didn't really bother with even finer points of discussion.
Sharpness, endurance, paid in gold.
Master Dharri was a smith, and a dwarf, but that was a given, there were smiths, and then there were dwarves. Only the latter produced masterworks for adventurers and ne'er do wells on Anvil, and for its kings and counts.
And only the Dwarven Kingdoms made enchanted weapons beneath the earth in their halls no outsider had access to.
Smith could make a sword, but a weapon of dwarven make would be thrice as light and keeps the edge fantastically.
He plied an artistry of blades, hammers, axes and armour upon the world.
From one anvil to another and whence he came, none in living memory knew.
A bright set of purple eyes with an intense look about them attached to porcelain skin and a full head of black fuzzy hair peeking over the counter confused the master dwarf greatly.
He wasn't used to looking down on others, even from his raised standing platform behind the counter.
In the middle of his counting of petty cash for small sales, was when he first became aware of the stare.
There was an awkward moment of pause as master dwarf was surprised by a child in his store, admittedly full of sharp objects and never having met such an entity there.
"WHAT!"
He blurted out, equally out of confusion as from surprise.
"Make me an apprentice."
Master Dharri blinked twice before he managed to formulate an answer in his head.
"I am a dwarf young lady, what we do isn't taught, I am blessed so."
Young elf nodded in understanding.
"I know, you can't teach me how to do that. " She pointed at one of Master Dharri's swords hanging from the wall.
"But you can teach me to forge metal."
The dwarf leaned forward and looked at the elf and noticed she had no shoes on and seemed to be dressed in someone's oversized cotton tunic.
Sharp dwarven eyes see practised magic glint in the irises.
"You seem kinda scrawny to hammer metal, little miss."
"I'm not afraid of working hard."
She fired as a reply without hesitation, there was something peculiar about the child, she seemed older than the initial expression.
Dharri didn't know how to take the sudden demand, it was surprising to be sure, from one so young, but it wasn't that surprising for smiths to have apprentices.
She seemed to be knowing what she was asking after all.

"Do your parents know?"

The nod came sharply as a response.

"Well, you need better clothes, or some clothes to work with fire. A leather apron isn't cheap."

Dharri said, hoping this would discourage the child.

Coins tinkled in a raised deer pelt coin bag she proudly presented like a trophy atop a raised hand.

"I hunted some pelts and herbs and sold them to Mr. Halvoisier, he still owes me some. So when do I start?"

Master Dharri had to admit to himself that she didn't seem clueless but he also knew how his muscles hurt the first time his master put him to work, maybe that would end further discussions.

He nodded more to himself than to the child, more mentally than visibly but she still read it from him.

There was a grin on her face covered by the counter.

Had the dwarf seen that smile, he would have probably denied any further discussion about working in the forge, there was something predatory to that smile that far surpassed her age and fitted ill on someone so young.

That smile had started appearing on the day she learned of magic.

With magic had come knowledge, sight of things hidden, knowledge recalled. Memories in life not lived, sieved and distilled. Hot metal of youth had been dipped in the waters of life and tempered before its time.

In the skin and under the youthful gait walked mind a few steps wiser than its years.

Wanted the young elf or not, her mind raced to places and plans best left unsaid.

She is young enough to not wonder where these things come from, something in it warns her from sharing and in time they become innately part of her, melding subtlety and innocence with a vicious grin.

She has passed Adventurers Guild's noteboard as many times before on journey to village and back home now, but this time she sees it, thinks of it, truly comprehends what it means. Path of the Quest.

Face flashes by her, another adventurer didn't return this summer from the south.

This is the only marker of that sacrifice for miles.

Some primordial rage screeches from her centre, awakes her to the moment.

Anvil, broken a many hammer has it?

Sheer vitriol rises to her throat and she is shaken by the intensity of emotion. Iza's breath is taken from her, she's sure she can taste blood. She misses a beat in her stride and breathes out a few times to steady herself, eyes closed.

The beast wakes to life, to this realisation, and within it she feels herself.

I will be the rot beneath the floorboards, the slow poison, the assured death to all monstrous and vile DESTROY,

DECAPITATE,

TEAR,

RIP.

Her knuckles go pale from the effort and she sees red.

Concept of giving ground to monsters and foes against home and hearth *infuriates* her beyond reason. She feels her mind race to plot, plan and concoct evil deeds upon enemies. Imagined and real, around and around and ever darker...

Ragged breath escapes her lips to the gold tinged afternoon.

Iza Featherhome realises she might not be the most emotionally stable.

Nor very nice of a person.

Wrinkles form on her forehead, well, she wasn't planning to do anything to people. And from that she recoils.

Gentle summer wind pushes such thoughts far away. She is still ten years of age, and Anvil is breathtakingly beautiful even in the worst of times.

Mana circulates the whole planet and imprints even to the common to reflect mystical.

She stops at the fence at her home, a nearby field of wheat, staying there staring at heavens well into the night with a gentle smile on her lips and wonder in her mind.

Adventurers attempting to scare the young elf are surprised and elated by the steady responses as they pass Farhome on the way to south and back again.

There's an apt hand and a sharp mind doing busywork by bonfires of Questers.

Descriptions, stories, examples they give are dutifully memorised to the best of her ability, noted in a small book nobody else will ever see and added to a long line of quiet, hidden, personal vendettas and mature carefully over time.

Before she is twelve there are three small notebooks filled with careful, well thought plans of insensate and cruel towards the monstrous, hidden in places only she knows of.

"You can't lift it."

Dharri states matter of factly.

Young elf is staring daggers at the two handed hammer meant for a human mounted in the wall and goes back to the task.

Quick elven hand's first task was to dust the shop and the dwarf watched her meticulously dust each one, being careful not to hurt herself as she went on multitude of dangers around.

"Come on, let's try something."

Curious young thing snaps to him and Dharri escorts her through the forge proper to the back yard; there wooden replicas and crudely forged examples lie around.

"Let's see your forms. Pick anything."

Weaponry is critical to the culture of Anvil, monsters lie in wait behind near every other bush and wildlife isn't harmless.

Apex predators of anvil are frightful indeed.

Most all have suitable Blessing for implements of war under gaze of Triumvirate Godhead.

Dwarven smiths are used to children staring at sharp objects under watchful eyes of their parents now and then.

He knows precisely what to do.

Iza takes no time at all reaching for a wooden sword and excitedly twirls it and pokes a wooden dummy.

"Something lighter perhaps."

He is careful not to judge the childish display openly but Iza can see the dwarf isn't impressed and changes to a short sword and hefts a buckler.

"Might as well see your shield work."

Master Dharri grumbles expecting nothing of it and is surprised by the veteran's stance approaching the dummy, followed by ineptly swung sword and passable attempt at shield bash.

Dwarves, Smiths of Anvil see a weapon in every hand and encasement on every shape.

Within their mind bespoke tailor crafts masterworks.

They need only to see that hand in action.

"Well, you got a shield in you, drop it for now, let's see how you measure against others."
Iza cannot even comprehend the spear at first and a hardened hand gives her a mace.
Rusted poor old thing bends against metal and wood of the dummy swung from an enthused two handed grip and dwarf shakes his hand dismissively.

"Good enough, rather you didn't bend the thing."

Fair showing but Iza isn't done and reaches for the throwing knife made from an old sword, some other examples lie around and are measured.

Iza seeks grip on them and looks at the dwarf.

"Thrown."

He says and gathers one up and the metal thing lands far from the dummy.

He shrugs his shoulders at the poor display.

"Give it a try."

Three examples are chosen and Dharri notes the dextrous fingers expertly finding grasp on the blade and a swift throw.

It lands square on the chest and bounces away, being dull as it is.

As Iza moves for another throw and Dharri motions to her.

"See how you strike with them."

Young eyes narrow and right hands points the tip downwards, left upwards.

There's a slight relaxation, within the leap some predatory feline mirrors and swift foot carries the young elf far.

Two bounding steps serpentine the distance, metal flashes.

Left seeks ankle, sliding motion rebounds from ground to slice and bury the right to back of the neck.

There was Blessing to that, amply.

Smallest and lightest pair of examples from the store are loaned against future wages.

That night forward the young elf slept better with a pair of knives under her pillow.

Hard labour in the forge during summer, continuously expanding exploration of surrounding areas during winter with sword on loan from Master Dharri, bow and arrows sourced from the trader for pelts and herbs and other such sundries fed the ever growing wanderlust to equal measure of despair of the parents of the young girl.

Until she was a small girl no more, there was surety to her step and trophies decorated a longbow replacing the worn and used bow, loaned sword had been returned and her own labour had produced sharp implements for every occasion.

Most notably, the multitude of throwing knives master Dharri had tuned to her magic and hers alone.

Favour, a gift for a hard worker. And maybe a sign of respect, although the dwarf would never admit to such.

She quite likes the hardworking, nearly non-verbal dwarf.

And soon the dwarf learns to appreciate the attention and care to detail Iza shows.

Master Dharri was careful to not show emotion, and internally Iza called him the *Old Boot*, although careful enough to not voice such disrespect.

Dwarf had the wonderful ability to feel exactly like but not quite like old abandoned leather boot in the corner gathering dust at times.

There was deep melancholy to the Smith of Farhome.

Independence of the Prodigy of Featherhome was a known quantity in the village, if villagers required fruits of the forest, she was the one to ask.

She was fifteen now, and despite the despair that had deeply set into her mothers chest that one day she would not return, her parents spoke of her only with pride and love.

Her father had taken the matter in humour and thanked the Goddesses for giving him a son so capable and no further matter was approached with trepidation in the household.

Small library that trader Halvoisier had gathered had been hers to plunder and alchemical basics of reagents had been hurriedly copied first into a bought journal with expensive ink and then soon after into her mind.

Now she supplied the inks and occasionally other distillates and valuable ointments.

And her knapsack hid more than a few useful solutions, curatives and poisons ready at hand.

Primordial magic she had been born with still eluded its full potential. *Motive force*, she called it, though there were no mages to ask near plains of Farhome and what her mother knew were taught rituals, patterns magic would respond to but revealed no greater mysteries. Spells to identify, to light fires, to make bars of magical soap that left a pleasant smell in the clothes and other such daily wonders.

Books of magic were rare tomes of antiquity, journals of great passed sages and were worth small kingdoms, guarded, if not with jealousy, then by talented hands.

Most tutored in Groves of Druids who kept ample libraries, talented were usually called to the Empire's Capital to continue studies.

She could exert force into things already on the move, rarely otherwise. Some lever in her mind was missing, some function missing its logic still from it all.

But practice readily provided results and capacity to do, even if the precise mystical mechanisms escaped her and prevented true casting, spell-flinging.

Daggers bury deeply to a dummy, fresh rabbit, never rarity at dinner.

She stops missing her mark.

Iza had hoped the Ritual of Divining would enlighten these matters.

Upon coming of age, a ritual could be committed where one's blessings could be divined, if one so chose, Triumvirate had ordered the world so.

Some blessings were minor but world altering, blessings of trade assured no great coffins of gold but one blessed so was never met without a few coins in their pocket.

And to many that was wealth untold.

Merchant Princes were in storytelling often heroes by their own right, by charisma and coin turning the most desperate situation on its head.

Even manifest Divinity on Anvil, Prophets.

Angels of Triumvirate chained to flesh of Man, cursed to speak only true things, burdened with divine knowledge and poor health.

Three have walked Anvil.

In antiquity, Angel of Divine Mandate, Prophet of Rule.

Man anonymous, laying to stone the rule of heaven and order of the world to the young races.

"Above Godheads, Below Men. Tolerate no ill will Men, Godheads shall protect."

Prophet of the Signs; To warn of the first war to come, institute draft and to set signs in stone.

"Madman weaving banners, Priestess of the Moon proselytising openly and red leaf in hand of a prophet in midsummer."

Third, because she got lost, somehow, causing no small amount of heartburn and furrowed brows in synods and fanes of Triumvirates faithful.

Prophet of the True Question;

"How will I get back home?"

Few received blessings that could alter their whole lives, if they chose so, blessings of poetry, of music, of culture.

Artists were highly sought after by the clergy and the nobles, even those without talents divinely possessed. The Triumvirate had made it known that within beauty was divine, and Anvil's men made good use of pencil, chisel and brush.

Even the most destitute house could boast a piece of art or two, and no furniture left the care of its maker before the artist's chisel had touched it lest in emergency.

Some concerned statecraft or prowess in the field of battle.

Swordsmen of Anvil professed frightful talent. From an armed hand flowed more than physical talent on Anvil.

Sometimes an unarmed hand split metal.

Man in the capital sweeps, ponders philosophy and lives like a king following his blessing.

It's sorcerer's conjure wonders in their workshops, the mages summon elements, creatures and energy from thin air so long as will held against the psychedelia and human reserves of mana held imagination to the real.

Travelling chefs are a wonder, the hidden food culture each, professing frightful talent at turning even common turnips to culinary masterpieces.

The Blessing of the Vizier concerned itself solely with affairs of statecraft and could demand notable sums for their talents.

Some related to matters daily, where some degree of divinity had made a talent supernatural, others dictated matters already supernatural.

The Blessing of Soap Summoner was so common that its use had overtaken the cultures in even most remote locations.

Solar was exacting, none could enter Hallowed Fanes nor Holy Grounds without a decent wash.

One could be born with such or be given such later for deeds or prayers.

Or misdeeds.

Bane of Triumvirate is as frightful as any Demon.

Rare as heresy was on Anvil, it still happened occasionally. And the Triumvirate tolerated no imaginary Divinities.

Men were faulty, many a bandit lived in Wilds, more than few took blessings as raw power to turn against fellow men.

Treated as a monster of another sort.

Obedience was not mandated, rarely, if ever, asked.

But the authority of Triumvirate Godhead over Anvil, absolute.

The Triumvirate of the Seat of Madness held reign over the most unique of these, Guise of Humor.

Though he is known mostly to share artistry and the more esoteric blessings.

Men of Anvil were not immune to ailments of the mind, and to these unfortunate, or fortunates, was given something unique.

A mask, usually self made, sometimes bought, but irremovable, a taboo. It binds these men and women to be unable to be harmed or to harm any Men walking on Anvil.

They spend their days irreverent to the small matters of life, like looking after oneself or securing a source of sustenance.

Untouchables, Psychotics, hopeless, lost and the self exiled.

Most collected of these attempt to be jesters and mimes of Anvil, usually to frightful incompetence.

Of them is asked nothing, they are safe from even the monsters of Anvil and could laugh at a hail of arrows fired by an army remaining untouched.

A rock falling to head shatters from the affront of harming Guised.

Few have pondered the fact that such blessing does not protect the monster from the psychotic.

One of the great jokes of creation.

Demon still kills them and for ruining that joke, the ever laughing plaster mask did fall silent for the first time in eternity and sought the counsel of his sisters.

The Triumvirate War Council shall oppose demonic, protect the innocent.

He inspires both, one to war, one to seek knowledge.

And they inspire him to prepare the hidden thing.

God of Humour shall have the last sarcastic laugh, Solar her eternal idealistic victory against all that is evil and Lunar, the innocent child, be allowed to play her innocent games again.

The price of one broken mask on Anvil is total and absolute, the basis of Divine Rule.

For a cheap plaster mask and the innocent life of Anvil Triumvirate Godhead marches now to war the third time.

These are the Blessings of Godhead its Men live by, and no seer dares to claim a reason as to how they are divided lest in idle chatter and ponderings.

Druids of the Grove during the second century after the first invasion provided a draft of all the known Blessings and proclaimed the list to be complete.

Lunar was unimpressed and promptly prevented Rite of Divining from working for a few decades and God of Laughter saw it fit in sympathy to add half a thousand nonsensical blessings into the mix to confuse matters further.

Solar was unimpressed and withdrew her blessings for an hour at midday from all to force the matter.

In the aftermath, Druids of the Groves Elders knelt in front of the altar of Solar in the Capital of the Empire, admitting they had tampered with the domain of the Divine too invasively, ending the Age of Surprise Blessings forthwith.

Triumvirate accepted no future lacking surprises after all.

There is also the Path of Quest, one blessing all are born with that is ordained by stars and their passing at time of birth.

Noone is forced upon it but the world of Anvil is frightful, multitude of monsters roam its wilds and if left alone form incursions into the civilised lands, wrecking havoc and death as they go.

Anvil is rich beyond measure, but that comes with a cost, magical energy enriching life and fields and mines swirling in the wilds concentrates from nightmare and will divine, nightmares and horrors stalk the land.

Against this and to reap rewards from it, Path of the Quest.

Those upon the Path of Quest gain terrifying prowess from walking along it.

But they are cursed.

Once taken, oaths sworn, the path cannot be abandoned, all walk it to their grave.

Power is given to defend men from dangers of Anvil, but at a cost.

Many take this as granted, others see path upon quest as ultimate challenge, pinnacle of talent. Many seek power, others wondrous artefacts and wealth.

All so bound by the Quest, divine writ in their soul to seek monsters to slay, ignored too long and be driven mad by the imperative.

None try in honesty, Quest rewards those who walk it and it is a blessed path, favour of Triumvirate flowing easily to the adept and willing hands sacrificing much to keep fellow Men safe. Materials from monsters are imminently usable by rich mages and alchemists, and by smith turned into tools and weaponry.

It is her fifteenth winter, the chills are biting the teenager harshly even through the bear fur coat. Trophy not year long since. Trap and dagger, by bow and swift foot she is mastering the forest.

Result of practice and endless hours of honing talents, natural and supernatural.

The set of throwing knives are now hitting with considerable force, enough to pierce prey in the forest.

She can throw them with deadly accuracy without magic and accelerate them all day without passing out now. At first she barely noticed the effect to begin with and the attempt took all energy out of her.

She is far more attuned with the forest than she ever thought possible, magic is here, itching under the skin, forest resonating with her.

Even in the dead of winter can she feel the pulse of life everywhere around her, so close but so out of reach.

Innate magic of the elves, her father speaks of it to her in songs of elven language.

Somehow they are lessons, somehow they convey concepts to her mind without ever understanding the words. Yet from it, is missing the psychedelia of magic, the flow of mana. Her mother says it is a matter of what an elf is, not something of magic.

And in her silent moments in the forest Iza feels it, she's a creature of the forest in a realm magical, adapted to be in it more than a rabbit is to its hole.

She still lacks the structure of the spell to do anything other than to propel daggers but lately her mind is starting to form theories, still adapting to its new senses.

Elves are not as susceptible to extremes of weather as humans are but cold well below freezing still is uncomfortable.

And this year it is a far colder winter than normally, Iza of Featherhome ponders the rationality of continuing the hunt for deer. Fresh venison passes her mind and a predatory smile is covered by the scarf knitted by her own hands, ravens and wolves are pictured with careful stitchwork on the brown wool.

For all her supposed veneer of finesse and mild manners, she still feels like a bloodlusted beast barely held in reins by her own intellect at times.

Lessons of emotional control from deep within her mind have helped to mute the extremes, she's at least certain none in the village has seen her wear the smile openly.

In the forest she doesn't need to worry.

It expects a predator.

The forest is disturbed, she can't feel it initially but her legs are directed, enchantment of forest older than the Empire touches it's old ally elf and does what it did since the ages past when elven spellsmiths first laid it down and embossed it upon the very land.

It directs the hunt towards a threat.

She's moving with the grace of a cat among the eternally green spruces and pines, occasionally climbing one without needing handholds to speed her up to see ahead.

She could pass human camp a few feet away and not disturb one sentry.

She senses it through the forest before she smells it.

Blood.

Bloodlust takes her momentarily, then she slows down, a fair distance from what she senses careful, and slow, blood, but not from prey.

Finally the smell of blood catches her in the wind, wolf.

She draws into herself and covers under a pine, realisation dawns slowly upon her about the gentle nudging.

She can sense it, magic in the air, hiding just under every leaf and nearly imperceptible melody that goes along with it.

It is haunting, echoing last strings of a deathly ill musician.

If there is a vicious process going on inside her mind, her face doesn't betray it.

There's details and a vacuous sense of direction to it, it keeps disappearing to nothing only to become the background of the forest again.

She silently climbs the pine she's covering under and soon disappears into the foliage, unseen and undetectable.

The wolf is bleeding, but not profusely, alone, which is strange but not in an imminent danger.

It's warily looking behind itself every now and then, careful to measure where it's going, careful of the forest around it.

It sprints, pauses at a tree and stays low and sniffs the air before sprinting to the next set of trees or sapling to hide under before sprinting again.

Mean looking cuts to its left flank tell tales of its opponent.

This continues for a while, wolf pausing and taking a sprint.

It is heading loosely towards the village.

If the wolf ever noticed the elf passing it overhead, it didn't consider it worthy of note.

The elf does take note and stores the details in memory before continuing to head where it came from, blood and trail easy to follow.

She feels it in the enchantment before she smells it or sees it.

There are half a dozen or more dead wolves in a gully, something tore them up and then tossed dead body parts everywhere.

She takes the scene from multiple angles, high in the cover of treetops before she approaches by ground.

Something clearly has charged the pack in the gully, it has left destruction in its wake.

Wolves are fit, save for recent wounds, methodically every piece of offal is considered and committed to memory, something new the elf thinks to herself, bear could not take a pack of wolves, not alone.

And it certainly would not spread its food like this.

She kneels in a place and measures the depression in the snow, large, heavy, and surprising gait.

Another few details reveal themselves, three massive frontal claws it rendered the wolves into paste with.

Jaw with worrying width to it.

She stops and kneels to inspect, few symbols, carved with surprising steadiness for such a large implement into a pine.

Simplistic markings, *monster runes*, she could read it, Mr. Halvoisier's small library relieves other nugget of valuable information.

“Display of power”

Language wasn't exactly deep and mostly conveyed concepts.
Monster, humanoid and a dangerous specimen for sure.
She shivers as if in disgust and disappears into the pines.

Wolves of Anvil are smart, by necessity. They share the same hunting grounds as monsters, and few of those creatures care if the next meal is a deer, or a wolf.
If even seeking to feed themselves at all, some sustain by means magical for years in hiding. Others manifest as pure destruction of all order and life around them.
That is not to assign to Anvil's Wolves unreasonable faculties, but packs are known to cooperate with men, rare as that may be.
Mostly they kept to the deep forests, habitation of men wasn't for the beast.
Lone wolves are rare indeed, they are pack hunters and now this one would have to resort to scavenging, not the pack to survive.
Old lone wolves there were none.
Its injuries were sore and it recoiled when snow fell on its side from the trees surrounding it. It sniffed the wound and got a telltale whiff of infection and disease.
Growling at nothing for a while and the wolf laid itself down under a small pine, there was no time to find better shelter.

It passed through sleep once or twice before it heard the sounds of something approaching. The elf and wolf's eyes met instantly, even if the wolf was almost perfectly hidden under the young pine.

It walked from under the pine and stayed wary of the one approaching.
Iza stopped respectful distance away from it and knelt down.

“Want food? I'm hungry too.”

Wolf did not respond or react. She removed her scarf covering her face to let her sound more clearly. She bit on a piece of dried meat and tossed it at the wolf.

It sniffed the meat and the small morsel disappeared into the maw as fast as lightning.

“And a bit of payback after.”

And that smile the wolf could understand even without complex understanding of matters. It pressed its head down and considered the elf from under its brow, its nose evaluating. Something passed between them, unnoticed by both and their attention turned towards the west.

Taste of meat on the wolf's tongue made it hungry for more and it started to slowly walk towards the unfelt western draw.

Iza appreciated the Anvil Wolf as it passed her close by.

Compared to her it was massive, nearly five times her size, it smelled of strong musk and radiated an aura of self confidence and reserved power, even wounded.

A massive beast compared to her, she could walk behind it and be hidden from sight.

Her eyes glanced at the wound and came to the same conclusion as the wolf had before.
But she genuinely was hungry.

As if to echo her the large stomach of the wolf grumbled and it was followed by subsonic growls from the wolf, not threatening, but reminding her that they had things to do other than to wonder idly.

With the forest now in her skin and enchantment under her breath it didn't take a long time to find prey.

And with unsaid connection there to speak between them, they didn't take even that long to bring it down.

Wolf had lazily stared as Iza cooked the meat with a belly full of innards it had devoured up but seemed to perk up considerably when smell of spices and cooked meat covered the camp.

Small fire and a piece of tarp consisted the entirety of it, the large wolf overshadowing the makeshift tent she had cleared at the base of a young pine.

She was surprised how close the wolf was, how nonchalantly it had taken Iza into confidence and how unafraid of the fire it seemed to be.

Few pouches were spread to the rock she had rolled over to serve as a table.

Wolf was apparently greatly enjoying the warmth from the campfire and had calmed considerably with its belly full.

"You are hurt, some of these herbs may sting, and I surely hope you trust me enough to understand I mean you no harm."

She extends her hands towards the wolf and a large brown eye on the even larger grey furred head follows her intently but without moving away as she places her hand next to the wound.

Something passes through both of them without being noted by either and the wolf recoils and then settles down and whines, its sound almost disappearing into the darkening night and the wind.

She gets to work applying the medicines.

Skills hard learned and fought for, from the gently old lady known as bonesetter as well as the alchemist who occasionally travelled into the village to peddle his wares.

And that's where the monster was headed.

If she had been infuriated at the concept of monsters, now one actually threatening her home and hearth had driven her over the edge of fury and into calm steady plateaus of considered, seething hatred.

A millstone was grinding even the smallest remnant of hesitation to dust.

Had she been of steady mind, the sheer size and endurance of the quarry evident would have stopped her.

Elf would have known she had no hope.

Her soul refused to accept the fact.

Now the little books became handy, now she had a target.

The slaving beast of rage was in control and would accept only death, and Iza welcomed it.

The enchantment of the forest still bothered her but a few hours of sleep had cleared the fog, in dreamstate she had listened and relaxed, inviting the spell closer, she could now feel the vestige of the enchantment now, map it, see its limits.

It was dying, almost gone, it had sensed the monster, the elf, sprung into action to warn the progeny of its ancient habitants and expended the last of its reserves. Strings strung so long ago to sing the enchantment had failed, fallen out of tune and withered away into almost nothing.

But the spell was still there, every note struck, still vividly embossed into the forest all around her.

Masterwork of elven spellsmiths from ages gone.

In servitude to the master of the forest, do be done however they so willed with it.

Or lady.

The power it ran by had gone, but what structure there was, was utterly under her control, the first, and the last elf to visit it in ages.

She took the entire enchantment, held it high above her hands, felt the entire forest, all things in it and her quarry as murky taint to the southwest.

The structure was rigid, after a fashion, it leaked no mana to confuse or conjured imagery from it, as she felt along its creation and theme, so drained it was.

And then she folded the enchantment, bereft of its power as it was, and neatly placed it in her palm and closed her fist.

It was now within her, entire complex spellwork to be called out at will for study.

She had her journal, her book to study.

Then she gathered her things, noted it was indeed a full moon out today, and told the Lady of the Moon about her new spellbook.

As tinted as her mind was by the eminent rage and bloodlust, she was excited, wonderstruck by what she had found and harnessed.

And none knew of it, safe for an elf in a forest and now, Lady Secrets herself. Excitement echoed.

Moon seemed closer.

Cold air sparkled and hard snow painted mysterious pathways in the dark amongst the pines.

Then a path towards the southwest separated from the forest as the moon came out from behind the clouds.

She half heard, half felt something wish her luck in the hunt.

She looked at the wolf next to her, felt the folded enchantment in her palm and tasted the distillate of mana reduced from boiled manaberries she had consumed just now.

Her father had observed the process with considerable worry as manaberries were eminently lethally poisonous to consume.

Men's magic reserves had limits.

Mana flowed from her now, intentional overdose. Manaberries were oversaturated by magical poison, a simple alchemical process turned that poison nearly into pure mana, fuel for magic.

Nearly, taste was still utterly vile.

The aftertaste of the psychedelic turned the experience surreal.

Her knives weren't the only thing she had been practising to move faster and the wolf had to do its best to keep up.

And wasn't only magic and favour of Divine that sped her along, but frightful purpose.

Thing, whatever it was, was kneeled in a clearing, rendering deer it had caught into smaller and smaller pieces, screeching as it went, diving claw and teeth into what little remained.

She had never seen a monster before in the flesh, but tales of passing adventurers aiming to scare a child, now conjured imagery, memories.

Massive gaping mouth and three claws in each hand, standing even hunched nearly three metres and coloured blue in its thick leather, a beast most dangerous.

The young woman recoiled from the ravaging apparition.

Soul within her screamed ever louder for decapitation.

Supposedly this was a skinwalker. Capable of magically manipulating its appearance to that of a man, they made passing imitations of occasional visitors, most savvy ones could remain

hidden for years at the outskirts of villages.

They ate meat, human meat.

It was a monster that had weaponized language.

But it's true form was this, ghastly long gaited wiry monstrosity with far too large claws and a mouth bristling with hundreds of small razor sharp teeth crowned by sabre teeth poking down and below on both sides of the gaping maw.

It was unnatural to see, some slightest hint in the atmosphere radiated imminent danger and it didn't seem to obey laws of nature easily. Downward poking saberteeth would have undoubtedly pierced its chest by accident were they on a natural beast.

Creature seemed utterly unbothered by these matters as it approached a large pine near its kill, undoubtedly to mark it with more hateful runes.

Barks and shuffling snow alerted the beast to the presence of a wolf and it almost managed to begin a hateful lunge towards it, but a split second it spent roaring, trying to assert its dominance was enough.

Iza might have been good fifty metres from the beast but the knife hit true, piercing one of its eyes and causing the territorial roaring to become a siren of pain and promise of revenge.

Half-blind as it may have been but it had mass, and it knew where the pain came from, it moved hideously fast for such a large beast and tore a fully grown pine as it went into a four legged gallop, throwing powdered snow around it as it went into the forest.

It was not a prepared trap but had worked wonders as such, dead trunk of a tree covered by snow in just the right angle with another trunk that had happened to fall *just so* didn't care it wasn't a lance, laws of physics demanded it would serve as one.

Provided one knew which direction to serve the bait from.

Instinct, wolf, the spell of protection and the elf are one in the night and dance it away with murderous intent.

Miraculously, the beast didn't die instantly running full gallop to ad-hoc lance, though the hit was tremendous and sent it flying sideways into another collection of trees.

Creature struggled to its feet and tried to palm the trunk of a tree embedded into its side, prevented from doing anything by its badly articulated clawed hands.

It fell to all of its fours, silently now and looked around with its only good bloodshot eye and was greeted by another throwing knife to the remaining eye.

It began twitching and screaming even louder, destroying wood, snow and stone as it recoiled on the ground from blindness and undying rage of a monster.

It was a blur of blue skin as it went around the place and systematically destroyed everything from that point forward in expanding circles.

It didn't catch anything.

Far from it, the venom harvested from the deadliest snake in the forest, applied liberally in the knives had worked far faster than supposed to, due to the beast launching into such vigorous action. Magical as it may be, it still followed rules of nature in its biology, to a degree.

Creature stood upright for almost seven metres on its full gait, moaned mindlessly and froze. Paralyzed and blinded the creatures muscles ripped unnaturally under the skin as it struggled to be freed and it soon would be.

With its blinded eye sockets it cannot sense the witch nor feel the stare.

Hatred convalescences and talent meets intent.

Blessing of the Path tastes combat against monstrous.

Witches Hex lands on the monster from a murderous stare.

Curse to mark prey and target for suffering.

And flow of mana in combat teaches a spell of innate, elemental magic.
This one considers celestial objects.
A gesture of dismissal downwards actualises whispered words.
Meteor falls from the sky, small as it may be, twinkle in the night, it is magical.
Nothing on Anvil save for a demon or a dragon survives magic turned into weaponized spell.
This one meets the Hex on Skinwalker's forehead and a flash of blue light from the sky sparkling as it goes turns to malevolent purple fulmination on impact as it buries to the ground somewhere in the mulched forest past the beast.
Clear hole through the head and collapsed skull, it crumples.
Wolf was soon at the edge of the mulched area, sniffing at the beast to make sure it stayed dead.
Iza breathes raggedly as such a sudden magical display has drained her.
Rage within her had gone, disappearing into thin air as soon as her quarry had been laid low, now gently purring deep within her in whatever dark place it retreated to.
She didn't seem overly pleased at the recovered blade, covered in monster's eyeball fluid.
Two knives. Poison. A distraction. Bit of luck. No day missed in training. She felt burned out by her emotions, numbness started to set in.
She ponders the warped, ruined edge of one of the knives in stupor.
Whatever furnace had launched her into this felt emptied of its vitriol, for now. Numbness turned to warmth as the reality set in.
She had slain something that would take a party of trained adventurers to bring to heel.
Granted, more by sheer luck than planned intent and within her body she can feel the berries flow more energy and mana into her.
She feels her hand and knows how easily that shooting star can now be summoned.
Mages of Anvil are terrifying forces of destruction.
The intense knot of stress in her stomach relaxes.
She breathes out gently and senses the other blade not far and carefully walks over, being wary of upturned silvers of wood and roots.
She focused on the blade and tried to summon it from the dirt to her hand. Something told her she should be able to, some learned skill but how to do so escaped her still.
Blade didn't even twitch.
She sighed and looked back at the dead monstrosity and the wolf now sniffing the dead corpse.
Her muscles hurt from the run, and the constant emotional weight now lifted, tiredness began to take her over.
Something crossed her mind. Handaxe meant to cut firewood and small sticks flashed to her hand from her belt and the wolf reacted to the sudden action by snapping the large head to her.
She was now wide awake and began to hum to herself pleasedly.
Magic returns and with it, a new gust of renewed energy.
Trophies.
And fulmination of new complexity from spells.

Her father was stopped in his tracks as he saw her child carrying the large predator's teeth in the snowy field behind Featherhome.
Although the larger wolf was surprising it was when she came close he realised what had happened.
Elves befriend wildlife easily, wolves weren't that strange of a companion.

Monsters dissolved in the sun when slain, unless trophies were taken.

In truth she had timed it to be so, her father always checked the fields in the morning, sun or sleet.

He cleared his throat but didn't find words to follow. Ator of Featherhome wasn't certainly born yesterday and had seen his fair share of brutality of Anvil. It was then Ator understood finally that his daughter might not be anything like he expected a child to be. He sighed, shook his head at the wolf staring at him intently, breath forming clouds in the air.

"It was heading towards the village."

Iza said, half apologetically, half triumphantly.

"What are we going to tell mother?"

She said and suddenly Ator could help himself but laugh. Maybe it was exactly like he imagined having a child would be after all.

"So is he staying too because that might be even a longer discussion than the trophies you carry."

Ator nodded towards the bloody wolf. He grinned at Iza.

"Proud of you child."

Her mother did not take it at all well.

There was shouting, there were dramatic pauses, appealing to higher powers and Iza realised that her mother was an actor, covering up her surprise and shock with practised theatrical outburst and an entire new side of her mother opened to her as she was paralyzed by the sudden change in attitude.

She controlled her cadence and intonation perfectly, like royalty would.

And Iza got the telling of her life.

She was good at what she did but ultimately that was a facade as motherly instincts took over and tearfilled hugs buried Iza.

Looking at his fathers face trying to hide a grin, being so talented at farm work and such a theatrical outburst finally gave Iza some hints as to who her mother could be and why they might have left Elven Lands.

Mysteries left for another time as Iza gently explained that the wolf didn't present any sort of danger, and was akin to a hunting hawk used by nobles trying her best to make the creature seem favourable.

Although yes, Iza had to admit the wolf could just get bored and wander off.

Weave of Featherhome, once called *Resolute* by her peers, had taken a good look at the massive wolf with dried blood on its flank and had fainted.

Later that night it was agreed it would be best to keep the massive teeth hidden, at least from the village at large, the Guild had to be informed, maybe the liege lord, such beasts were usually warning signs of something more dangerous coming.

Anvil had bared its teeth, it rarely left it at that.

And such trophies were rich in stable mana, valuable to those in the business of practising magic in its various forms.

Mr. Halvoisier had to be informed, he was the most well connected person in the village after all.

Three letters were sent, one to the local Lord within the borders of the Empire. He by Decree Divine was afforded the right to levy and tax for the purpose of maintaining a fighting force. Lessons learned from the first incursion of Demonic were hard won.

Hero would not stand alone.

First Hero had made sure of it in his short reign as Emperor.

Second incursion had committed this to the law of the land.

On Anvil, kings, ladies and lords ruled by divine right, granted by blessing from the Goddess of Light to select bloodlines.

She offered no other authority to the Kings by Divine Will, and had never made any known policies to favour, but King sounds nicer than warlord and organisation demands bureaucracy.

So were born nobles as the organisation grew to demand more oversight.

“Local” was inaccurate, farhomes were not part of the empire, but Lord Heimet would undoubtedly need to be made aware of such movements.

The colony of the empire was still originally funded by the empire and King by his order maintained vested interests in the area, that meant soldiers, present and hopefully future.

One by necessity to the Guild of Adventurers who operated loosely as watering holes and information kiosks to those on the Path of Quest.

They would be first to respond, and they would usually respond decisively.

To an outsider Guild operated as little more than taverns of ill repute filled with the rough element of the society.

Even if they were willing to admit adventurers tended to bring profits and some semblance of honour with them.

But those on it, something far more important than outward appearances hastened the journey.

Last letter, by suggestion of Mr. Havoisier was sent to the local traders guild; teeth of Skinwalker, indeed, were valuable, and rare.

It would take considerable capital or a very interested party to finance the sale of such items. He shared the concern of letting the village know and as such insisted on taking upon himself to have acquired them from a trusted source.

He was, after all, member of that same guild and such nonchalant explanation would be happily accepted by sheer interest generated by these items from Farhomes, it was, after all, very much a place that would end up with such rarities.

Mr. Havoisier explained gently but insistently, hoping his best to explain such concepts.

Iza blinked at him nodded her understanding and responded with,

“Ten to you, five to the guild, i’m perfectly happy to accept three quarters of the payment in guild vault”

Mr. Lavoiser blinks and then recalled Iza had a voracious appetite for all books, even his financial ones and corrects his attitude from teacher to merchant.

“I suppose that’s more than acceptable but... How would we prove the payment to be in the vault?”

Iza wandered over and took one of the papers, and hovered the quill pen over the paper for a while.

“I suppose I would accept a contract of sorts... Signed letter, underlying this whole..”

She spins the quill pen around in her hand, sprinkling ink around the paper in circles.

“... deal, from the Leader of your guild, and two people from the capital that you, Mr. Lavoiser, trust.”

Her penwork is accurate, precise and trained from her little black books.

“And treasurer of the.. Opposing guild?”

Henri Lavoisier turns it over in his head.

"I suppose it isn't impossible..."

She finishes her lettering and hands it over.

"I'm willing to pay, let's say, a gold coin for such a letter to be produced."

Text is fluid and very readable to him and he works it over in his head and that little tingle of gold at the back of his head reminds him that there is money to be made.

"And the sum mentioned on that letter is to be surrendered to the holder of such a letter.."

Henri recounts a blessing to Triumvirate and rapidly pushes further questions to another day.

"And I'm sure I can arrange for some matters to be ordered for you, no? Some specific things, yes?"

Merchants of anvil are savvy, but above all, loyal to honest coin.

She smiles back, humoured by the merchant's ability to switch gears when a coin is to be made. And there were more than few on offer.

The Ritual of Divining was fast approaching, it would be at sunfall, winter solstice.

Day before one was expected to fast and pray, then stay awake until time when both sun and moon were in the sky at the same time.

This rarely happened, Lady Moon was nothing if not capricious and was polar opposed to letting something as sensical as solstice to be at an assigned time.

It should be a secret, matter arcane, argued her priestesses interpreting the will of the moon, and by divine will, so it then was.

Summer was coming and Iza would be sixteen when the solstice happened.

She had asked and yes, she was born exactly during one.

When she heard that a cold whisper went through her mind, some plan unrevealed itself in the back of her skull and then the feeling was gone.

She shivered at that internally.

Her mother still refused to talk about the past but had taken the newly revealed "secret" in stride. Now her education at home involved a turn where a small hut now served as a stage to strangers coming to greet the lady of the court.

Wolf still hovered near the hut and had served amicably chasing rabbits away from the herbs.

Labour had traded to another when fences took the brunt of the massive canine happily chasing rabbits it had no intention of catching.

Although it happily joined Iza in further excursions to hunt in search of more offal.

Now independently wealthy Iza had taken a leave of absence from his apprentice smith until Solstice, Featherhome was now indeed royalty of Farhomes, even if the apparent wealth was told to be inheritance from far, far away.

She was still available and Dharri seemed genuinely happy for the company at the forge.

In his gruff voice Master Dwarf had said he had little less to teach, rest was practice.

One night they had been working the forge and master Dharri had sprung into song, Impact of steel meeting malleable metal rings a true note when a Smith of Anvil hammers it. He had gently hummed it more than sang but between the hammer falling to anvil every syllable was clear.

Dwarven music echoed from anvil and was every bit as magical and potent as the masterworks Dharri produced.

Rune between each blow, word.

He sings of mountain homes, how a soul is forged to a dwarf and how motherlode always waits for the industrious miner, always hidden.

Moment after he had snapped to and seemed to avoid Iza's eyes for a moment before returning to his habits of trying to imitate an old boot.

Twinkle in the eye still reflected dwarfs' surprise.

"That's uh, an old song, don't suppose to be sharing that among, cough, well, non-dwarves."

She was surprised that Dwarven Smithing was *magic in music*.

Seems elves and dwarves had more in common than she had ever imagined.

"It's the lost hold, I dare say, that's not the secret, lots of hold survived, they say none ever were as grand as the lost one."

He played with his hammer in the dim twilight of the forge, flames casting figurines of shadow dancing on the wall.

Dhari looked old, older than he usually seemed there in the dark.

"Was reminded of mountain homes, when I had a rock over my head. Not this fluffy stuff you call clouds..."

Dwarf grumbled away into nothing and took a swing at the metal again.

"Thank you for sharing Master Dharri."

She was now thankful to her mother for the lessons. She said that quietly and with a calm voice but something was certainly bubbling over.

Magic from and within Music.

She felt the theory there, working the bellows in the forge and throwing coal.

Few more dwarven secrets spill.

It started to live its own life in the last days of spring and matured into summer.

There was a song of her own within her taking form.

One with velocity in it, the cold of the forest and a wolf that refused to go away.

Hammer meeting glowing metal.

And it was weaving a mythic of her own, unique, she now knew how elven spellsmiths had crafted their enchantments.

It was without structure, without form, but Elven Song had heard metal meet metal on anvil and with it, the Dwarven Smithing song.

Aria of the Wilds, the elven spell of forest protection, had liked it.

A lot. Sometimes the spell itself echoed the song's notes up just to do it.

Flute was one of the next things Mr. Halvoisier was to procure.

Rhythm of dagger blows is tested, spark strikes back from thin air in response to beat.

Witchsong takes formative steps.

Adventurers had come, raced the forest to its ends and left as rapidly.

They had seen the teeth and were aware of what had happened.

Party of three, nobody seemed to be that concerned girl fifteen years of age had felled a Skinwalker.

Proof was Trophy and denying trophies was dishonourable to Guild.

Surprise yes, but monster invasions weren't rare, this was how they spent their days after all.

To them life on Anvil was violence and monsters.

Few words were exchanged, nods exchanged and adventurers had left just as suddenly as they had arrived.

They had reasonable concerns and would send a party in fall, for now they would post one permanent member to watch the area until then.

They were heading south, more pressing matter was imminent, carrier pigeons would carry the message.

They assumed a great many things and were correct about most of them.

That didn't prevent Anvil from vomiting out more danger.

Two days before the adventurer was supposed to arrive, war drums started in the forest.

Iza's mother and father had exchanged glances and told her in no uncertain terms they were leaving for the village, and maybe farther, immediately.

Wolf was a known factor in the village, rarely seen but from a distance, it had sensed the mother's distress and now Iza's mother was struggling in the village square to not be crushed by mountain of fur and affection, overriding the usual respectful distance wolf usually kept out of fear of sharp strikes to nose.

Truth be told, Weave seemed happy to have something so scary nearby.

"Goblins." Ator explains to the men and women gathering in the square half awake, they keep a knowing, wary distance from the mass of fur and Weave.

"We heard the war drums, not far off into the woods, we left as soon as we noticed, no further than a day away."

The news is grim and not long before everyone is wide awake and looking to the itinerant preacher and village chief for an answer.

They look back and see villagers, not one soldier. Master Dwarf and maybe young elf could hold themselves in a fight, few others from outskirts have their merits no less meaningful.

"We must evacuate then." One of the village elders sighs disappointedly.

There is grumbling among the ranks but all know the truth, war drums means a war party and no matter how poorly organised, there are still hundred more warriors than the village has, there is no place to defend against such.

Village has its walls but they are timber.

Goblins are dumb, poorly armed and small. But what they do have is fanaticism and numbers, usually hundreds. War parties mean more.

Few brave against that many cannot protect everyone.

Iza of Featherhome followed them to the village to make sure her family was safe but pressure behind her eyes was building to a crescendo from the moment she heard the erratic rhythm. She knew what this was somehow even better than her rightfully scared parents.

Her mind is manufacturing deception and hands twitch at the presumed smell of blood.

She's halfway to her home before her father notices her missing.

When her mother notices she is already hearing the drums in the forest and sees flames from the bonfires.

Tales Iza had heard were not inaccurate, they were infighting, around the bonfires unobservant and they smelled vile as they danced themselves into frenzy.

Ugly, leathery, almost unformed pieces of clay with sometimes missing eye, ears, deformities and mutations rampant.

Short, half the size of already short Iza and more of a hideous horde itself than any individual among it.

Occasionally one of the things screamed something and others echoed this across the ramshackle encampment.

They poked their sharp implements at the moon and Iza decided to take offence to such blatant disrespect.

Although that thought barely registered in the screaming pit of fanaticism of her own, building to another sort of release.

She had had enough time to gather her things from her house and against such a vile corruption of nature festering in front of her Iza allowed herself to get systematic in her approach.

She was again surprised at the duality of her mind, the slaving beast of sheer bloodlust eagerly listened to rationality, but mercy?

It had none.

And the Blessing eagerly provides tools.

Dwarf kicks a locker and spell undoes.

Within it, relic Legionnaires set, insignia and status symbols are removed or have worn over time to unrecognisable.

Shield is hefted and found impermeable as it was against demons.

Hand feels a familiar symbol on the axe handle.

Hand feels the thrum of mountain homes and echo of the Great Forge on the chestplate.

Contempt rises to mind as he pulls the straps and tightens the plate.

Dwarven legions held steady against charging demons.

Few goblins here and there barely counted as an outing.

On the abandoned street his stare meets an archer and a man with a spear.

Ator shares a steady stare and tells him Iza went ahead.

Three armed men change looks and Dwarf nods towards the smithy.

Ator looks at his wife and shakes his head.

She observed the ritual for some time, found no sentries posted nor any guards around foodstuffs, they were all mindlessly screaming around the bonfires in some primitive ritual. She had poisons, paralytics and even benign stuff mixed wrongly could have the most adverse reactions.

Some of the failed experiments were now imminently handy and the toothy smile of a predator stalked the campsite with poison in hand, visiting every food basket and consumable.

When approaching one of the large clay pots obviously filled with alcohol an idea struck her.

She told her friend a secret, and then asked for help on another such secret.

Nearly translucent gleam around the vat was almost imagined and she wasn't sure if anything had happened in the first place.

And she didn't actually know if the Goddess of the Moon even responded to such prayers.

And Iza thought to herself that it wouldn't be a secret then.

Whether the vat of alcohol was indeed Banned by the Princess Moonlight or not, if it would have any effect on the goblins, it was a secret.

Then she retreated a fair distance from the camp and paused on the treetop of a large fir.

She was sure the moon just winked at her and she wondered what it would be like to dedicate their life to the Goddess of the Moon, she smiled at the thought and tried to relax for a few hours. It would be a busy day.

Many goblins were sick.

Many more lay dead.

Warcfief still demanded the war party advance in guttural noises and gesturing.

Although to Iza the presence of a leader seemed highly irrelevant.

Goblins had woken just before sunrise and gathered themselves, the ones that were left. Barely two hundred of the five left the camp, None afterwards.

Goblins were also bad at counting their own dead, Iza noted, if they even understood such matters.

She met the scout in a clearing. It launched into an insensate scream and stood there pointing at her.

And not long after the screeching horde of the beasts darted from the undergrowth. First few fell to easily assembled wire traps, meant to slow, not harm and she suppressed a smile.

Advance was slowed and a goblin with an impressive feathered headgear holding a staff appeared and began to point staff at Iza half-screeching and half-mumbling.

Wroth was forming on the goblins mouth as magic began to take hold of it.

And it got no further, a sliver of metal as entrenched in its skull ending the trance and the spell.

She waited politely for a few more moments but no other leadership figures presented themselves.

The approaching horde finally got close enough to her to be a threat, she darted herself to the undergrowth.

Goblins were visitors, these were her forests, every hill and valley measured by her steps. Enchantment still echoed its former existence in her palm and gave guidance and familiarity with the unknown.

The scene repeated multiple times that day, incensed fanatical goblins ran into Iza, she chose the best targets and disappeared into the green again.

Powerless as the enchantment was, it still blossomed within the fertile, familiar environment it now existed in.

Ebb and flow of mana had breathed life into the old symphony and now it caressed the immediate world around it rather than a forest it was written for.

Powerless to protect but strong enough to feel gossamer fabric stretching over and thru and around her, faint echoes from here and there but to the senses of an elf accustomed to the forest, she could *almost* see the entire war party in her mind's eye moving along the undergrowth.

Although crafted for protection of an entire forest, the spell knew its mistress, and had over time changed, its makers had crafted it at the peak of their talent deemed unreachable since with an entire suite of magical instruments long since lost or taken beyond the borders of Elven Lands and lost to time and distance.

It was a Spell of Protection and within it echoed sheer purpose and curious amount of capabilities. Old and faint it may have been, it held within its strength of spring and endurance of winter. It had lived an age, outlasted its masters and still would persist more. Spells such as these were made to be cast, to be in active use, and it now echoed faintly among the trees again for those few with ears to hear it, in service of a lady as it was supposed to, each day stronger.

Aria of the Wilds was an impressive, adaptive spell. It had heard the hunt.

And this day it learned of warfare, guerrilla strikes and more; from the soul of its mistress the screaming of the slaving beast's bloodlust in detail was stored and in the moments to come, *Aria* would ring it like another instrument in the orchestra.

Testing, composing.

That death song of goblin war party in the forest was an unheard symphony filled with joy and wonder of rebirth from something long since gone and lost, was a joke lost on all but one.

God of Humor turned from his task and from under the cheap looking plaster mask crowned by jesters hat and laughter took over Triumvirate of Seat of Madness.

This elf had caused the entity dressed in black robes decorated with childish, badly made multicoloured animals and stars lazily stitched on no small amount of enjoyment recently.

But now she was doing things that Triumvirate had an invested interest in.

It stared at the universe with unrelenting shivers of barely contained laughter concealed only by thick robes.

There was intensity to the stare as Iza of Featherhome was measured against the unknown.

"Half a foot in crazytown eh?"

A small leathery booklet is fingered carefully by fingers covered in ill fitting white gloves.

"Not one of mine though, surprisingly!"

Few bubbling giggles still moved the jingles attached to the hat. Then another matter demanded the infinite attention of one such as the One That Laughs.

"Let's put a pin on that."

Somewhere where Gods were, an imaginary pinboard appeared and someone placed an image of the Iza and attached it via a pin. Such blatant causality violations and literal jokes God of Humor found hilarious in his privacy.

Admittedly, there was very little he didn't.

But the half crazy elven prodigy singing songs of rebirth as it went slaying monsters was noteworthy in and of itself.

An idle thought wondered within the infinite facets of Godhood if the Sisters had anything to do with the elf before it too moved on.

Dwarf nods to the archer and flurry of arrows scythes three before Legionary line meets goblin and casually tosses it aside, spear follows and picks up the startled and off balance creatures.

She had a perfect overview, and the position to strike from goblins had no hope of reaching, from the treetops. Goblin bows didn't exist and their short stature made them unable to really gain height, much less distance. If they could even see her.

But she wasn't perfect, more than a few times the mass of it surprised her and a flashing dagger was needed.

They draw elven blood and she settles to the rhythm of the shortblade played by the *Aria of the Wilds*.

It's fantasy on a knife's edge, striking electricity from an unseen string.

Blade swings a wild miss and goblin has just enough time to notice that before thunder strikes in the wake, slapping it out of balance.

Next swing barely parries a club and recoil of thunder dislocates a monster arm and swings the body to stumble others.

She had speed and far more familiarity with her surroundings than goblins ever could fathom in their small minds.

The dozen remaining in the clearing charge and meet shockwaves and thunder strikes, flashing blade to tendon or leaping feline in jugular.

Aria of the Wilds and the elf play a bloody duet of thunderous music.

They had numbers but she can disappear swiftly, only to strike again to mercilessly cut down the leaders.

More than a few curatives are expended from pouches and vials used to envenom blades and cause confusion run low.

Three men of anvil met the goblin masses and got to work.

Bow got the stragglers, a warcry drew the idiotic things to axe reach and spear exploited superior reach and broke cohesion.

A fighting retreat in good order, peak form, executed by two veterans and an untiring spearman.

They piled corpses efficiently.

Lady Featherhome inflicted grievous casualties amongst the trees and when the remnants reached the fields surrounding the village, there was barely tenth remaining of the original numbers.

And now she didn't even need a home field advantage, she had clear lines of fire.

True flying daggers in man height grass carved pathways mercilessly executed towards any goblinoid that dared make noise within it as she fired from the flank, away from the village.

No more than five made it out of the long grass, saw the trio of foolhardy who had remained to defend the village at the open gates and charged, screeching fanatically as they went.

More than a ton of playful fur persuaded the straggler to retire from the mortal coil.

Few remaining were quickly treated to a sharp axe and even sharper boot as few left met Master Dwarf Dharris in full plate mail and were intimately familiarised to the degree a dwarven masterwork cuts goblin.

Bowman, who had held his arrows for more impressive targets, loosened his hold on the string.

"Don't see more coming Master Dwarf."

The spearman to his right noted, pulling his spear from his kill. Familiar face appeared from the edge of the grass as graceful catlike gait brought Iza to view, almost to be tacked to death by a loose wolf as it ran past, bounced into air and settled to follow her panting happily as they went.

"So there will be more coming?"

Dharri worried there would be a second wave. He had been doing the math in his head.

"All dead."

Iza replied and grabbed a throwing knife from thin air as magic coalesced into a dark purple aura of a knife in the air before solidifying.

"Figured out the returning thing."

She said calmly and returned the knife to its holster on the wrist.

"Really cut the numbers down in the clearings. Poisoned their food too, I was very thorough."

Dharri was acutely aware of the lethality Iza could throw sharpened metal at.

"I noticed the trail you left, half and half?"

But practice in the arts of war was new to him. Young elf had seemed very pacifistic to him and very calm mannered.

He flipped his face cover up and rested the axe on his shoulder.

"Well that's a trick and a half." He spits at the halved goblin.

"Your family stayed, I guess you knew. Us too."

He pointed his thumb at the calm looking archer and bear of a man with the spear.

"Didn't fancy not protecting my home, pointless as it was. Whittle, pleased to know ya, seen you around before though."

Bear of a man said politely and nodded appreciatively.

"Theo, I'm with the guild. Got here a bit earlier than I was supposed to."

Elf holds steady, breathing deeply but calmly, more than a few cuts and torn, bloody sleeves and clothes hint at curatives being used.

He's taking a good measure of Iza now. Plinking at his bowstring in thought.

Adrenaline still flows in the girl, he sees the familiarity to violence in a slight twitch of hand and smells magic from the tinge of ozone.

"Or late, however you put it."

There is a pause interrupted only by the loud breathing of a happily panting wolf.

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way but I need to check this out... If it is as you say, there might be worse things coming behind..."

Man shifts awkwardly, he's not willing to deny the trophy yet he is torn between his Quest and duties to the Guild.

Iza sees now the fidgeting in the man, interrupted from his rightful quarry and can sense the latent energies of the Quest hovering, tugging gently. She smiles at the man disarmingly.

"Happy hunting, adventurer, I didn't check past the warcamps, I was in a bit of a rush. And admittedly it's been a long day, all in all."

Man shoulders his bow and picks up a spare quiver from the ground.

"I've seen warmages do this, so it ain't like I don't believe you, you just seem awfully young for it, pardon me saying so."

They wave the man goodbye as he enters the long grass and disappears into the darkening afternoon.

"I think, seeing things as they are and the tavern didn't get burned down, we deserve a drink?"

Bearish man announces happily.

"And that's where your parents are staying, they seemed mighty okay with it all... Not the first time this happens?"

Man questions honestly, bewildered, but genuinely happy of the circumstances.

Dharri looks at Iza and for while there is too old of a dwarf in too fine of a wargear to be standing in a small village out in the middle of nowhere.

Dwarf sees a future reflected from the past and cannot escape the feeling of fear for the small thing walking so confidently on the face of Anvil.

To him life is a string of misfortunes.

Terrifying fates after one another.

Stronger still and more promising have fallen before.

Iza returns the glance and the dwarf is just Master Dharri again, doing his best impression of a worn boot.

Even if mithril full plate and truesilver enchanted embossings declaring glory of the forge arts betray the part.

Iza had never seen the panoply before and Dharri knew she would be curious again.

Solstices are holy days on Anvil.

Multitude of things happen, Druids visit and decide what is to be sown and offer teaching and assistance.

They cannot be everywhere at once but Farhome is lucky enough to live close to an grove of nature mages.

Men and women in green robes, illusion on their face covering half of their face in a skeletal grin, priests and keepers of Life and Death, scholars of Nature, History and the Monstrous.

By their rites are children born and by their expert hands are dead laid to rest.

By the knowledge and records of past Druids keep the fields of the Empire and lands past it bountiful and healthy.

Monastic order, even they were incensed by the Demon and were one of the most ardent defenders of Anvil in the previous conflicts.

They might be kindly men and women more concerned with matters of nature and scholarship than daily affairs of mortals.

But invasion and its blatant destruction of life had struck an ill chord and the Druids of the Grove had introduced more than their fair share of Demons to savagery of nature personally. They also conducted the Rite of Divination.

They were precise in their demands of what was expected of attendees, this was the coming of age on Anvil and how and to what degree were these demands followed was noted by the druids and measured by some unknown gauge.

Future could not be known, yet the name had lived since antiquity where these blessings were seen as a destiny.

Druids knew better, yet held true to belief ritual was to be conducted thusly, and so it was. Gift Divine was not to squandered, so they argued.

Divination was one of them.

Iza was expected to dress plainly and spend the entire day in nature, surrounded by it, neither consuming food or making noise from sunrise to eclipse.

Prayer was recommended as passage of time.

Iza was in a small copse of trees not far from home, she could see a Druid and his father in a discussion over the herb gardens.

It was barely below freezing and the light clothes she was wearing were enough to keep the cold at bay, Iza was actually quite comfortable in proximity to the small fire burning.

Wolf had at first been curious over the affair but quickly got bored of statue-like Iza and disappeared into the woods.

Prayer was recommended and Iza really didn't have a great secret to share about the bonfire so her idle mind bounced between things like a mayfly as she spent time, waiting for the fire to burn until it was time for more fuel.

Light blinded her from the corner of the eye as the Sun approached its apex.

It wasn't even a properly worded prayer, she felt around the concept of being thankful for the life she had but petered the thought off before she could finish and breathed out and prepared to try again.

"I have to admit, that was pretty lazy, not that I don't appreciate it."

Iza snapped her head around looking for the source of the voice.

Female, young, no discernible direction.

Who was that?, echoed her own thoughts silently inside her head.

"Me?"

Became answer nonchalantly yet in a questioning tone. Silence fell over the copse of maples even more so than it had before in a pregnant pause.

Aria flitted around the maples, confused by the call out.

The Goddess of the Light?, she asked in the privacy of her mind, she was confused as to what had triggered this exchange, and couldn't place anyone else to be answering to half thought prayers.

Aria of the Wilds gently moved around her and sensed nothing unknowable near, utterly untouched by the noise Iza had certainly heard.

Iza gets the impression someone is lying on a couch now paying very careful attention to the elf from immeasurable distance, or right next to her.

"Wait, you aren't supposed to hear me respond, I'm... Ugh, fine."

Reality bends around will manifested, the couch is now at the opposite side of the bonfire and golden eyes hanging upside down take measure of the elf.

Lady of Light seems dishevelled in her awkward position, upside down with feet thrown over the backrest and barely a shirt to cover her modesty.

Surprise sets in as Triumvirate of the Seat of Sun, Solar, The Goddess of The Sun realises from the elf that her glamour isn't working, she sees her as she is, not as she wishes to be presented.

Surprise and embarrassment reflect from golden eyes and she calmly climbs herself to an upright position on the very, very expensive looking couch.

The weight, the reality of the divine is present ever so akin to his recollection of her passing meeting with Lunar and Anvil's reality obeys eagerly around her.

Yet the young elves' eyes do not obey, bend to will and easily pass through her illusions.

And worst of all she's very much trying to hold back laughter.

The shirt flows into a featureless white dress at will.

Elves eyes wander into the couch and black figurine fashioned from soft materials betrays the likeness of Lunar, figure next to it bears a passing resemblance to a jester and its implication is exclusive.

A pillow quickly appears and covers the childish puppetry and Solar points a long, elegant finger at the elf.

"Not one word to either of them or I'll swear..."

Leaving the threat hanging in the air with blushed features and frowned brow from the Godhead, Iza does her best to not laugh outright as not to tempt fate.

Or bother her father nor alert the Druid.

Iza's eyes glaze over.

"We've met before, haven't we?"

Without glamour to cover, slight surprise passes in the eyes of the Godhead.

Iza was good at reading people.

Solar slumps on the couch, not pretending to lie or willing to fake the exchange.

Time slows to a crawl and then halts, stolen pieces of time, she's felt this before when she met Lunar.

Sunlight freezes and so does the raven in flight and the cold of the forest changes to warm rays of sun in the enclosed time. And Solar releases a long breath and blows raspberries.

"Well, heck. I hmm, had a very personal hand at making you, actually. Constructed soul.

You've read your history, right?"

Iza thinks intently for a moment and realises the only place that particular set of words was ever used was in relation to the Demonic Invasion and its supposed leader, the Demon King.

"I know of one." Iza shook her head.

"I don't know what that implies." She said slightly worried but was careful not to show it, she also wondered if that kind of deception mattered here, to Her.

"Listen this is so infinitely complicated it's going to take a while to get through this all..."

Solar tries to deflect but is stopped by Iza narrowing her eyes and pointing at the raven caught mid air before she really gets anywhere. Dejected the Goddess presses fingers to her forehead with her right arm, closing her eyes and focusing intently for a while.

"Fine, okay, I was expecting to have to explain this anyway so here goes."

The Goddess takes a breath and continues, Iza idly wonders how much breathing a Godhead actually does.

"Demon Lord was like, a smart move. So, I, uh, tried it."

She makes an impression of pulling a bow back and releasing it. And Iza nods at that, the Hero.

"And when that same thing happened again, I realised they, demonic overlords. I'm sorry that doesn't make any sense at all but.. But.. I had to iterate. They weren't so I..."

She brightens up.

"Arms race! You know that concept, right? It's like that."

Solar happily bubbles out excitedly. And to her surprise Iza knows what it means.

"And then uh, yeah I ran into complications... We ran into complications... that weren't related." She corrects herself and vaguely motions at the pillow hiding the stuffed dolls.

She ruffles her hair and the golden locks neatly fall back into perfect order and Iza feels jealous of such a display, her's was always a more or less dishevelled mess.

"We made a mistake. We left an unintended spell into the structure of the world. Like back when... A really, really, really long time ago. Well, it isn't a spell but it's a thing. A book! I used a book to put some speed into..."

She waves her hand loosely in the air not finding words to convey the concept and just gives up..

She looks at Iza waiting for her to respond, to gauge her reaction and if she understood even part of it.

She raises a finger and idly stares at the raven hovering in the air in frozen sunlight.

"A question, if I may?"

She nods, keeping a level stare at Iza.

"This is why I learn so fast?"

Solar blinks and smiles warmly, Iza feels the sunlight from the smile as glamour is slowly returning to this frozen moment in time.

"Well, that's part of it, yes, when did you notice?"

Iza snaps her finger and ghostly after images return the noise mutedly and the motion echoes in the air.

"Just now, thanks to this." She motions around her.

"It feels more than a few, not more than a dozen..." She wanders off into thought.

"Oookay I suggest you stop trying to think about it." Goddess makes stopping motions at her flamboyantly, flailing both her arms towards her trying to take her attention from the train of thought.

"Truuuust me on this. Like, there's well, that's a trap, along that line that makes you go to my Brother." She motions along with her hand to the pillow hiding the figure with the cheap mask. She pinches her nose as her free hand retrieves a doll to be caressed.

"Well, you can't understand it anyway but that's part of the problem but since you are inside the system right now, under the influence of the, let's call it an enchantment..."

The elegant movement of a noble mixes with enthusiasm of a young woman.

In the glint of the smile is enjoyment at the challenge.

"There's a crazy time mage somewhere out there, and like a Demon Lord, immune to divine intervention, I still don't know which part of this falls on us and what part of it was just an utterly crazy coincidence."

She motions her arms towards Iza.

"And in between all of that I was making... You, part of you, or I was already finished. Let's call it a... timequake. And off you went, after all, well, you already had."

Iza was taking it in stride, the ghostly after images had tempered, she was focusing on being here and now. Motionless. It was like motion sickness in a way but she was starting to understand some things better now. She hadn't practised knife throwing for the entirety of

her life, she had been doing so over, multiple, fractured selves close enough to somehow transfer that training back.

Every sore finger and papercut a lesson.

From within, echoes of decades at the forge.

That's not all, here, now, she could feel the seams in herself, knowledge, something blue, something loaned, something taken...

Pain hits Iza and she remembers, collapsing like a wet rag on the ground to gasp for breath and her consciousness recoils from it.

Next time she feels anything is sunlight in her neck and radiating life back into her. Gentle hand strokes her dishevelled hair.

"That's one of the ones I used and I'm sorry, the timequake made things imprecise."

She feels the Divinity reach into her and numb the recollection, Iza shivers.

"I needed something desperately and the only way to do that was to ask for it, I just couldn't do it without causing pain first."

She sighs and gentle strokes continue, Iza realises she's on the couch now but echoes of the pain still keeps her passive, she's even afraid light might hurt her eyes.

"That was supposed to not be there, and certainly not like that. And you'll forgive me for late intervention but you are fine now, I was very, very gentle you will find."

"What was that?" Iza manages weakly feeling the numbness and the pain disappearing under the warmth. She glances at the Divinity and her face is very close, hand still gently stroking young elves black hair.

"Death. What I recovered was past it, the point of death, dissolving. I kept part of you stable enough to fully respond to my desire to keep parts of you and then... I let the rest go."

Solar's face wrinkles in worry and she moves to sit on the forest floor, in front of the couch, staring at the frozen flames in the firepit, turning her back to still recovering Iza.

"You were supposed to know all of this, before, well, the timequake. Before you ask, yes, you were supposed to be the next Hero, but better, stronger, I was supposed to do other things too and trust me I'm actually really good at this."

She raises her hands to the sky shakily, in an unfamiliar gesture decidedly for one of the Divine.

"But then you just were, and I didn't know which parts were in and if I had actually made what I was supposed to or not."

Hand ruffles the golden hair again.

"And at that point you were, and with all the complexities involved, well, I just didn't interfere with you living your life like you wanted."

There is a long pause as Iza gathers herself from the sleeping position and takes a kneeling position on the couch, crosses her fingers in her lap and breathes in calmly.

"Thank you Lady of Light for the gift of life and life ahead of me.

Thank you Lady of Light for the Blessings you have given me."

Prayer is true and intoned perfectly, heartfelt. It is a fragment from a prayerbook preacher in the Village had allowed Iza to read in the Fane of her Lady.

Solar visibly stiffens at this formal attribution.

Iza kneels closer to whisper in the ear of Godhead radiating warmth next to her.

"And thanks Sol, you were pretty great too."

Laughter escapes Solar uncontrollably and it takes a while for her to regain her bearings while Iza is smiling the predator's smile with warmth to it out of her sight.

They both now sit on the couch, next to each other.

Solar's idle hands have recovered the Lunar from under the pillow and is now being subjected to a bearhug with the entire force of a star behind it.

Iza had politely asked for time in the frozen time to go over these revelations at her own pace.

"It is Solstice after all."

Golden haired Divine had said matter of factly and shooed Iza away from the pillow covering the dolls.

She was almost done now, the furious millstone of her mind, *minds*, she thought to herself had resolved most unanswered questions and short replies clarified questions without answers.

Last one Iza could dredge to ask was somehow irrelevant to her, she supposed she should know if nothing else to sate her curiosity.

"So, what were you making, exactly?"

Solar snaps out of the bearhug and the idle humming.

Iza may not have taken note of this small detail but *Aria of the Wilds* is paying attention.

"Emperor? Empress I suppose, a more unifying force than Hero was, more capable at least." She shakes her Golden head of hair gently.

"I was supposed to have time to think it over, you know, finetune it, work on it."

Glamour has returned a fair bit to her now and emotions manifest more easily from her.

Furnace of a star lights its hellish glow from the corner of the golden eye before it's gone into a sombre tone of voice.

"Something to stop this dumb pointless waste of lives once and for all. To stop demonic invasions. Now... Now we are stuck with this time problem, we are stuck in the moment because someone ricochets us all back before we can return to the demon problem, it won't happen so long as the loop remains."

She looks at Iza warily.

"Why do you ask?"

And she tilts her head.

"Curiosity, mostly, but that does raise a question, the blessings, were those part of the... Process?"

Solar nods and her eyes glaze over, recollecting something and lowers her head to rest on her palms.

"We could do something about that... I should probably do something about that."

She glances at Iza and focuses on something so strange Iza can't see where she is looking at but feels herself under scrutiny beyond the look.

"I'm going to intentionally make you not remember this part, there's some... things, you will become aware that do not belong in the natural order and I can't let you just waltz around the place with knowledge of them. Had enough of that already, thank you."

She rubs her nose.

"I also think that you really shouldn't..."

Iza snaps back into reality and the frozen time, sitting on the couch.

Solar is giving her an evaluating look, hovering over with both hands on top of Iza's head.

Warm smile greets her.

"Well, nobody is usually part of this and actually makes choices."

The warm smile becomes a dry chuckle and she shakes her finger at Iza.

"You are kind of a mean person, aren't you?"

Iza tries to look Goddess in the eye but has to avoid the knowing look. She has no earthly idea what Solar is talking about but can't really deny the accusation, to herself at least.

"I'll admit to resembling something like that statement."

She coughs theatrically.

"Cruel, willful and breathtaking anger management issues."

She shakes her head dejectedly and stands upright.

"But that is me, I'm not regretful. I like me."

Iza shrugs and gestures towards the bonfire.

"I should probably return, no?"

Before Solar can say another word she herself is subjected to a bearhug of cosmic impact.

"I have decided to like you Sol, we are friends now."

Gasping for breath from surprise, Triumvirate of the Seat of Sun returns the gesture.

"Fine, okay, yes, we are friends." Solar manages with her breath cut short.

"Just sit where you are supposed to be."

Iza relinquishes and nods at her, walking across the firepit and sits down, nudging herself around to be comfortable.

"Talk to you later."

And Sol realises she forgot all about the whole matter that triggered this state of affairs. Iza wasn't supposed to hear her at all in the manner she did.

She isn't going to do anything about it now however, she brings her palms together and extends them, making time flow again.

Raven croaks and sun passes from Iza's eyes. Sol is gone, insofar as she can be.

Upon Anvil, Iza is learning, Triumvirate is omnipresent.

In her privacy, Solar hugs both of her familial member's dolls and considers Iza to be exceptional in many matters but when it came to knowing herself, the girl didn't understand anything at all, like a blindspot in that vast array of insight.

"Cruel?" She shakes her head at that.

"When did you ever treat anything by means other than it deserved. When did you ever skip the opportunity to be helpful towards your fellow villagers."

"Willful?" Eyes roll.

"It's called determination you goofball!" Solar shouts, stomping the ground.

"Very important for would be heroes!"

She breathes out a little thru her nose, that's what growing up was, she supposed.

One one account, though, she had been, mostly right.

"My sweet innocent child."

Breathtaking didn't do it justice, but Solar had a family member who was very helpful in these matters.

"Friends help friends, I suppose."

That family member found the entire matter utterly hilarious of course but he assured he had put a pin on the matter.

The Triumvirate of the Seat of Madness certainly had done so and laughter racked the body and small bells bounced around the mask as arrhythmic dancing sent the black robed figure into pirouettes and theatrically dove halfway into a large box carrying insignia "Tricks" in thick golden letters.

Menacing laughter escalated from the depths of the furniture. He had been keeping *that one* for a good long, long while now.

This was going to be so, so hilarious. At least to someone.
A rib is poked and direction forms.

Rest of the day passed uneventfully, at least outwardly to Iza, she was thankful for the break and felt exhaustion set in.

But she kept appearances up.

When the Druid finally approached Featherhome Iza had dozed off twice.

Sun was nearly set but the Moon was nowhere to be seen.

Druid knelt opposite of the firepit and young human male with curious brown eyes was as unbothered by the cold as Iza was and Aria reflected from slight taste of magic radiating from the man, Iza herself could see the earring with her sharp eyes hold a rotating coin with sun on one side, moon on the other and the dimmed radiance was very familiar to her, a blessed item encompassing might of both of the celestial sisters.

Iza had met the man once or twice in passing but kept her distance out of reverence and unwillingness to engage, though she had to admit the mask was not the most friendly of looks.

The usual ritual mask of half skull illusion was gone now.

"I will now wait until the fire stops burning."

The man said and chose his words carefully, and nodded very meaningfully towards the firepit.

"You may now speak if you want to." He smiled at Iza who had spent an entire day watching the same fire.

Slight tinge of ire passed her but she bit her teeth and looked at the man who was clearly waiting for something to happen now and Iza realised he wasn't telling her not to do anything.

She gave a half smile to the man, fetched a bucket full of dirt and dumped it on the bonfire.

Man tried to hold laughter in but didn't try that hard and a calm, steady laugh echoed among the copse of maples surprising the raven that had been hoping Iza had scraps of food with her.

It hopped a few branches closer, scavenger instincts firing, more people meant more opportunities.

"Oh well, I had hoped you'd show me more of your magic."

He poked the warm dirt with his finger and rubbed it to his fingertips.

"Usually mages tend to relegate this sort of task to their magics, whatever they may be."

He shrugs and nonchalantly cleans his fingers in his robe.

"So, could you please show me?"

Iza picks up a small pebble, shows it to the man who nods, and being deliberate, gently, very slowly throws it towards one of the maples.

Sharp snap is heard as stone pierces the tree and man jumps in surprise at the noise and his face lights up in genuine surprise.

"Oh that IS rare. Or not? Our records when it comes to Elves are sadly very incomplete. But yes!"

He clears his throat pausing from the excited outburst. Raven is excitedly now searching for food near the snapping noise and keeps glancing towards the talking people assured in the fact this was going to pay off.

"Force of planetary bodies, Gravitic Magic."

Iza expectedly waits for the man to continue as her memories calmly present factual iconography and unfamiliar symbols from somewhere, she knows the effect now and things begin to slot in place a little more. Man shakes his head and looks down dejectedly.

"That's sadly almost all I can tell you, but the Grove can send you a copy of what has been committed to memory, or you could visit. Your brand of magic is, as I said, rare."

He looks at his fingers and rubs them together thoughtfully.

"Your mother taught you cantrips, no? Why did you elect to use dirt, I'm sure you have more than enough mana for such simple tasks."

Iza ponders for a moment for the reason herself and spends a while in thought and notices the raven hopefully hopping around the maple pretending not to be side-eyeing them.

"It's a tool I use when required."

Still eyes on the raven she fetches a dried piece of bread and crumbles a piece of it and throws it towards the maple. Man takes a meaningful look at the bread and raises an eyebrow. Iza shrugs back nonchalantly.

"I like that raven, he's very helpful in being nosy as he is."

Druid makes a "ah" noise silently with his mouth.

"I have heard of this, that's an elven thing, more than human."

He clacks his mouth at the Raven and it snaps to the man and flies to his shoulder without pause and stares blindly in front of it, clearly enchanted.

"You connect on a more instinctual level, we druids can control. But.."

Spell is released and the raven crawls in surprise and flies to the leafless maples to assess the situation from a safe distance.

It had gotten bread, there likely was more.

"You could, with enough.. Time, practice make the raven do that willingly. And I have no idea how that works, I don't know if any Grove has that piece of knowledge."

He raises his shoulders and seems genuinely apologetic.

"Do you have any other magical talents? It's rare, but it is known to happen."

He smiles warmly again.

"Well, after the ritual, we'll know for certain but I'm genuinely curious."

Iza certainly has other secrets to keep, magical and otherwise. She thought that *Aria of the Wilds* probably wouldn't remain hidden from another talented mage and she wondered if this was also some sort of personality test as well as purely a traditional thing.

She couldn't sense anything malicious from the man across from her, the blessed item as well as her being tired; she couldn't find the energy to lie about any of this, she was curious as well.

"I can return my throwing knives, I don't know if that's magical or just..."

She holds her left hand and a slight push *just* so mentally and Master Dharri's etched throwing knife returns to her from top of her nightstand, deep purple outline and then it materialises, landing on her open palm. Rapid twitch of fingers too fast for the Druid to follow and the knife disappears out of sight.

"May I see the knife?"

Another movement of the fingers and she hands the knife slowly to the druid, the handle first, the knife perfectly balancing at her fingertip.

Man takes it and curious brown eyes appreciate the simple weapon for what it is.

His finger runs across the etching line that tunes it to Iza's magic and under his breath invokes a very familiar litany her mother also taught her, identification, spell to reveal magical properties of items. Iza wondered at that, her magical senses could now feel enchantments on her knives without the spell.

She wondered if her parallel lives had something to do with that. Using the spell, she had done it so many times all told, maybe she had gained some sort of mastery to it.

"Perfectly normal masterwork of dwarven talent, if there is such a thing. The etching lines are a fascinating addition."

"That way i don't lose track of them, seemed like the thing to do after i lost like twenty of the knives."

"This to me sounds like divine talent. Strange you aren't aware of it then."

He weighs Iza with a curious stare who shrugs innocently and calls the knife to her and it disappears in a twitch of a wrist.

"Returning throwing weapons is, dare I say it, a sign of mastery, not magic, most spend lifetimes to reach that." Appraising gaze glazes over and the druid shakes his shoulders again.

"Infinite are mysteries of Anvil..." Slight dry chuckle cuts the air.

"And we would certainly appreciate a record of these things in the Grove." he adds, eyes glinting with unbridled curiosity.

"Any more secrets to share?"

Iza gauges the man with a level stare, feeling the sting of tiredness behind her eyes and she suppresses a yawn trying to force its way to the surface.

"Only if they remain so."

There's venom to that, veiled violence and Druid of the Grove stiffens, settles down, breathes out, closes his eyes and breathes in deeply, takes a moment and says;

"May the Bane of Triumvirate take me if I reveal any of this without permission."

Iza notices in magic something falling upon the man and as it grazes *Aria*, within it she can feel the repercussions loaded upon the man, ready to be actualized.

It was just for a moment in time she gained yet another peek into Divinity on Anvil.

And she called me kind of a mean person.

Having no option left she calls *Aria* and it jumps to attention. Young elf places her right above her left and focuses on the empty air forming a sphere between her hands.

"Note first, Cold of Winter."

Sharp note rums from nothing.

Her voice is melodic and follows some unknown song from antiquity with it beating rhythm into air.

Nature is aligned to the spell and responds, sudden gusts of winter wind pick up racing in the copse of maples, dying as fast as it came leaving behind the biting cold of winter unnatural.

She switches her hands positions and mana gathers around the possibility in between being made manifest, invisible but even the Druid can feel it.

"Note second, the Warmth of Summer."

Dulcet bass reverberates from maples.

Copse becomes warm as on spring day and droplets of water fall from the nearest maples.

The Druid of the Grove can almost hear a flock of spring birds, robins, partridges and swallows in it. Mana coalesces around lines of the construct, untouching the thing itself but bright morass of mana begins to take shape in the real.

"Note third, Cycle of Life."

Inrush of power nearly tips the druid forward and *Aria of the Wilds* rings a melody without and within it as it coalesces into a translucent wireframe of a book, glowing deeply with a blue sheen.

It hovers for a moment and then gently touches down on the open left hand of the elf.

She calmly opens it with both her hands and the translucent pages filled with symbols and arcane scripture flick themselves to open a certain page.

Though the book seems translucent, each page is clearly readable, separate and filled with notations, most of it appearing as if notes on sheets of music.

"The spell of protection of the forest before the elves retreated."

She lets the book go and it hovers in comfortable reading distance. Hand moves above it and the page turns.

"Aria of the Wilds. It was nearly expended and with its last power warned me of something. I have kept it for study."

She connects her palms and the book dissolves into thin air.

"And I'd rather keep it private, I understand the value, I'd rather not have the hopeful follow me to the ends of the earth hoping to "borrow" it. Or worse."

She takes a meaningful look at the clearly shaken Druid across her. He shakes his head in disbelief.

"That's certainly wise." he sighs dejectedly. "In truth, you are right, even Grove would be loath to let something such as Pre-retreat elven spellworks pass without... pressure."

He falls silent for a moment and ponders the matters, staring into nothing.

"It seems like it's... charged with elemental magics, which is strange for a spell of protection." he lets out a long deliberate breath theatrically.

"In truth nobody knows much of anything about these matters. Elves and their spellsmiths retreated before the Grove started keeping records. What is the verbal component? I have never heard of a spell like that, this is just me trying to be helpful, as little as I can be, I'm sure."

Iza turns the idea in his head to explain it.

"The spell was Forged with the help of instruments, like violins and lutes." She squints her eyes at her open palm.

"To call it forward I have to... sing songs, or play an instrument? I'm still trying to study it. It tries to protect me but the spell was made to protect an entire forest, it's not really good at protecting me. And it was nearly out of whatever powered it."

She was lying, a little anyway. *Aria* wasn't able to do anything physical so far but its mere presence had been anchored to her magic and expanded her senses to a surprising degree. Druid seemed to have been taken utterly by surprise by *Aria's* existence.

"Just, extremely fancy book, sheet of music, however you put it."

Widened druid listened intently.

"If I can help you with this, I will, I have never heard of such a thing before. Spellcasting via musics, fascinating."

He falls silent for a moment and snaps back to the situation.

"Well, It seems to be in good hands, but for now, we have a rite to finish."

He fetches a small bag and from it pours metallic items into his palm. He gives first to Iza, it is a copper coin that has been worn by time, upon it a very stylized sun, if the reverse had any imagery to it it has long since worn to nothing, holding nothing but nondescript scratches.

"Hold that to your heart, and this one, hide it from me." He hands her a second coin stamped of the same copper with a picture of a moon in crescent. Iza once again displays her dexterity and the coin vanishes from the druid who nods.

"These coins aren't that unique and any metal plates with suitable imagery would suffice," he explains. "Give this one back to me after you have rubbed your fingers on it."

The last coin he hands her has a stylized jester cap. She warms up the coin with quick movements of her fingers in the twilight of the maple forest and passes it back.

He fiddles with his pouches and produces a scrap of paper torn from something. He smiles apologetically. "I was badly prepared this year it seems."

He covers the paper with his right hand and holds the coin in his left, making sure the jester cap faces Iza.

"Triumvirate, Rite is upon a young soul, may her path upon the quest be revealed. As you will it, so will it be."

For a moment nothing happens, and Druid seems more curious than surprised.

"Sometimes it take...."

He's stopped from his explanation by a sharp inhale, stars in the sky, barely visible in the sky have begun to move and rapidly accelerate to white hot streaks. Moon peeks from beyond the horizon, Lady Secrets has decreed she will be present after all.

Clouds disappear into nothing and shrunk from the majesty of the full Solstice. Stars stop and become constellations, clearly readable. Golden sunlight covering the horizon gives space to creeping darkness and the Moon soon lays its pale light upon the matter.

The Copse of maples already mystical, immersed in magic of the world takes utterly otherworldly appearance as to the west pale golden sunlight is doing it's best to warm the snow, from the east moon is doing it's best to overpower the Sun and artistic equilibrium sets upon the scene.

Widened druid and Iza can but wonder. Iza feels a pull from the east.

Moon is growing. Slowly, she isn't first sure it's happening at all but soon the moon is twice its size.

Druid has also noticed it and he audibly gulps.

The Moon forces itself upon the small copse of maples and takes up almost the entire sky.

Sun disappears and moonlit night becomes arcane in its brightness.

Iza can feel the pull amplifying and she feels herself fly towards the ruler of the night sky, in truth she stays seated, gaze fixed in the paleness.

Raven in the maples crawls and jumps into her vision behind the trunk of a maple.

The two lock eyes in an eternity. Shadow of the raven against the omnipresent Moon.

It crawls again, takes flight, losing its solidity, the raven becoming a wisp of deepest blue, then darker, melding upon the shadows, and spirals towards Iza.

Before she can even react the raw magic strikes her at the back of the neck. Odd sort of cold sets into her and magic flares up, the darkness diving into the depths within her soul.

She can see so much now, structure, formation, order, signs and runes all pass deep into her and energise her, invigorating what was and embossing magic she previously used with new pathways, journeys to be taken.

This is actual magic, one actual mages have, she thinks, spells to protect, to detect, to track. Elemental magics in their primordial fury of raging spiral.

Memorised in unfinished form, simplest of them would come if called, others beyond reach, asking for familiarity in what is given to be brought to fore.

Lethality from a whisper. Flourishes of sharpness aimed to dig past defences of the even most talented swordsman.

Bans of power and measures of denial against arcane.

Wilting force, entropy itself eating its tail at her beck and call, nestling somewhere deep.

Enchantments, protections, summoned help, charms and she feels below it all, curses unfathomable, death to be dealt in amounts immeasurable if called with enough talent.

This is what I am. Path of the Grand Witch.

Seek monsters to slay and you will reach these peaks sooner than you think.

A voice rumbles from within her, nondescript, nonverbal, it shows what can be, it tells her how to seek that power, the Path of the Quest.

Or seek me within quiet hours, within study and practice.

I am yours, to thy will I submit.

This is her and innate.

The arcane surge is unfathomable to Iza and she feels pure magic, its hallucinogenic properties overtaking her senses, sheer weight of potential overriding sanity and sense. She closes her eyes and for a brief moment she has the feeling of holding it all in her mind's eyes to be called at will.

Then the mana overflows her sensibilities and she is left where she is, no stranger, no more powerful than she was, save for a few more tricks.

She's trying to blink the tinge of the overriding might and spiralling madness from her.

The moment passes in its absurdity and power passes.

Iza is sitting in the clearing again.

The Sun is now in its rightful place, nearly setting and the Moon is no longer here.

Aria seems to be unbothered by what has transpired, happily echoing and bouncing notes from the surroundings to itself. She can feel the *Aria of the Wilds* more clearly now.

In return to her shock and surprise, *Aria* calms her with information and sight beyond sight.

Raven is no longer present and she wonders about that.

Feeling has passed but the knowledge remains, simplest of it, itching under the skin, to be used, to be...

Iza stops that path of thought, it might be hers but magic wants to be used, to be on the Path of the Quest. To slay the monstrous.

Druid across from her shivers and coughs. He is about to say something and he catches a throatful of air in the wrong place and a coughing fit takes him.

Iza is soon next to him and pats him forcefully to the back.

Druid spends a moment to stabilise his breathing and manages to nod thankfully at Iza with tearful eyes.

"That was.. Something." He manages with a raspy voice.

He takes a few deep breaths before he is ready to continue, waving Iza away with his free hand, his right still covering the scrap of paper.

"I have heard of celestial alignment, even saw one when I was still in training, never something so... impressive."

He takes the piece of paper and squints at it, clearly surprised, again.

Iza idly wondered if there is such a thing than being over-surprised. He hands the paper over.

"Witch, there hasn't been a Witch in... age, age and a half. In all honesty I maybe shouldn't expect less from you at this stage. You are just full of surprises."

He shakes his head with eyes closed. Iza studies it, with steady artistic hand markers of common parlance, *Witch*, it states with certainty.

She keeps her observation about the nonverbal distinction the magic had itself made abundantly clear to her.

Grand Witch.

She turns the paper over and in it are arcane markings with the same steady hand, she recognizes the basic symbology of it but cannot place the icon.

Druid motions for her to hand it back.

"The coins as well, if you please, although I won't require them for another half a year now I'd rather not misplace them, some smiths think it's bad fortune to make these."

He studies the symbol on the other side of the paper as well with curiosity.

"I'm not entirely sure what this is, it's supposed to be elemental affinities but...Grove could have records, maybe Witches do things differently. I see lightning, is that fire..."

He wanders off deep in thought for a moment.

The coins and paper disappear into the leather pouch and she can hear paper crumpling as they are packed tight, assuredly the few other children had similar pieces of paper, the Grove was, after all, known for its recordkeeping.

Internally Iza smiled at the dishevelled way Druid treated them. Although it was unlikely he'd forget this one, and the village here in Farhome had only one or two children coming of age this year.

"Witches haven't been around in.. since, well, the first war." He scratches his nose idly for a moment, thinking.

"They were the first magic structured into the path to fight Demons, they and the Sorcerers, it's somewhat of a..." His face darkens for a moment.

"It extracts a heavy toll from those on the Path of the Quest."

He focuses on Iza again, taken from his ponderings to the real again. His brow furrows.

"Far be it from me to read Lunar's reasoning but there must have been a reason Witches are a rarity. And if I had to guess, it has something to do with the price it extracts."

Iza is calmly waiting for the Druid to finish his wary explanation, feeling the new magic within her, looking for the price to be paid.

"Madness, self destruction, to witches and sorcerers the Path is... Accelerated."

He gazes into the sky and continues looking at the clearly visible stars now.

"I mean, it was required, from what I understand. Anvil needed a weapon, something to hit back and more.... Traditional paths were slow to prepare for war."

He looks at Iza, weighing her with steady stare, there's ice behind his eyes.

"I'd avoid the path unless... Well, You are the one who makes that choice in the end. I don't have much to add to that. Just fair warning. I do wonder though."

He's silent for a good while, measuring Iza with his stare that seems far more focused and serious than it has been before.

"Is the third invasion coming, now, soon?"

Iza blinks at that, twice, not sure how to answer at first. And the Druid relaxes visibly.

"I've read Witches and Sorcerers were aware of what was expected of them."

Iza thought it might not be best to mention the book complication she had been informed of not too long ago.

She can no longer suppress a yawn and she covers it with her sleeve. Druid chuckles.

"Yes, well, The Rite is over. I think it's time we retired as well. Coming?"

He says and raises from the ground, earring sparkling in the starlight.

Iza shakes her head, she points to Maple to her right, the Druid notices, a backpack. Iza had trained preparedness and even such a ceremony would not persuade from being so.

"I have my tent with me, I... think I'll stay here for a moment still, fall asleep under the stars."

Druid nods and bows slightly.

"I suppose exposure doesn't bother elves even without magic that much. It's a beautiful night after all. Goodnight."

He begins his walk towards the Featherhome, his father and mother likely had prepared the visitor room for him.

Grand Witch, she wondered, but when she had prepared the campsite all it took for her to fall into the sleep state of elves was to close her eyes for a split second. It had been a very busy day after all. And as she fell asleep, the moon finally decided it was time to show up.

Now that Iza was of age she gained some freedoms and lost others. Her father informed by no uncertain terms she was capable of providing for herself so she would do so. In truth this meant little to Iza, aside from having to move her small amount of valuables away from Featherhome. Mentally she was already halfway there. Her mother was far more emotional but insisted upon the matter as well. Iza yawned and her mind still reeling from revelations of the Solstice yesterday as she walked on the road to the village. This had not been a surprise but this was the day she had to do it. Mr. Halvoisier had a spare room and was willing to rent it. Woodcutter had been contacted and what little Iza had, was being moved from Featherhome by cart to her new home. Although she felt ill at ease calling it “home” yet, if ever. Plain but protected from casual onlookers, the small hut was tucked behind Mr. Halvoisier’s shop, covered by maples and willows she had taken a liking to providing extra privacy around the hut. It was his previous home before his wealth had made him buy a larger one farther away from the village and included a small herb garden, now barren. It was poor, she admitted to herself but well lived, and maintained. The worst she had to deal with was a few rats in the corners and the small rodents had decided it was best to move before the thing with the predatory smile moved in properly. She spent the entire day noting what little she was missing and throwing things into the two rooms she had rented rather than organising. Her wealth would pay for the rent in perpetuity. Freed from the oversight of her mother, more dangerous, more imminently things she considered important appeared over the week on her person and possession. Although, she admitted, there probably were a very small number of people who had been okay with her carrying as much poisoned and envenomed implements on her as she did. After everything was moved in and Iza was more or less happy with things, alchemical workstation and tools and sundries took one of the rooms, in other she had a beautifully crafted bed and a full sized mirror that Mr. Halvoisier had procure, as he said, appearances were half of the sale, and he was if not preened, then certainly never underdressed. She was sitting in the centre of the room and collecting herself when a sudden sideways glance made her notice something peculiar in the mirror, it took her a while to notice what was off until she looked herself in the eyes. The dark purple of her eyes had changed. Deep, dark blue was now there and purple disappearing towards the edge of the iris, almost gone. The longer she focused she was sure she could see flecks of gold mixed in but she could never catch any golden flecks in her gaze. She wondered why that was and after a good while gave up chasing the glinting. She took a look at her in totality.

The hand mirror she had used before didn't really allow such an option as to see herself fully. She stared at the mirror evaluating herself.

Maybe Mr. Halvoisier was at least partially right, she thought.

Her black hair was still dishevelled and messy, although her clothes were clean, it all seemed so worn. She grinned at herself and was jarred back.

Leather that her clothes were mostly made of, were exceptionally pockmarked by the fires of the forge, the creature in the mirror didn't really seem like *her*, she admitted.

Preening or not, Iza thought she really should invest time into looking like something else besides a mix of a worn forge attendant and a creature of a swamp.

Thankfully, solutions were simple, Mr. Halvosier was open and carried more than a few bolts of cloth.

Some force was drawing her away from the village now, more than it had drawn her to the forest. Wanderlust, and in truth she had questions to ask of the Druids of the Grove.

Maybe others.

As spring approached properly Iza spent most of her time in the forge under guidance of Master Dharri as she forged tools of the trade she was to ply, although she wasn't sure what that trade was it would include a shield and a sturdy mace.

Roads were patrolled but rarely safe without armaments.

Her reserves of gold rapidly diminished as she updated her equipment and adventurer's belt that included five magically enchanted pouches which had almost cleaned the majority of payments from the Skinwalker teeth and had to be specifically ordered from the town of Flowerfield to the north.

It could carry enough equipment for a lengthy expedition and nullified the weight.

This, that and other such matters made Mr. Halvoisier beam like the sun itself whenever Iza walked through the door of his shop.

Summer was nearly here, all the snow had melted and wildlife was in a frenzy.

Although the revelations of Solstice were still pressing on her mind, it had taken a backstep to her updating her clothes, equipment and the small amounts of homebuilding.

She assessed the creature in the mirror and admitted to herself she wasn't looking dishevelled now, brush, sharp knife and comb had tamed the unsightly black mess and neat, short hair now covered the alabaster skin and framed her sharp features, pushing tuft of hair away from her eyes she admitted it was maybe too short with her right arm covered by repurposed fingered gauntlet from Dharri at the length of her entire arm, more leather than steel it still covered enough for her to feel secure in its protection. The plate covering the back of the hand had been subjected to inscription of magical symbols by Iza and there was a magical circle of gravitic magic hidden from sight, to amplify and help transfer magic between her and the weapon, attached to finely made fingers Dharri had been happy to beat into form, fingers and the thumb could be locked to the plate and wrist could be locked further into place to form into a deadly claw should she lose her weapon.

Long purple tunic in the same tone as her eyes and belt hanging the enchanted pouches covering her chest now and belt held a mace of steel of good quality, it was made of four sharp flanges reinforced to take even the strongest monster hide and not bend.

One of the villagers had given her basic training, a retired veteran of Draft, he had been suitably impressed by the destroyed dummy after he had shown the basics over a few weeks and Iza had given the wooden target her best by reinforcing her strikes with her magic at the end.

She hadn't mastered the mace by any means but it was mostly about raw force, the veteran had said.

More important for infantry was the shield and foot work.

Shield was alien to her but footwork was something she was exceptionally practised in by long journeys in the rough undergrowth of the forest, she only lacked opponents.

The steel had been bent upon the forge to produce a large round concave, it was maybe a bit too large and heavy for Iza but covered her exceptionally and the side facing her held three of the knives in easy reach. She had managed to ease the weight by her magic and in practice battles against the few talented in the village had been, if not impressed, then happy with her form.

Upon its face was embossed a stylized feather covering from edge to edge, the edges of feathers pointing downwards to give her a cutting edge to carry in the left arm if required. It now leaned towards the wall of the hut.

She had taken a liking to excessively large hoods that apparently were fashionable among some adventurers in and around the capital. It folded to a scarf against the elements and covered the lower part of her face, with two large copper buttons, five more continued along the tunic along the cut, bending towards the left.

Tunic was excessively large and also served as a short skirt down to her knees.

Cotton pants reinforced by leather here and there held pockets of varying size to hold things she considered rather be on hand that stored into the pouches. Steel inserts at the knees and wool packed tight between the metal and leather made even rough hits tolerable.

Boots she had made to order by the local leatherworker and steel reinforcements at toes and heel hadn't raised eyebrows as much as she had assumed. Remaining nine throwing knives were hidden around her clothes and some next to her skin in holsters of leather, easily reachable by her dexterity at moments notice.

She jumped a few times and was happy nothing made noise and it wasn't too heavy of a load.

She had packed a long cloak and a black robe enchanted against the elements into the pouches if she needed them.

She looked around her in the small hut and stopped at the mirror again, closed her eyes and sighed deeply.

She picked up the shield and holstered to it her back by a strap and hook, she had practised pulling to the ready and was happy with how fluidly it now snapped to her hand.

Master Dharri had taken the last of her coin at hand to produce a chestplate, also of steel and today was the day it was ready.

Village seemed so familiar and lively in the morning light as Iza made her way to the forgeshop, quite a few of the younger males had taken a note of Iza now, she wasn't the wildling from the forest any longer, covered in branches with wild look to her eyes but Lady of Featherhome to the villagers.

Preacher had changed his tone considerably after Iza had started to wear actual clothes and had begun to choke his words.

She nodded at the people greeting her in the mainroad, if the loose cobbles could be called such.

Hammering at the forge told Iza Master dwarf was hard at work and she was careful to cover the small bell before it could make noise and she dashed behind the counter with a leap, hiding a letter under the petty cash wallet Dharri always checked at the end of the day. In one swift set of movements she was back at the door and rang the bell on purpose.

She calmly walked past the counter into the forge proper and saw the dwarf hard at work forging a hoe, it was spring after all and such items always sold.

On the workbench was Iza's chestplate, polished, with fresh leather belts next to it, ready to be fit.

It was form fitting, carefully measured to protect her core and not much else. The dwarf had looked at her sketches with the careful eye of a master and made a suggestion here and there.

She was planning to wear it under the tunic, out of sight, she wasn't sure how acceptable it was to wear armour in social settings outside the village and was sure in the village she'd be laughed at for doing so.

"Sit."

The dwarf gruffed at Iza and pointed at a short stool next to the table.

She started to remove her tunic, opening the buttons and wrapping it around her waist. The silk undershirt she wore was brown, stamped with imagery of green and yellow leaves and one of the more expensive goods she had procured.

Dharri took the back of the plate and stopped suddenly.

"I didn't know the village had a tattoo artist?"

Iza is surprised she certainly hadn't gotten one and turned her head to see the dwarf.

Rough finger touched the back of her neck above and between her shoulder blades

"Raven, fine work I'll admit. What's it for?"

Iza's fingers ran to her back and studied it for something and felt magic in her fingertips.

"I didn't know that was there, it's magical."

She remembered wondering where the raven had gone during the events at solstice but had assumed it's disappearance was some hallucination induced by the Rite and its magics.

She focused on the tattoo and could feel what it was for.

From it she pulled the magic and held her arm in front of her, the raven distilled into reality, seemingly unbothered by its sudden existence, calmly staring Iza back.

"Familiar, I actually, uh, didn't know about this."

She was surprised but unbothered, it was part of whatever blessing she had been given by Lunar, she knew it instinctively, *her* familiar.

"Been so busy with the new house and..."

Dwarf gruffs and sniffs at the bird and Iza can see the dwarf measuring it clearly with the help of a Raven standing behind her. Extra pair of eyes and visual awareness beyond her own eyes, split vision.

It felt so natural to her she couldn't even notice anything odd about it now that she had done it. Dwarf squinted at the apparition and said nothing but she could almost hear the grumbling.

Iza told the raven to *go away* and the bird became a swirl of blue magic and dove back to its place where the tattoo had been.

Now that she was aware of it it was distinctly there, at-will, something to serve.

She wondered how she could have missed it and realised she needed some time purely to herself in case of more of such revelations.

Rest of the fitting was only noted by short questions and answers as both worked to make the chestplate fit as it had been designed to, comfortable and padding to soften blows.

Last part was a rondel designed to guard her armpit, to be attached to the shoulder. Outside of the tunic, it was also shaped like a feather and looked more decorative than protective.

She turned it over and noticed a symbol of an anvil stylized, with a star at its centre and deeply scored into the metal. She looked at Dharri questioningly.

Dwarf seemed to consider for a while before answering.

"I'll be damned if my apprentice goes into the world without my stamp of approval. That is my family's seal. I suggest you not brandish it openly, some may take a dim view of it, and dwarves know their history."

Of Anvilhome Iza thought. And then corrected herself. She suppressed the surprise of sudden recollection. *Staranvil* had been the family name of the King of the Dwarves before the capital had been lost to the demons and subsequently lost.

The Dwarven King's acts during the invasion had been legendary.

King himself was dead, taken in one of the many desperate and hopeless defensive actions Dwarven infantry was known for, after the Capitol Hold had been lost, sheer bullish determination to yield not one more inch to the Demons was certainly underlying reasons Demons had not won.

Internally Iza wondered how the good dwarf was related to the king, and how closely, dwarves were a long lived race of men after all.

Then again, Iza thought, she wasn't that surprised, Dharri was not known to be wordy but the years around the anvil and beating of metal had loosened enough from him that Iza knew Capitol Hold was important to Dharri, in more than just cultural sense.

This is what the hidden letter concerned itself with afterall.

~

"You want to know where the lost hold is?"

Solar considered the question in her mind, Deity had not shown herself in the real world since the day of the eclipse but words flew easily now, if she wanted to she could talk to Solar directly. Iza was wary of this to a degree not to overstay her welcome, in truth Solar didn't seem to mind the elf and her company.

All it took was a thought of prayer and Solar heard her. They had both taken the companionship in strides, awkward as it was at times.

"Weeeeeell, you'd have to ask Lunar, it's a secret after all, she wouldn't really appreciate me overstepping my authority like that into her domain."

Iza had a trump card she had been armed with just for something like this without ever actually noticing it but this mattered to her, a great deal in fact.

"I might tell her about the doll while asking about the hold, you think that would loosen her tongue?"

Iza grinned, without the predatory tone to it this time.

"You wouldn't dare!"

Solar knew full well Iza *would* dare.

"Hmph! Fine, I will ask her."

And as soon as she had said it, information flowed to Iza's mind.

"There, not that it was actually lost, apparently, seems some demonic magic covered the entrances in landslides. Here's how to get to a new opening and tunnels that lead to it."

Solar added, and a map of the journey from Farhome to Lost Hold visualised in her mind.

"She was actually excited when someone was asking about it, strange. She's usually very protective."

Iza shrugged and knew the feeling would somehow be conveyed across the mystical connection.

"Probably just to make you think that's the actual secret."

Solar's crystal laughter filled her mind.

"That's Lunar for you, she's just so adorable about these things."

Iza had her own feelings about that but didn't vocalise it, for sake of privacy Solar had made it abundantly clear unless she specifically addressed her, nothing would be transmitted. Short time she had been a Witch had given her insight into how Lunar's blessings, mind, worked and she wasn't sure *adorable* fit at all.

"She seems very... innocent."

She said diplomatically. Blessings of the Witch mostly worked itself around Curses, Banes of the Divine turned to spell casts and enchantments to cause and to amplify an already impressive magical skill set.

Some of the effects were far from adorable, even her deepest rage fuelled instinctual primitive part had to admit there was sheer radiating *ill will* to the possibilities present once she would gain some practice with the basics.

It was certainly a path made for war and it somehow felt reactionary to Iza, an insult hurled against the opponent, very spells themselves undermined and devalued opposition by turning what the Demon Lord had been inured against into another, more brutal, opposing form and then made lethal and certainly... A memorable experience to suffer from.

"Speaking of, apparently Lunar kinda poked around with your blessing during the eclipse, seems she's very taken by you."

Ah yes, the grand part, Iza acknowledged silently.

"I tend to keep up with her every full moon, ever since I was a small child. Always a few secrets to share."

~

Iza attached the rondel herself and danced across the floor of the forge in her new armour, going through the motions of swinging a weapon and throwing knives, feeling if anything stuck or felt off.

The fit was, Iza admitted, magical, she could barely feel the extra weight from such a sturdy plate and she wagered the plate was probably worth a fair bit more than the gold she had paid for it, plain as it was.

She knelt and hugged the dwarf who was clearly surprised by such a sign of affection but returned it.

"You are leaving, right?"

He asked quietly.

"I need to."

Iza could see apprehension in Dharris' eyes as she let go.

"This village is home but... I don't plan on coming back soon, if ever, I need to..."

She petered off, Anvil was waiting, her mind, her soul needed to see it, to explore the wonders.

Burn a large part of its monster population to ash.

Tear its limbs off and beat them to death with them.

Make it submit, beg, scream.

There it was again, she wasn't sure if THAT was the reason, or...

It wasn't the Path of the Quest that compelled her but something ill defined sitting badly with the idea of staying in Farhome.

Ever since Skinwalker she had on some level known that she could be dangerous to the village, not that she would do anything to men in it, but she knew power attracted power.

Anvil's monsters were poorly understood and Solar was very vacuous in her responses when it came to the monsters and why's and how's.

She wasn't opposed to Iza killing them, quite the opposite, but over the months since Solstice she had gained the nagging feeling from the discussions that those hunting monsters attracted them as well.

She closed her eyes, still knelt close to the dwarf.

"Father knows, I think he always knew and we had a talk. Mother, well, I said I loved her yesterday. I don't think I'd leave if I told her."

She opens her eyes and the dwarf studies the eyes of his apprentice.

"And I need to do something for myself, please do not ask, I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to lie to you Master Dharri."

Dwarf sees something in the eyes and nods slowly.

"If that's how it is."

Iza rises from the floor and silence sets upon the forge, as it often did between the two, they were comfortable with each other's company even in dead silence

"North?" Asks the dwarf as Iza is walking to the door and she stops, considering.

"Future, whatever that looks like. But yes, the habited lands, for a start."

She had plans for it and the affair with the time mage had eaten a good portion in her most recent journal. Others she had burned, childlike as they were, she didn't fancy anyone stumbling into the once she was gone and there was only that much she could carry.

"Fair travels, may the Tribunal keep you safe."

Dwarf said and could feel again the weight of past and lost comrades and saw it reflected in the elf about to walk from his life.

Iza turned, and her stare captured the dwarf, she dragged down the buttoned hood to show her face set with determination and something twitching in the corner of her mouth.

And for the first time she let someone in the village see the smile.

Dharri had faced a fair few monsters and his fair share of evil men in his years.

This was entirely new, he was taken aback, and realised that was what was always hiding under the reserved outlook and polite words.

How much of her she had hidden, in such a plain view, some primordial paragon was in the small forge with him gazing at him with fires of deepest forge, with intent.

"Anvil's dangers are wide, large, beyond compare. I know, I am distinctly aware. And it has never met something like me. I was *made* for this. We will meet again."

Genuine smile returns.

"Trust the feeling, Dharri."

And with that Iza of Featherhome left the forge, and soon the village.

Dharri had to steady himself by a stiff drink from his hidden reserve, as his trembling hand reached for the bottle it met the texture of the letter and stylized feather inked upon it.

She had left master Dharri not only the last tooth of the Skinwalker, materials for the journey to come.

A map, clean line ahead of him, a path. Before he set it down he was in his mind's eye half way there already, in the Empire, Capital, gathering lost and the exiled along the way.

One last masterwork on the forge, he thought, to reclaim the ancestral halls.

And with trembling hands closing the bottle Dharri had to admit, with map in hand, he was ready to trust the future again.

Dharri smiled, for the first time in a long while and genuinely, for a long, long time.

She'd show her, the old dwarf still had life in him, he'd get the smirking elf for this, no matter how long it took. And with this map in hand it wouldn't be that long.

Wilds of Anvil meet Iza without limitations, without care.
Monster meets curse, meteor, mace and dedication as she goes north.
Anvil will try to stop her, she knows, so she hones herself.
A lifetime passes to one so hastened.
Soon a veteran, in a year part of it.
Trophy trades hand, coin owner.
Genuine smile listens to a few secrets and invests smartly.
And then she finds there's further peaks to reach, even outside the Path of the Quest.
Practised ease, she stalks civilization and Wilds both.
She's looking for something.

Three Years Later, 459aH. (after the first Hero)

Grove had been a bust, too far removed from the Empire, its library was expansive but lacked details.
His keeper of the Rite was helpful, Hawk of Springfield, but ultimately they both agreed if she was to find what she was looking for, guidance and possibly a teacher she'd need to continue northward, and visit Groves along the way.
And so she had, killing monsters along the way and practising her talents.
Anvil's monster population diminished wherever she went to degree adventurers took note.
Keeping a low profile, she had been careful to not get too involved in anything, life continued as it did on Anvil around her and she set a rhythm to the road.
Many boots had worn out in the three years, going from and to without an objective.
Wanderlust became a state of being.
She had been held in a bordertown of the empire, Backflip.
The inventive name told a boorish tale of an unlucky dwarf and a donkey.
Her reserves of cash were not exactly out, but deeper on went to the empire, pricier it got.
In Backflip she was a very wealthy merchant, two towns over she would struggle to pay for upkeep.
To enter the Empire proper Iza wanted a good reserve of cash.
Gold greased palms and assured good bread and board. Although she wasn't opposed to living in the wilds if she needed to, she appreciated a warm bed and a bath more than the freedom the wilds brought at times.
Backflip was sizable for what it was, it took most of its income from visiting traders passing by and adventurers plying their trade, although the fields around it told of expansive effort to farm the land and food here was cheap as a result.
Iza raised eyebrows wherever she went due to her looks and due to her race, elves were exceptionally rare creatures, though not alien enough to cause concern past the rarity. And she had been thankful of taking care to cover her plate and most of her wealth under layers of clothing, not everyone plies honest trades on Anvil.
First man out for her coin and blood in the wilds had seen an easy target, Grand Witch had seen a practice dummy. And before she could think about it, two others died.
It had bothered her, then she stumbled into a bandit camp deep in the woods and realised some facts about baser natures of men.
Blessings were given, not held hostage.

Some chose violence and ego.
Right blessing and ten men held kingdoms in deep woods.
To some, caravans of men, just another hunt.
They just added to notches along with monsters now.
Occasionally questers dropped a weapon on the tavern table with a darkened look and everyone knew.
Not a trophy but a monster had been slain.

She was sitting on the edge of a fountain with statues of the Triumvirate depicted in art and marble and pondered how to best make money flow when something new interrupted her. Sitting next to her and holding her knees and gently rocking back and forth. Mask was well made, polished clay or porcelain and painted white, it had magic in it, into its surface had an artist of no mean talent fashioned with a few touches of paint a look of a mime.

How did she get so close?

The emotionless mask was turned towards her and a melodic voice from within it, slightly muffled, called out. Copper hair is an unsightly mess.

“She’s pooooooooor.”

Red shirt and brown pants she wore were not worn out but not new either.

“I was... I forgot. Anyway, if you want to make quick gold, I hear someone is paying good money in the guild right about...”

The voice wanders off and goes to silence again.

Elf, and one under the Guise of Humor. Iza was surprised to see another elf, she seemed about the same age as her, some odd mirror of herself.

The sudden, unannounced appearance had frozen Iza in surprise and between bites of a filled bread she had brought from one of the stalls around the fountain.

“If you aren’t finishing Mr. Bread, can I have him? I think I’m hungry.”

Iza looked at the bread and still stunned how she had managed to sneak past *Aria of the Wilds* and offered it to her.

“Indirect kisses!”

The creature said and grabbed the bread. It soon disappeared into the elf under the mask who was careful not to show her face to anyone when munching it. Iza turned away from the mime out of politeness.

“THANK YOU FOR SHARING!”

The mime shouted and hugged her tightly, if shortly, a small commotion raised a few looks but no one stayed their eyes on the pair because of it.

Iza was curious, not only because of another elf but the seeming talent by which she had slipped so close and undetected.

And then she stopped cold.

You didn’t ask about either of these things from one wearing the Guise.

“Iza of Featherhome, interesting to meet you.”

She said instead and the mime stopped rocking for a moment.

“Everyone always says stuff like that. But you are the first to mean that.”

Iza raises up from the fountain and stretches.

“The Guild?” The mask betrays nothing to Iza who mostly has gotten by by reading people.

“Might as well.”

She picks up her shield and mace that had been resting against the fountain wall and looks questioningly towards the mime.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

The mime asks, clearly amused while Iza ties down her mace to the belt.

Iza sighs to herself and bows slightly.

"I assumed you would know where the Guild is, since you suggested I check it out."

The mime brings her forefinger theatrically to her chin and seems to be lost in thought for a while.

"No idea!" She exclaimed happily.

"I just came here..."

She wanders off again into silence. Iza is amused, and worried at the same time.

"Well, shall we go find it?"

The mime mask turns to look at her and again Iza is bothered by being unable to read the person behind it.

The Mime, as Iza has taken to calling the apparition to herself that for some reason or another failed to give her a name.

And an apparition she is, the Mime is gauntish, little malnourished possibly and her movements are jerky, as if uncoordinated, skittish and and there's a slight rocking back and forth whenever she's idle.

"O-ookay."

Mime bounces from the fountain and points her finger towards one of the five roads leading from the fountain, seemingly at random.

"This way!"

To add further to Iza's confusion, Mime seems to be changing her tone of voice and intonation too rapidly, changing from elated to suspicious and from disjointed to scarily attentive on a whim. Iza isn't exactly sure if the elf is as insane as she seems to try to convey.

But she would not be bored at least.

The Mime bounces in front of her from storefront to stall on the street and points out this and that to Iza, sometimes making nonsensical comments that amuse her and sometimes stating something Iza assumes to be true.

One of the stalls is labelled as an outright scam selling pieces of painted glass and Iza's sharp eyes do seem to be noting that to be true as they walk past it.

Another shop gains praise as an excellent bakery, even though Iza can clearly see it is selling armour and sundries from a forge.

The pair manage to walk three of the main roads from end to end before Iza admits Mime has to know where the Guild is.

She finds the whole affair too amusing to do anything about it and lets her continue the tour, she's learning an awful lot about Backflip this way.

Growling stomach of the Mime is left unheeded by the excited Psychotic, but not by Iza.

When the next Inn happens by them, Iza also admits to being hungry.

"We are eating here, come on, it smells delicious."

The mime pauses awkwardly and hops on her feet back and forth, clearly held back by something.

"I'm paying, come along now."

Iza, although in pursuit of more funds, wasn't at immediate risk of bankruptcy, she could afford to feed the Mime.

Night was falling and one of the servers was cleaning the patio, clearly closing that part of the service down, although Iza was yet to hear of an Inn that didn't serve long into the night. The Priestesses of, and those with affairs with Moon, usually mages of some description, were prolific abusers of late Inns. And the calmer clientele usually meant rooms on offer were orderly and clean. Alcohol was served but there was a clear distinction between Inns and Taverns that had become one by necessity.

It only took, after all, only one Priestess enjoying her breakfast to be interrupted by a drunk crowd for the message to be passed along.

"Welcome! Have a table traveller! Will be with you in a moment!"

The young cherry cheeked patroness in white apron called from the counter where a mage of some description by their outfit was trying to stay awake and nodding, still half asleep.

The Inn was old, the carved wood tinted by passage of time that consisted most of the furniture and red tablecloths were homely in the yellow tinted light of the Inn maintained by magical lanterns above each table.

At the centre of the tavern was a counter and pillar reaching to the ceiling covered by all sorts of bottles.

Iza could feel the Psychotic hiding behind her, wary of the place for some reason or another. She decided on the corner table, far from other patrons at the back, not that there were that many at this hour, Moonlighters would still be a few hours from now and the daily crowd had undoubtedly passed into their domiciles by now.

Fireplace not far from them was burning appletree and a pleasant smell of it mixed with the food on offer wafting from the kitchen with its door open, assuredly to attract a hungry passerby or two. Iza took the position with the best view towards the door and sturdy wall behind her.

Waitress finished her business with the mage at the counter who had managed to mumble his order, blinking his eyes, clearly out of sorts.

She had a warm smile and the red shirt was clearly an uniform of some sort.

Mime was trying her best to hide behind the menu held by both hands, feet on the couch of the alcove they were sitting in. Iza found the theatricality hilarious in her privacy and the waitress was surprised as she was glanced from behind the menu by one of the Psychotics in her establishment.

She was clearly about to say something but was interrupted by Iza's mace hitting the floor next to her shield and the promptly following purse of gold hitting the table turned the waitress' focus from Mime to Iza.

"Something smells pleasant, Steak of Butter, is it not? White bread and if you have a bottle of cherry wine?" She asked, letting the waitress continue the open ended question.

Gold and the abrupt interruption deadened any following questions about the presence of a non-paying customer in the establishment.

Although Psychotics of God of Humour could walk into any establishment and eat their fill with no questions asked, higher end one's, like this inn clearly was, took a dim view to such. And in turn they avoided the places unless forced to.

Maybe that is what the apprehension was, Iza had thought and had prepared her own theatre to suppress any arguments.

"Indeed!" The warm smile returned.

"Although it will take a while for the chef to prepare it, may I suggest some appetisers as you wait?"

She tapped her chin.

"I think we have a few bottles of cherry in the pillar, I do have to check."

Iza returned the warm smile.

"Excellent, we'll have two steaks and a plate of appetisers, spiced chicken?"

She dexterously handed the waitress a silver coin, far in excess of the price of the bottle and the meal for two. The Waitress's eyes showed clear surprise at the sudden wealth in her hand.

"I may be seeking a place to lay my head as well, after."

Currency did have a magical tendency to smooth over matters and the young girl was thus convinced from noting Mime as anything other than as paying customer.

"Right you are, I will get you some forthwith."

As the waitress left Iza stretched her feet below the table and outstretched her hands, letting loose the stress of walking more than half the town and levelled her eyes at the Psychotic. Mime fidgeted, finding a comfortable position to sit, having taken her feet from the couch and faced her, returning to her gentle rocking.

She wasn't sure what had attracted her to the Psychotic, maybe it was some familiarity or curiosity she felt towards the first elf she had met besides her family, but she had been, for all her faults, pleasant, energetic company.

In truth Iza could have used *Aria* and her familiar raven to locate the Guild promptly had she needed to.

Patience was a new virtue she learned after the Village of Farhome. She opened the top buttons of her tunic, the third one of its kind, worn in travels around Anvil.

She smiled at the Mime who seemed to calm at the gesture, returning the attention, or so Iza imagined at least, the Mask was clearly enchanted to hide Mime from her surroundings beyond the obvious in some way or another.

To Iza she remained unreadable as a smooth granite wall beyond the tone of the voice she clearly had some practice in using.

Former actor, possibly, she wondered, in the end that didn't matter.

Waitress was there for a moment and was gone again, leaving behind white sliced bread, a pair of glasses and a bottle of opened cherry wine and a plate of deboned chicken swimming in sauce that made Iza sigh, the food seemed to be of excellent quality.

"Eat, you seem kinda thin if I'm being honest."

She said to the Psychotic and nonchalantly tied a silk scarf around her eyes so as not to see Mime's face while she did eat.

That was expressly forbidden, if not by a bane, then by politeness and taboo.

Guise of Humor protected the identity as well and that was explained to her by the preacher in the village to be the one thing she should be careful of if encountering Psychotics.

People of Anvil didn't normally travel far and wide and as such it was for many villages easier to consider afflicted to be someone else entirely when wearing it, even if they had been well known.

She could feel the Mime dig into the food offered with gusto and soon the plate was empty as the two dug into the offering of bread and bird.

"You can actually see under that, can't you?"

Mime asked as Iza poured wine to the glasses without spilling a drop.

"I can.. Feel things with my magic to a degree. I can't tell details, colour or... people that well."

She passed the glass towards the Psychotic who gingerly took it from her, apparently careful to not touch Iza, grasping the top end of the glass with her fingers.

"Mostly its practice."

Mime giggled quietly under her breath at that.

"Much practice dinnering Psychotics, do you?"

She sipped the wine and enjoyed the tang of cherry mixing with a bite of alcohol.

"You are the first one that I have talked to, I'll admit. Practice with my magic."

"Hmmmmm, you aren't on the Path but you still do that sort of thing."

"Thing?"

Iza could feel Mime waving her arms.

"Talent thing. Usually mages who aren't on the path are like that guy at the counter, barely awake."

She had to admit Mime clearly had a sharp intuition to her.

"So, I expect no answer but what do I call you? I will call you a Mime if you don't have one to give."

"Mmmmm, not telling. Rude." She said in a flat tone and she wasn't sure if she considered the name she had given her rude or her asking about it.

Mime sipped the wine and clearly liked it.

"You aren't trying to seduce me are you? Fine dining, walk in the town, you are polite to me for no reason, clear hints about the room after. *Such leading questions too, my lady.*"

Laugh bubbled from Iza as the surprise hit her as much as her tone of voice at the last sentence being clearly overacted.

As she tried to calm herself from the fit she admitted to herself that was certainly one way to look at it. She really hadn't had time for such matters before, focusing on her journey from Grove to Grove to study and feeling that time spent in wilds hunting the monstrous and focusing on her magic was more productive than socialising.

She also realised Mime was the first person in years she had paid any real attention to.

She genuinely hadn't even considered how the afternoon must have seemed to the outsider.

"As I recall you were the one who approached me, my fair lady. *Might your intentions be honourable?*"

She returned the question in the same tone of voice and got a similar response as Mime giggled at that.

As she sipped her wine again she realised that she could be kinda, partially, maybe right in her questions. Under her blindfold she blinked a few times pondering the emotions that she had never faced before now.

So I like women? That's... new, she really has an uncanny insight to her.

"You are pleasant company, in your own, weird way." Iza continued.

"But no, I wasn't trying to seduce you."

The psychotic was silent for a good while and she could hear the glass being filled.

"How about now? I'm not *that* opposed to the idea."

If there had been a blank stare Iza was surely having one now.

Well... This escalated.

She also filled her glass in silence. They barely knew each other, Iza thought back to their first meeting today and realised Mime could have genuinely approached her with the idea in mind. As awkward as she had been, the distance between them had clearly closed and Mime seemed far more collected than initially, calm, even.

"We'll see how it goes." Iza managed.

Thankfully the awkward pause was interrupted by the Waitress and plates of food, steaming and smelling divine to Iza who had spent the last few weeks in the wilds.

Or that all could be part of the reason Mime had a mask.

"She was looking at you like you were the crazy person with that scarf of yours."

"It's not for her so she can think whatever she wants." Iza managed before her mouth was full.

They both focused on the food and soon the exceptionally seasoned steak and sides were gone.

"I uh, came on kinda strong, didn't I?"

Mime asked as Iza was removing her scarf.

"Let's put the blame on both of us, yes?" Iza responded, smirking.

"Friends?"

Clear pause as the Psychotic was clearly taken back by Iza's words.

"Friends. And no take backs!"

They finished the wine bottle in silence, occasionally interrupted by new customers walking in Iza took careful consideration of by sound and magic

"Oh yeah, I was supposed to run a message." Mime suddenly interrupted the silence.

"Im, uh, sorry, but i need to go. I really, really wish I didn't."

Iza smiled at the unreadable Mask.

"I'll find you, don't worry, I was looking for work here, and it is late, I think I shall retire for the night."

The Psychotic danced between the customers of the now filling Inn and Iza shook her head at her going. She levelled her emotions and paid for a room in the Inn.

She was indeed tired and allowed that to show.

But the one thing she was not, was a believer in coincidences.

Mime was dancing in the dark alley whistling off tune, obviously on the way to something when he was stopped by a group of three people congealing from the shadows.

Dressed in covering robes and scarf on their face to hide them.

"Give us the letter!"

Leader, or one that presented themselves as such by taking a step forward and extending an opened hand.

The Psychotic is taken back and looks behind her, stopped by two more standing behind her.

"Uh, you do know I'm wearing a Guise, riiiiight?"

Mime laughs and points at their mask.

The group seems decidedly unconcerned by the sharply approaching repercussions.

Stopping someone wearing the guise was taboo, further than that and you risk imminent pies with glass and very real cases of hitting your foot into a rusty nail.

"You *can't* be serious." Mime says out loud in disbelief.

The people behind her pull out daggers and close in, the leader takes a step and repeats his gesture, hand extended.

"The letter, bitch, or we will take it from your corpse!" The leader hissed at her.

This was clearly past rusty nails and imminent repercussions but nothing happened and the Psychotic recoiled from the man, clearly shaken and scared.

Mime blinked as the man flew to the wall to his left and crumpled into a pile of broken bones on impact.

Iza congealed from the same darkness as the men had, her fist sheathed in the gauntlet swirling with energies of deepest blue, melding into the night and the dark alley.

"Hold this." Iza said and handed her shield to the Psychotic, back towards the Mime who grabbed it reactively.

"Duck."

Mime ducked on command and Iza's firm but steady hand swung her around in place as she kneeled.

The men behind the Mime now faced a shield on the ground and the attempted assault they were on slowed.

All Iza really needed.

She took support from the shield anchored to the ground, kicked the wall to gain more momentum as she went over the Psychotic and the man on the left ate a mace to the face, the following backhand strike caused similar injuries on the one on the right even as he tried swinging his dagger wildly at Iza.

Both crumpled in place with a wet smack.

Men at the sides of the leader had taken a step back in surprise when he had hit the wall.

Now they had recovered and both had pulled daggers, clearly intent on harming the Psychotic, if Iza's violent outburst gave them pause, they didn't show it.

One of them ate a throwing knife to the heart, promptly collapsing along with his compatriots into a nondescript lump on the dark alley.

Impact fulminates magic and pulls the man off balance ever so slightly.

Slight distraction of that was enough for the remaining man in the robe for Iza to take the few steps required past the kneeling Psychotic and apply the crushing force of her mace to the right hand holding the dagger.

He didn't shout out.

Far from it, he knelt to reach for the dagger and Iza's repeating blows first dislocated his left shoulder, then mulched his right and the force of it splayed the man, disarmed, in a very literal sense to the ground.

Iza is on the man, armoured boot on shoulder, grabs his right hand and pulls, causing pain that would make anyone squeal as she twists the arm.

"Who sent you, who do you work for?"

Blood is bubbling on the scarf covering his mouth and mace pulls it back, unconcerned with the welt she makes on his face by doing so.

He grins thru gritted teeth and keeps his silence, staring daggers at Iza and apparently trying to get up.

Iza pulls on the arm and pirouettes on him, pressing her reinforced boot thru his shoulder, separating the arm from the man in a sickening noise of tearing meat.

Gush of blood sprays on the alley.

Arm she tosses to the side casually and picks the man from his throat without care towards his well being and squeezes hard.

Man chokes and twitches in the vice grip.

The blue magics swirl from the gauntlet and man is flown and pressed against the wall.

Three rapid strikes to the left leg from the mace each crush bone and destroy muscle.

"Who?" Another strike to the hip, another sound of crumbling bone.

"Do?" Mace separates the left leg.

"You?" Violent thrust to the stomach nearly hits his spine.

"Serve?" Swing to the side pulverises more than a few ribs.

Iza draws close to the man and grabs his chin, evaluating the man's eyes as he expires from the pain and trauma.

He lets the man fall from the wall and steps back, calmly tying her mace back to her belt.

Raven flies from the rooftops and whooshes along the alley towards the direction Mime came from, past the bodies and disappears into the cool night air.

She looks at the shield still in the alley, behind which Mime is hiding and smirks.

"They are dead now, you don't need to worry."

"YOU JUST TORE FIVE PEOPLE APART I'M STILL VERY MUCH CONCERNED!"

Mime shouts as best as she can behind the shield and under the mask.

"WHAT IS HAPPENING!"

Iza sighs, realising Mime is hardly used to violence like she is.

"I have been fighting bandits and monsters my entire life, I kept you safe, they didn't stop. So I stopped them."

Elf kneels next to the shield covering another and touches her hand gently.

She twitches at the touch but doesn't retreat.

"And if I were planning to hurt you, do you think you'd be screaming right now? Friends, remember?"

She picks herself up, shaking, still holding onto the shield.

"How did you know where I was?"

"I followed you, obviously."

"But why would you even do that?!"

Iza sighs and pats the hair of the Psychotic who tries her best to retreat behind the shield but doesn't seek distance from Iza.

"You are the first person to talk to me in years, you came onto me, might I remind you?"

She rolls her eyes at Mime who seems to relax a little.

"I'm paranoid, curious and this whole thing..."

She waves her hand around the alley.

"From meeting at the fountain of the Triumvirate all the way here. That's a pretty clear sign, isn't it?"

She relaxes, the heavy shield hits the ground and the sudden sound surprises her.

"Sign?"

Iza takes the shield and swings it to her back in one practised smooth motion.

"Later hon, for now go check guards aren't coming."

Iza points towards the end of the alleyway she came from.

Mime nods shakily and gingerly moves past the two bodies oozing something dark into the dirt.

It only takes a moment for Iza to detail and search the bodies. She didn't need the Psychotic to check for guards as the familiar is giving her a birds eye view of the situation and *Aria of the Wilds* is securing the immediate area around the alley in the form of music unheard.

There are no other armed people around besides the bodies.

Mime is doing her best but white porcelain mask peeking from behind the corner darting back and forth is obviously not the best method to covertly survey for approaching problems. In truth Iza just wanted the Mime to not look at the bodies while she did her grizzly task.

She touches her by the arm, gently and pulls Mime up and next to her who doesn't resist.

"Don't look back."

Iza says and starts guiding her away from the alleyway, the two walk lockstep in the road covered by lanterns.

Two blocks further Iza turns into another alleyway and let's Mime go from the gentle grasp she has held on her.

"Two options, either you stay with me and I try my best to keep you safe."

She points behind Mime, towards the road with an open palm.

"Or we go our separate ways."

She keeps a little pause to let her consider her options.

"First option requires you to do as I ask of you, even if... Whatever the reason you wear the mask says otherwise. There will be impolite questions, violence and very likely more corpses you have to see."

"Second option, there will be more corpses and I will still follow you around, I'm almost certain you will be one of those corpses."

Mime is paralyzed for a moment and then breathes out, letting the stress go and falls to her knees, breathing heavily. Iza kneels next to her and gently caresses her back.

"I'd very much like for you to choose option one. And we don't have time to discuss or go over this here."

She raises and extends her hand towards Mime.

"Trust the feeling."

Mime looks at her and sees the predatory grin.

The Psychotic decides that whatever that is, it's certainly far better than being threatened by people with daggers in alleyways. Or worse.

Crates in the alleyway give them a makeshift ladder to the rooftops, Mime might not be physically as trained and practised as Iza but is still an elf and manages to make it with only minimal help from Iza and stands steady on the roof.

She points towards one of the buildings in the distance.

"That's the way to the Inn we ate at, I paid for a room and exited via the window to the rooftops, we will make it back the same way."

She smiles at Mime.

"Tell me if you need help, it would be best if we weren't seen by anyone right now."

Mime nods, still shaken but happy to have Iza there to steady her.

The moonlight caresses Backflip and castle in the north, at the edge of the village seems even mystical than it seemed in daylight from the ground as the two elves make their way to the inn.

Iza leans to look down to the Inn where speech can be heard and sees the window is still bolted open.

"Great, now we just need to get you there." She rubs her nose.

"Trust me?"

Mime lets out a nervous giggle at the roof, taking support by crouching and laying her hands flat on it.

"No? Like, at all? Let's do it anyway. What are we doing?"

"I'm going to catch you." Iza says and disappears over the edge.

Mime suppresses a yelp and inches towards the ledge, looks down and sees Iza waiting for her with open arms in the window.

She breathes in, suppresses the panic and leaps for it.

It wasn't a gentle landing but a hastily moved mattress softens the blow enough as Iza falls to it, cradling Mime.

"Made it..."

Mime is grabbing onto Iza in panic and refuses to let go.

"I am afraid of heights and will never do that again."

Iza can feel how scrawny Mime actually is and feels her ribs through the layer of clothing as well as how light she is. Her assumption of malnourishment seems to be on point.

Mime seems thoroughly unwilling to let go and Iza finds herself enjoying the warm creature laying on top of her; she pats her head gently.

"Okay, I'm going to get up now and you are going to go take a bath."

She points with her armoured hand to the door in the room.

"O-okay."

Iza smiles and pokes her between the ribs to which Mime yelps, releases her hold and recoils from Iza to her feet.

"Rude!"

Whatever emotions and questions mime has suppressed stay untold as she storms to the bath and Iza still laying flat on the mattress.

Her mind is racing as she closes her eyes and goes over the events.

Untouchable was *harassed*, without repercussions. Without her there Mime would likely be dead. Great many things bother her and she breathes out in a long steady breath and opens her eyes.

Iza gazes at the door and smirks at herself at the concept of peeking then furrows her brow.

Busy, busy day.

The tiredness is suppressed and she knows from experience it's half adrenaline, half force of habit.

You did not relax in the wilds, ever.

Desire to fall asleep on the mattress and just rest for a few good moments entices her greatly.

Yet she collects herself from the floor and starts peeling layers of clothing and armour from herself, checking for cuts, bruises and damages.

The tunic is a loss, it has bloodstains and monster blood is wildly different from blood of a man. They weren't the first Men Iza had killed, banditry was common off the beaten path, yet here, in the town, there were no easy excuses and they would be followed by an even tighter set of questions.

The corpses in the alley would raise concerns. She hadn't had time to be gentle or considerate of the aftermath.

And Iza admitted to herself if she had been given time to think it over she would have been somewhat more...

Okay you are attracted to the Psychotic Iza, get over it already.

Nothing else is worrying and after she recovers the buttons, tunic flies to the fireplace still embering and watching it burn, Iza decides to start working.

From her pouches she recovers a set of silk green shirt and skirt with artistic brown patterns on the as well as set of undergarments. She knocks on the door of the bath.

"There is a fresh set of clothes by the door, leave yours there, I will deal with them."

She calls out and hears half of a response.

Short, to the point prayer to Lunar will get the ball rolling, she thought.

Last time someone willingly broke the mask it resulted in two wars.

She breathes in, and out and faces the Moon, its location always known to her ever since the Solstice so long ago.

She fixes the mattress and kneels towards the Moon in the night sky, from Lunar Iza hides nothing as a matter of course, having done so for so long.

In hindsight she cringes at the thought of mentioning her supposed feelings towards the Mime, she trusts in Lunar's subtlety in this matter and hopes her more childish side doesn't spread the fact around, that could be awkward, going forward.

Door to the bath opens behind her and closes again and Iza has to suppress the urge to glance nonchalantly and uncharacteristically, blushes.

Iza shakes her head at that.

She tracks her breathing manually for a while, emptying her mind of all active thought, placing one of the daggers recovered from the attackers in front of her as well as the few other valuables she detailed from the bodies.

Not much to go on, as she ponders one of the rings, it has initials detailed on it but not much more can be gained from the set of items. *DN*.

Smith's mark on the dagger could possibly be used to...

She's stopped by something soft pressing against her back and again she realises Mime has an uncanny ability to surprise her as arms surround her in a warm, soap smelling embrace and her face is pressed against Iza's neck.

Mime mumbles something she assumes is a thanks and seems to relax even if her arms tighten their hold.

She places her hand on top of Mime's and the Psychotic grasps it tightly.

Exhale in her neck sends a warm shiver down her spine and Iza suppresses the urge to do something about that.

"Can I stay like this for a while?" she whispers.

"Sure" Iza says and moves her hands to her waist and Mime takes full advantage of this and tries to slip her hand under her shirt. Firm hand stops her.

"I need my arms free though, I'm working."

Mime nudges against her, seeking a better position and the mask covered face is pressed against her cheek.

"What on?" The tone is curious and Iza is surprised by her ability to switch between gears.

Iza breathes mana in, magic out, purpose in, spell out.

She presses her will against the structure of magic and forms a construct.

Witches spell of identification and tracking.

She assumed, as the carriers of these items were dead there'd be nothing to be gained, yet she was systematic.

Slight blue tinged glow covers the items and she gains no insight, as she assumed.

She nods and stares in front of her for a moment.

Mana in, magic out, purpose in, spell out.

She holds the dagger and draws it across the back of her hand, enough to draw a few drops of blood and mime breathes in, surprised.

Spell fractures in her mind before it can be finished. Clear sign that it was not usable, she had to try but too much time had passed whatever intent and person behind the order was too far gone from the item now.

Had it worked she would know the face of one intending to cause harm.

Fine, hard way it is.

The engine is kicked, fires lit and Iza begins to formulate and plan.

There's fragility to it now, she realises, brutalistic, utilitarian plans she is used to considers the Mime, works around risk and dangers more than ever before.

"The letter? Would you tell me about it?"

"Mmmm, a trader handed it to me as he was leaving the south gate and told me to give it to the trader of a general store where I was going to on the west side."

Mime correct her position and this time Iza allows the hand to slip under her shirt and curious fingers feel her abs, stops and traces them carefully and surprised noise comes from the Mime

"Oh... Gosh."

She leans towards the head resting on her shoulder.

"Focus, Mime."

Flitter of laughter rings out.

"It's still with my clothes..."

She fades out and the hand tries to go higher, tracking the muscles on her stomach, Mime clearly being distracted by something else than the letter.

Iza considers her options, allowing Mime to continue her explorations or taking a bath... And smoothly moves away from the embrace, raising up and stretching.

"I'll be taking a bath then. Try not to run away while I do."

She looks at the dejected Mime on the ground dressed in the loaned set of green silk and internally sighs.

"Also, what do you call him?"

"Him?"

Iza motions as if wearing a mask and gets a shrug as a response.

"Great." Iza frowns and closes the door. Her dirty clothes fly in the same pile as Mime's.

The bath is welcoming but Iza focuses on washing and thought passes.

There was no dogma, no sure fire way to call God of Humor to attend, many had tried, many pies had followed.

Sometimes worse.

She hadn't time to wait for another Solstice and even then...

There was absolutely, one way to call The Triumvirate of the Seat of Madness.

Iza summons one of her knives and places it on her wrist, and considers pulling down.

And somewhere she's absolutely terrified of the part of her that considers it a solution.

She looks at herself naked in the mirror, still holding the knife.

Shiver passes her and the knife lands in the mess of dirty clothes.

She dives into the bath tube filled with warm water, some mage had a few decades ago created the bathtub and its assorted enchantments, he had died a declared Saint of Solar.

Her fingers run along the edge and manipulate the magic to warm up some and dives under the surface for a moment.

Or she could walk to the other room and punch Mime.

And her eyes wander onto the knife, probably safer, on multiple levels.

She laughs at the utter absurdity of it all.

And then she feels it, something behind her that isn't right at all and dry, hacking cough fills the air.

Iza isn't easily scared, much less surprised but this is terror, sheer, paralysing fear that takes her and makes her sit still, unable to turn.

"No, I give you the knife thing, that was inventive."

Voice feels old, skips some critical part of speech to be considered such but she reads the intent well enough and it's followed by a chuckle.

"You should be extremely careful with this line of thought. I know my sisters consider you in their favour but this line you do not trespass, ever again."

Fair warning to not test certain limits.

The feeling of fear is passing and Iza manages to speak.

"Wait..." and she is nearly choked by the pressure returning, paralysing her completely. All strength disappears from her and she slips dangerously close to the surface of water, only stopped by friction and she knows that's fleeting.

"Unless you truly pass into my domain, do not summon me again, Withcling, I will not be gentle. There will be repercussions."

"..Her.." she manages to push thru clenched teeth, pushing against the pressure of the Divine, knowing she can't win and focuses on Mime in the other room, hoping she gets through. Jingle of small bells.

Firm hands pull her from the hair up from the tub, it's really not gentle.

"And what do you pretend to know..."

The hand releases her and suddenly she's sitting in the tub, as if nothing had happened and She can feel the memories fading. It certainly happened but Godhead is going through her skull and making it not be.

"You are forgiven, Witch. This is notable."

Hand bobs her on the head and a few haha's dissipate into the steaming air, thoughtfully.

The presence is still unnerving to the extreme but not unpleasant nor does she feel compelled. She couldn't bring herself to look back.

"Very notable." Voice says, calmly now.

She can smell old socks and damp cellars, and darkness hovers just out of her sight to the left.

"It has been ages since one was called to protect the Untouchables. You have served... Most admirably. For this, a favour. Present this token to any under the Mask, they will help you."

Something cold lands on her naked chest and she finds herself alone in the bathtub again. She collects the item, it's a stylized oversized coin of silver, caricature of a face of a jester stamped on it.

And good luck with that one! raucous laughter echoes in her skull.

For a while Iza is stuck there, realising that the last part is the most worrying part of this whole encounter to her sanity and then she is reminded of the letter.

Clothes pile flies to an even more unordered mess and she retreats back into the bathtub and casually breaks the signet on it with a swift motion of a summoned knife. There's nothing specific in the letter, just this and that and a list of if not every day then common enough items to not raise eyebrows.

She goes over it twice and can't fathom why five people would risk horrific consequences for it.

Silver, barrels of grain, odds and ends, lumber and request for selection of specific gemstones be set.

This would take some doing and Iza smiles, she loved challenges.

A half idea forms, and before she knows she's filing details of it.

Mime could act.

She grins and there's no predatory tone to it this time.

When she finally emerges from the bath, having tossed the dirty clothes into the bathtub that could also serve to clean those as well as a Man, Iza admits Sainthood was most apt for whoever came up with it.

Mime has fallen asleep on the bed, no surprise, the day had been long for her, for Mime it had to have been a rollercoaster. She kneels next to the bed and feels her pulse.

Calm and steady.

Mime mumbles something in her sleep and manages to grab her hand halfheartedly while turning in her sleep.

Iza closes her eyes for a while and decides to get the part she was waiting for Mime to be out of reach for. She was scarily good at reading Iza.

Lady of Light, might I have a moment of your time.

And she feels a splash of warm sun pass her by. She can feel a yawn and stretch.

"Iza, this late? You know I need my beauty sleep."

"I thought it best to inform you as soon as possible, someone attacked an Untouchable without repercussions."

She had now the full attention of The Triumvirate of the Seat of Sun.

"Demons? Out of phase? Tell me *everything*."

The Goddess of Victory has her eternal, true opponent at hand.

Solar was reaching for her bow and considered munitions.

Now she let's the predatory grin show, these guys were *fucked*.

It takes quite a while for Solar to be happy with Iza's explanations and she seems to be focusing on details Iza considers irrelevant but she freely admits there is very little she knows about combating the Demonic.

Eventually Solar seems satisfied.

"This needs to be addressed, and rapidly, I'm calling my Priestesses over, keep the Untouchable safe until I get someone there."

"My lady, if I may?" Iza says, using a more formal tone of voice. And Solar rolls her eyes at the *Lady* but curiosity echoes.

She bends to one knee, still holding Mime's hand next to the bed so as not to wake her.

Iza recollects the Oath of Draft and doesn't even consider it.

"I swear myself upon your service, until you see fit to release me.

A swift and steady hand, let mine serve."

Solar coughs in surprise.

"This is risky, new, you could be..."

"Killed? I'm here, now, *I care*."

Solar is paused and then...

"Wait one hecking minute, you are in *love*? Oh gosh it's her. When did it happen oh my me... I want details!"

Iza's turn to stop. She was holding a hand, as was tradition but it wasn't Solar's and the realisation hits her.

"Oh."

She can feel Solar trying to hold back laughter.

"In any other situation I would let you off the hook on this, but you have to admit it serves my purpose of keeping you two safe far better than direct oath to me would, no?"

Iza has to admit that is certainly true.

"And you do have a tendency for, let's put it bluntly, excessive violence. I want answers, not a bodycount in the dozens, girl."

The sun sized grin is now blatantly obvious to Iza.

"And I have to admit I was getting worried nobody caught your eye, if I'm being honest. You were really deep into your... training."

Iza winces, caught off balance for the first time in a long, long time.

"Okay, serious talk, there should... could be a Priestess of Lunar in Backflip, if there is, your best bet is the Inn you are at, apparently the pastries have a reputation. Just say you are "Oathbound", she is certain to know it. Just don't ask her outright, you know how Lunar is. I'll try to convince her from my end to pass the message along but... As dearly as I do love her, she can be difficult at times when it comes to more... direct stuff."

Iza slips into dreamstate to decompress for a while.

To her terror she realises Mime must have done the same thing, if so, she would be aware of the Oath and the next morning would be... Interesting.

But that all disappears into the murky half-awareness of an elf, the time passes on without a sense of self but not without *Aria of the Wilds* echoing its latest masterpiece in the skull of the Grand Witch, Favoured of the Triumvirate, or so the song goes.

Aria has a tendency to overstate matters, take artistic liberties.

It still doesn't make the song any less inspiring and grandiose, it has had a long time to practise depths of it's Lady into song.

And in those songs Iza dreams how to catch and hold cultists, to find untrackable.

Morning comes and sunlight hitting Iza thru the window wakes her on the bed and it takes her moment to reorient. Mime has done her best to wrap around Iza and she wonders how she managed to pull her to the bed without waking her up.

Any slight movement and Mime will notice her waking up. Iza lays there for a moment, listening to Mime breathe steadily and enjoying the warm sun.

She pinches Mime who recoils at the sudden interaction and releases the deathgrip.

"*Rude!*" She hisses at Iza who dexterously avoids any attempts to recover the grasp.

She smirks at the Psychotic.

"You were breathing too steadily, do better next time."

Sitting cross legged on the bed she turns her mask sideways and seems to be taking that under careful consideration.

"Next time, huh?"

Iza shakes her head at Mime and laughs at the theatrical creature.

"Yes, you goofball, don't pretend you didn't hear me while asleep."

Mime turns her head the other way.

"Hm, I was sooo hoping to get a reaction from you with that. Dang It."

Iza motions towards her with an open hand and Mime grabs it, Iza pulls her close.

"So, a kiss now?"

"Fine, you'd bother me the whole day if I didn't."

Iza closes her eyes, she's not exactly sure if "Lovers" would override the Mask and unless *He* tells her so she isn't going to test the waters.

Unfortunately Iza seems to have forgotten the Psychotic is crazy.

Before Iza can react Mime is latched onto her, legs wrapped around her waist and she's doing her best to apparently stop Iza from breathing, unbalanced as she is and extremely distracted, she can't stop from being felled back onto the bed.

Iza of Featherhome decides to show the Mime there's plenty of crazy on the other side of this equation.

Breakfast was interesting, bacon, eggs and surprised, curious stares aplenty.

Elf was rare, two elves in love, one who was a psychotic was noteworthy.

Mime did her best to ignore the world and to get a reaction from Iza, Iza in turn tried her best not to be distracted and did get a reaction or two from Mime.

Thankfully shift change meant there would be no awkward questions about how Mime got in.

The morning shift waitress was very young and blushed abashedly at the two placing their order, being confronted with two unhinged actors, one who very much so removed form concerns of what others saw and one who seemed to enjoy displaying their newfound joy to the fullest extent.

Although that seemed to be interchangeable at times.

Iza had found no evidence of the Priestess of the Moon to be present, or, at least *Aria* and little sleuthing seemed to prove so.

Iza wasn't perfectly convinced but that was the way it was with Lunar.

"So, what are we doing today?"

Mime asked with a mouth full of food to the blindfolded Iza, they had taken the same seating as the previous night.

"That, I suppose, depends on you. I do have suggestions but..."

She shrugs, smiling gently back. Mime swallows her food audibly.

"I'm guessing date day is out of the question though?"

Iza shifts uncomfortably, crunching on a piece of bacon.

"I would like nothing more but I'm not only sworn to keep you safe... I very much intend to, "date day" would likely involve a bodycount. I'm..."

She's looking for the words to say she was very much incentivized to not cause those without revealing the fact Solar and she were close as they were and ultimately decides not to say anything.

She'd prefer Mime not to be subjected to any more shocks, as well as she took it, there certainly had been trepidation to her last night and that sat ill with her.

"I think we do need to leave the city for a few days, just to get some distance from your hooded friends."

"Yeah I don't do outings, never have." Mime proclaimed proudly.

"Well, consider it a holiday, it's spring and very warm outside, even at night."

The Psychotic seems unconvinced.

"And nobody will interrupt us doing what you're thinking about right now."

Iza fires back to sell the idea.

"*Rude!*" She hisses and a swift kick to her shin under the table makes Iza recoil even if she is laughing about it.

"Fine, when are we leaving?"

"After you finish, there will likely be some questions about last night and we'd better get to the gate before those questions become sharp eyed guards." She adds quietly.

"And Mime, we do need a direct route to a general store this letter was headed to."

She continues, waving the letter now resealed.

Mime nods and drops her fork on the plate loudly, prompting Iza to remove her scarf.

"Okay, it's near the eastern gate."

Iza is all ready to go, the shield swinging to her back in one smooth motion and mace tied with practised ease.

She bows ever so slightly towards Mime and extends her open hand.

"Shall we, *my Lady*?"

"Yes we shall, *my Knight*."

The two traded barbs.

Mime was enjoying the new power dynamic and seemed to be ecstatic, coming up with new ways to draw enjoyment from being tied to Iza in such an unexpected way.

Iza was far more toned down in her showing of appreciation, tempering outbursts with focus and awareness of risks surrounding them, but Mime could attest to the vigour of those feelings just under the surface.

Just a day before Mime had kept her distance and covered existing initial feelings with bubbly outburst and nonsense.

As they walked towards the east gate Mime was happy, holding Iza's free hand and slowly

humming to herself, and to her surprise, keeping her motions unobstructed and the hold light.

Whether the Psychotic was somehow aware of Iza's mind working vigorously with *Aria* and familiar or not she was appreciative of the gesture.

"That's the place"

She said, pointing at a perfectly average establishment nestled between a potter and the east gate. Iza's stare was blank and she grabbed her hand, taking it to her neck.

Mime felt something odd pass between them.

"My raven is with you, should anything happen, I will see if there's anything to be found."

She pulls the Psychotic close and gently kisses her neck, eliciting a giggle from Mime.

"Here's a coin and a list of things we need and pass the letter along too, okay?"

Mime nods and both separate with notable anxiety from each other that remains unsaid.

Iza watches as the Psychotic walks into the store with bravado and calmly walks around the corner.

She observes the passersby from the alley until she finds a moment nobody is in sight and uses her considerable dexterity to scale the wall; there's a room on the second floor where she assumes she will find anything, if it is to be found.

Aria of the Wilds has made sure nobody is in the room and it only takes Iza mere seconds on the precipitous hang to jimmy the window open and silently drop to the floor.

Her eyes scan the room and soon she is opening cabinets and flipping over documents and papers. She's familiar with most of what traders do and nothing out of the ordinary catches her eye as she rapidly sorts it all, being careful to return it all to its original place as she goes. Few gemstones imprinted with basic magic to evaluate rare stones and precious metals but nothing else of note.

She's soon back to the window and dexterously exits, closing the window back up and falling to the alley without a noise.

Quick glance around and she returns to the main road, leaning to the corner of the store, observing goings and comings of people around the gate with critical eye.

Not soon after Mime leaps from the store to the cobbles with knapsack in hand and the mask scans the road.

Iza grabs her from behind and sends her spinning a few times to the sound of laughter.

"You aren't leaving behind anything, right?"

"No, no I'm not."

Gateguards keeping watch over the stone bulwark designed to keep even the most invested monstrosity outside barely glance at the pair and soon road has taken them to the seeded fields surrounding Backflip.

Spring is in full bloom, even the most stubborn flower and tree is in full panoply, summer will soon follow.

The road turns and the two disappear into the woods.

"So you've lived in the woods your whole life?" Mime avoiding the branches and shrubs says, clearly displeased.

Iza is trying to suppress the laughter, she seems so innocent, lost in the environment and they are barely a mile into it. She breathes out and Mime catches the amusement.

"Reaaaaal funny."

Iza tilts her head and seems to be lost in thought for a moment. They are both elves, the connection to the woods has to be there, regardless of where the Mime has lived her life.

"Mmm, you could say that. I wasn't born a wildling, I did have a home and parents."

"I hate this, it's so loud and everything is... Eugh."

"Come on, just a few hundred more yards, there's a gully past the copse, we will not be seen there, calm little pond too."

"Okay." Mime says dejectedly and does her best to avoid the wildlife to which following Iza shakes her head at. It's like the Psychotic had the exact opposite way to go about the forest. She can sense the pulse of the forest and a fox scampering away from the noisy distraction. To her this is home, she supposes, even if so close to habitation, wilds and forests of Anvil are free from most but the adventurer and occasional bandit, monsters roam and to the average person it is the very heart of Anvil beating with malice and danger. Even this close to Backflip there could be parts of the wilds never seen by the eyes of Men before.

The gully is a few dozen yards wide, covered by maples and fir, it opens to a calm little pond where fish occasionally jump, chasing insects, covered from all other directions by barriers of dirt and thick trees.

With *Aria* at her side, there would be no way to surprise them, even if her attunement to the wilds wasn't enough.

"Do you trust me?"

She asks as Mime is collecting herself on a mossy outcropping, clearly out of sorts and Iza is painfully aware now that Mime is out of shape for any longer treks into the forest.

She gets no answer and turns to look at Mime.

"Bitch."

Iza is again jarred by the Psychotics ability to use her voice as a weapon when she so desires and the venomous barb digs deeper than she is ready to admit.

"I love you, I trust you implicitly." Mime eventually says after catching her breath.

"Kay, come on, let's try a thing hon."

She picks up the surprised creature and is again surprised how light she is.

"A thing, huh?" Mime says and giggles a little.

"Not that sort of thing." She returns and bites her neck gently as she carries her to the edge of the pond and the procession becomes half horseplay, half Iza trying to keep her balance. She drops Mime on another outcropping at the edge of the pond.

"Oof, rude."

She says, surprised at the comfort of where she lands.

"This is the trust part, just be here, listen and focus on the wilds, we are perfectly safe here and as weird as this seems for you... Do it for me, yeah?"

Mime evaluates Iza standing over her, hands on her waist with the unreadable mask and lets her shoulders sink.

"I'll be making camp not far if you need anything"

It doesn't take long for Iza to get a small fire going and all the sundries in place, what extras she needed for Mime to be if not comfortable, then safe was in the little knapsack and soon a makeshift tent is erected to protect from the wind and rain with and few rocks are organised to be serviceable place to stay, dry leaves serving as flooring and sticks and stones to hold her gear.

She sits in the makeshift tent made from sheets of tarp overlaid and evaluates her handiwork, larger than her average resting camp but it would serve just fine.

Few more things to do outside and Iza starts to feel at home in the gully.

She sits in front of the tent, gnawing at a piece of fir, looking at Mime at the shore, she hasn't atleast become distracted, she's hoping what she's trying will work.

As a child she took almost no time to get familiar with her surroundings in the woods, long before she ever had magic and hoped it would be like that for Mime.

Unsure at first but as time passes she's getting hopeful, this is a natural habitat for both of them after all and Mime seems very comfortable where she is.

As the sun begins to set and Mime is still holding her position, Iza feels a rabbit wander in the gully.

Soon it is stew and the scent finally drives Mime from her place at the shore towards the tent and to her amusement and surprise, Mime is not pushing the undergrowth away from her but walks along it, magic of Anvil and the forest recognizing its own.

She had hoped Mime would be more comfortable with the wilds and now wonders how deeply set this symbiosis with the forest is for them both. The Psychotic calmly sits on the forest floor and seems to be eyeing the stew with raw hunger.

Iza hands her a bowl and turns to stitch buttons into her new, this time black tunic.

Calm sets upon the small clearing for a time as moonlight brings about silence and crackling fire drives away the slight cold.

Mime eventually squirms next to Iza, laying her head into her lap and playing with a twig as Iza works the buttons. She seems to want to say something but can't put it into words.

"So why the armour?"

She finally manages and pokes at the plate with the piece of a stick.

Iza smiles at the Mime and pats her head once.

"This is the wilds after all."

She breathes in, and out, magic spiralling.

"There's a few monsters about, if they spot us, I'd want to be wearing it. Doubtful they will.

You are, after all, unbothered by this, no?"

She realises Mime must be avoiding the actual subject and lets her find her own way to it.

The Psychotic tosses and turns a few times.

"So is the music yours?"

Iza stops and looks at the back of the head in her lap. She tells *Aria* to hold an artistic pause, stopping its *Symphony* from echoing. To Iza the pause is almost unnatural.

"Still hear it?"

She picks up her head and seems to be focusing.

"Yeah, it's like, very faint.... What is that?"

Iza is doing her best to try and find it and she feels it as well.

Deathswell of another spell of protection, gasping its last in the forest, singing a familiar tune from so long ago.

Iza is suddenly standing, excited and she looks at Mime, suddenly all awake and alert.

Without telling *Aria of the Wilds* to pause she would have never noticed it, it is so faint.

There had to have been others, Iza realises, left as *Retreat* came and went.

"Oh my goddess.. Mime, you are able to cast spells, right?"

Mime is taken aback by the sudden activity but nods.

"I mean like yeah some..." and she is pulled to the edge of the pond again.

"Sit, sit!" Iza hurries the Psychotic and she silently agrees, if somewhat reserved.

Iza sits behind her and presses to Mime.

"Iza.."

"Shush, focus on the Song."

"Song, oh you mean that.." and she whispers off-tune but in rhythm with the forest.

"Yes! You have the important part, now..."

She picks up Mime's hands and holds the backs of her hands.

"Aria of the Wilds, bring her home!"

Magic to words, excitement and call of family let loose.

Aria responds with full bearing of its orchestra, elation echoes across the forest.

And Mime sees the forest and the spell, around every tree and every branch, reflected from the pond in moonlight as Iza lets *Aria of the Wilds* echo through Mime and her magic and calls what remains of it to Mime.

Years of practice makes such matters easy for Iza, she could make the nearly expended spell dance on a pinhead if she wanted to, Spell of Protection hungers for another to wield it, its similar, more tempered by its decline but unique, more familiar with Man, more close to the farms and fires in forest, Men afraid of the dark. Discordant notes where unfeeling deforestation severed and it adapted.

Where *Aria* is balanced and full noted, perfectionist, this spell is echoing more of younger races, fiery yet determined short lives of Men and the more rapid cycles, Oath is known to it, Demonic has left deeper scars.

"I present to you, one last of the masterworks of our forefathers, *Sonata of the Hinterlands*."

Iza whispers to her ear.

Under gentle guidance of Iza and *Aria* the *Sonata of the Hinterlands* falls down from thin air, from nothing and forms a book, transparent constellation of green and yellow glowing gently, winking to the Psychotic in recognition of its own as it floats down.

Iza lets go of Mime's hand and allows her to grab the falling book.

The spell slowly dims to nothing and leaves the moon lurking closer to the nightly treetops, secret cabals of witches casting spells in the forest drawing curiosity from Lunar.

With it it leaves centuries old spellwork in Mime, just under the skin.

"Sooo that's new."

She pauses, feeling it in her, *Sonata* undoubtedly beating the rhythm of its magic into its new home.

"What is all this, Iza? You aren't like, *enchanting* me, are you?"

Enchantments could capture minds, some entire groups. Such a spell would most clearly fall under the "*do not disturb*" sign on the Psychotics face.

"No, you got lucky to be in the same forest as someone with a similar spell since childhood and, well, you are an elf. I just taught you some... Elfness? Forest is part of us."

Shrug and a toothy grin flashes white in the night.

"How do you feel?"

Letting worry colour her voice.

"Okay, I mean. Weird."

Almost imperceptibly Iza can sense Psychotics little back and forth and has a new rhythm to it.

"So that's how you do that..."

Her voice wanders off, noticing a fox on the other side of the pond looking for a drink.

The following morning Iza finally had gathered enough spare time and consideration to ask some of the impolite questions she had in mind.

Although the copper hair and green dress was a lovely combination, and extremely distracting, Iza added to herself, she didn't plan to sit idle in the forest, waiting for someone else to solve the problems they faced, no matter how pleasurable the company was.

"So you are telling me you know about these... robed men before we all met in the alleyway? How long have you known these people... exist?"

Mime shifts uncomfortably on her place on a comfortable mossy outcropping.

"Ten years."

Mime seems to be avoiding the subject, as many others and Iza politely dances from one subject to another whenever she senses any hesitation, careful not to overstep.

That was worrying, this had become as a surprise to Solar, if Mime had been aware of them for a decade, that spoke more to the ability of this cult to hide from the Divine.

Supposedly impossible trait on the face of it.

There were other questions carefully worded and one which hardly fell into the matters sensitive but which Mime objected to most vocally.

"I. Am. Not. Doing. That."

Mime played with her hair cross legged and radiated annoyance.

"Think of the upsides."

"Hmph!"

"First, you get to act as demeaning towards me as you want in public."

The finger stopped and the lofty, hurt body language changed.

"Go on."

Iza waved her hands in the air, exasperated at the vehement refusal.

"You get to laze around all day, you get only the best foods and pastries. You'll be safe. Please?"

Mime leaned forward

"Only if you promise to do one thing I ask in return."

Mime said and walked around the firepit between them to sit down next to Iza.

"Okay, what is it?"

"I haven't decided yet. And."

"And?"

"You'll figure out the rest later."

The next day a wandering Adventurer was sworn to secrecy, Iza was assured the man would only deliver the letter, as requested, as he continued along his way.

They might be roughshod but fair price offered fair service, even if the method of employment was somewhat unique, rarely was one employed by an elf from the deepest forest by roadside with gold.

She was certain that the story would spread, but not until the next town.

Thick envelope contained other letters with other destinations and another coin for the deliverer.

Wheels were turning and Iza was enjoying herself imagining what the letters would cause in Backflip.

To the east was a walled caravansary that was headed by a man with exceptionally sharp eyes and who twitched each time payment was mentioned.

More than a few gemstones, jewellery and rare potions traded hands to silver gold and copper.

His equally sharp eyed younger son proved to be essential with his talent with easels and paint.

Iza sourced a covered wagon that had been sitting unused since winter in the stables, bit of polish and paint and it served perfectly as a wagon for a Noble.

Empire was wide and vast, its Nobility rarely leaving to attend matters elsewhere, mostly conducting business via letter, their duties bound them to land on which troops were trained upon.

It wouldn't be at all strange to see Noble's family travelling, however, many a bored younger

generation considered stomping the countryside to be good for the soul so carriages back and forth carrying letters and Younger Nobles was constant, if not everyday occurrence. Guards to escort were present, eagerly waiting for another payday with rarely questions asked, from gate to gate or another caravansary to another endlessly, never minding what was written or painted on the carts and carriages, or how recently.

Workers who plied their trade from safety of numbers.

Leader of one group had asked where, mentioned a price, nodded and went to organise his men with strong disinterest towards further discussion.

Bereft of a notable sum of cash Iza sat on top of the carriage, leading the horses, although the animals knew perfectly where they were going and at what pace, they would arrive at the gates of Backflip come nightfall, or slightly before at this pace.

Iza had evaluated them and was happy to let the men be, few words had been needed in honesty.

They were clearly doing what they had been hired to do and no more.

Mime had been seated inside the carriage and she could hear her tapping her foot, annoyed in a multitude of ways, having been persuaded to follow the plan which even Iza admitted had been... suspect.

But to all appearances and evidence, what approached Backflip was Carriage of a young Noble, here to enjoy the countryside and the occasional benefits of diplomacy along with her retainer.

Iza had not been subtle in instructing the sharp eyed stableboy with talent who parted after his work with a surprising fistful of spare coins and selection of Iza's inks and spare distillates for future endeavours after a Coat of Arms proudly proclaimed ownership on its sides.

Family Featherhome was here to visit the count, it's youngest prodigy on look for marriage partners and favours, future and present.

Count had been informed by letter beforehand, as were certain traders and clothiers.

That the noble was indeed an elf was not unheard of, and that Family Featherhome was clearly a fabrication, could be dismissed to the history of the Empire, families, their branches went and came as the needs of Draft were measured.

It was convincing enough fabrication that it would be taken at face value.

Caravan Guards separated the company a few dozen yards from the gate, having nothing to do with Gate Guards and retreated to a lean-to and few tents at the side of the gate where others like them waited in company of another cart.

Gate Guards had one look at the coat of arms, smiled and waved the carriage forward, as they had been expected there, brave enough men to stop nobles at gates were few regardless.

Backflip was much like they had left it but this time people made way to the carriage as they approached the Villa on the northern side.

As they approached the inner gate two guards at the ready on each side took their attention admirably and didn't move a muscle as the carriage passed.

It was low castle, the second layer of wall providing a bulwark and protection to the initial fortification constructed here, nestled within rock space inside the inner wall was still spacious enough to offer room for greenery, of which there was enough to seem like a forest between two crags of sheer rock wall nestled tight between the castle and wall.

Spare resources for any siege, Iza wondered at the forest and gauged it too well kept for that, it had been someone's passion for quite a few years. She could see hidden walkways in the trees, covered by kneehigh bushes here and there.

In front of the imposing, forward leaning facade of the castle a man in well kept black clothing was waiting with his arms behind his back and another at attention next to an opened door.

Iza pulled alongside the man, jumped down to the door of the carriage, motioned to move it and was stopped by white gloved hand, Iza leaned in and whispering voices were heard. She leaned out and the hand disappeared out of sight.

Iza climbed down and approached the curious man who evaluated the approaching Iza. One of the caravan guards had had a serviceable rapier that had caught Iza's eye in its ostentatiousness.

Few words had convinced the man closer inspection and the sturdy mace had exchanged hands along with a whole gold coin.

It was fine example of function over form for such a weapon of finesse, its sheathe was most of the appearances, the two were clearly a pair but the plainness of the blade was a stark contrast to the wolf head growling at the tip and pattern of cloud formations carefully etched into copper edgewise along the wooden shaft inked red.

Meanwhile the blade was a dwarven masterwork sharp enough to pierce toughest monster hide with ease, leaving no illusion as to its use as a weapon of war, only aesthetics it carried was guard mirroring the cloud formations in shape and a hoop to attach a flair to, old knitted top hanging from it had taken the toll of its road and now had white silk scarf knotted thru it. It left an impression on Iza's left hip.

She had abandoned the loose fitting hiding tunic and pants and now the shined dwarven plate and armguard drew attention.

Spare white skirt with golden embroidery that had found its way to Iza's bag was suitable, if attention seeking addition and left arm covered by fine quality silken undershirt with widening sleeves waved after her arm, under it a wrist guard with throwing knives attached.

"It seems my Lady is extremely nauseous, the cobbles, I'm afraid. She assures us she will be with us in a fair moment's time."

Expression of understanding passed the man's eyes and he motioned towards the opened doors by which another man wearing a guardband of a sergeant stood out of attention now.

"We best inform Count, if you'd follow me."

Man now leaning to the doorframe took an evaluating look at Iza as she passed and went unreadable and then by her.

The Lord of the Castle, by the Grace of Lady Light, Count Merving was surprised by his manservant, not the guest of honour entering but calmed his expression and genuine curiosity peaked in his eyes.

Iza evaluated the man and found much to be admired, he was a muscular man with a mighty moustache, sleeves of his plain shirt he had rolled up as if to display his hairy arms.

Vanity seemed far from the Count but his well kept pants, heavy set gold buttoned boots and sash of displaying the coat of arms of Backflip proudly gave an impression of a man who worked for his position as much diplomatically as in the training yard.

The Kicking Donkey of Backflip and its humorous references was displayed proudly and Iza could see the same sort of evaluation being reflected back as she came into view.

She wasn't sure how much of Count's appearance was planned but sweat stains and the very presence of muscles spoke to the authenticity of the experience in front of her.

He was practised enough to keep what he noticed under an emotionless mask, as did Iza.

She stopped a few steps past the door, feeling the stare of the sergeant in her back.

His eyes wandered from Iza to the manservant who whispered something to his ear.

"Ah!"

Said the count, clearly relieved.

"We can talk openly then, I see by your bearing you are well travelled, soldier?"

Iza took a step forward, curtsied minimally and lowered her eyes for a moment before looking back in the Counts eyes.

"Retainer of Family Featherhome, Iza. I am a sworn servant of my Lady Featherhome, so blessed by her name."

She greeted formally, raising her left hand to heart as a salute.

Count instinctively responded to the salute without a moment's pause, eyes glinting at the surprise of lack of given name.

"She apologises profusely and will be with us in a moment."

Ize moved her feet, hoping to convey unease and count nodded Iza to continue.

"My lady is also Blessed by the Mask of the Guise."

She coughed gently into her left hand and Count's as well as the man servant's eyes widening at the words as they changed looks rapidly.

"Do continue, and there's, uh, no need to be so formal between us, situation is clearly extraordinary, I'd certainly appreciate... as much clarity as you can give me."

Count said, interrupting himself as the invocations and taboos of the mask stopped him temporarily.

Iza still kept up the attention but let herself relax visibly.

"Situation is as complex as you can imagine. Lady is... well enough to continue her duties as Lady Featherhome. In truth, her Father, Blessed be his name, was convinced that journey would be.. Clarifying upon the matter."

"I am terribly sorry you could not be informed beforehand of this sensitive matter but I am sworn to keep the matter such. I apologise for any failures in protocol or inconvenience this may cause you but upon my honour, she won't cause undue concern. You may question me further upon these details, but for now, my Lady sits outside, unannounced and we are sorely in need of rest and recuperation, her enthusiasm for travel is only tempered by her physical unsuitability for it."

She bows her head gently again and Count is nodding to himself.

"Curious matter which I will leave in your capable hands as you enjoy my full hospitality."

Cont smirks knowingly at Iza.

"I am sure my curiosity will force me to discuss matters further but let that not be a requirement for hospitality under my roof, nor answers to such, House Featherhome is most welcome in its totality."

Iza drops the pretentiousness a touch, her training by her mother in these matters had convinced the count she was indeed in the service of a noble but she wasn't sure the bitchfaced soldier persona would pass inspection to the Count for longer.

And she lets a slight quick smile pass to her lips.

"This is my Butler, Mr. Asimmon, ask if you have specifics and these two.."

Count motioned to the left side of the wide atrium where two young maids were waiting quietly at ease with curious looks on their faces.

Golden and brown hair, plain clothes, aprons with stitched flower patterns.

"Are my lovely wife's handmaidens, they are at your service and will see the needs of your Lady to perfection. Amalia and Willow."

First the brown head bops, then the golden, Iza can feel the intensity of the curious stare from the two young girls and does not need to guess at the reason, the fabrication was flowery prose.

"But in truth, now you peak my curiosity, Iza of Featherhome."

The gaze tries to best pierce Iza and she isn't sure how much of her passes the inspection.

"Might you divulge my curiosity on that?"

He motions towards the man who has silently waited by the door.

"Sparring match, perhaps? Sheathed, if you will, I always indulge myself by inviting people to challenge my man at arms to test their mettle."

Iza isn't sure if the Count meant the mettle of the sergeant, man at arms who she now evaluates or hers.

But he looks upon the man who in his leather chestguard seems to hold steady under the gaze of the blue eyes deepening to purple.

He is armed with a longsword in sheath but carries it with trained confidence, Iza is unsure how much that is innate. He has mastered the expression unreadable to Iza.

Sergeant squares up towards Iza and she obliges, returning the gesture, facing man head on, he bows slowly and extends his hand.

"Garret."

He intones abruptly.

"Iza of Featherhome." She says and both exchange firm handshakes.

"Shall we?" He says grabbing his longsword with right arm.

In the militant culture of Anvil it would be impolite to decline, especially as this was a sheathed duel. Iza could decline but it would reflect badly on her House, she wasn't sure if this was some political game at the end of it but he had to give the count he was good at playing to opportunities if that was the goal.

Iza brings her left hand to the rapier and internally screams, she has no practice to speak of with a rapier.

Few swings at the smithy ages ago had familiarised her with the weapon to the degree she wouldn't hurt herself in a mock duel but any advantage would be hard fought.

They both stepped backwards and the Count took a comfortable position at the staircase, opening towards the back of the room, making way for the pair to duel.

His eyes glinted at excitement and apprehension crossed across the face of Mr. Asimmon next to the count.

She wasn't expecting such a militant welcome but isn't surprised by it.

Duels are a common pastime and matters of honour, good manners with wooden implements and holstered weapons to test one another.

Anvil demands militancy and culture reflects it.

They were twenty feet apart, facing each other and Iza knelt down, working the silk scarf to tie the weapon to the sheathe, Garret pulled a leather strap from his pocket and tied his, clearly in a practised manner, mock duels and practices had to be everyday occurrences here.

Veteran of the training field meets a veteran of life and death.

Iza swung the rapier a few times wildly, with her right arm, confirming that sheathe would separate and Garret returned the gesture with his longsword.

Man took a firm two handed grip of the weapon and planted his feet at the ready.

If Iza was to lose this, she would do so in style and bravado, there was always the possibility she would win after all.

She tossed the rapier to the air, pointed her left arm towards Garret's face and caught the rapier with practised ease.

His expression held steady, looking at the mouth of the wolf now pointed at his face.

Not one to wait for further signal, Garret took a step forward and brought the longsword down as an initial swing, measured, far from Iza but with intent, he allowed the guest to set the initial reaction.

Iza pirouetted the sheathe and struck more momentum the the passing blade and with a twist of a wrist swung it towards the face the man, stepping clearly inside his defence.

Garret recoiled at the sword suddenly in his face, although it passed far enough for him to not to be in any real danger of being hit by it.

Few more, escalating swings of intensity and talent from the man were recoiled by Iza with violence, footwork and the turn of a blade.

Her elven reflexes helped immensely with such a light weapon and lifetime of swinging implement of pain against those with intent to kill meant Garret was foiled in each of his probing attacks.

Iza sees through it all and is only held by the unfamiliarity of the rapier.

After a dozen or so swings of trying to find the rhythm, both looked at each other steadily, now ready to take measure of each other in honesty.

Aria gives a staccato.

No more testing, no more probing.

Downward swing into a thrust, and Garret wasn't holding back, aiming at Iza's core with seemingly reckless abandon, either hoping to end this instantly or with as little effort as possible.

He was in his thirties, clearly having practised from early age on the training fields and against multitude of opponents with all sorts of sharp objects to get hurt by, his swinging thrust had surprised many an opponent and it would do so again, no mean amount of monsters had passed his steady stare alive.

He is a man, trained and practised.

But against veteran of the Wilds, Witch and Elf, he had no hope of landing even near.

Garret was deadly serious, his pride had been hurt under the unreadable mask, Iza had pressured him from the first swing to the last with ever increasing tempo, he could feel the effort piling up and wagered all on his gambit.

To Iza, this was an all too familiar move, effective as it was against less trained opponents, bandits and monsters of the wild, Iza had had three years in the wilds and trained moves were traps to find others in, not how fights were won.

As she saw Garret going for the swing, a slight curve of his shoulder told her all she needed to know, sidestep, step forward and Garret's reaching thrust reinforced by a long step brought him as if baited to Iza's rapier.

She continued the move effortlessly to the opposite direction of the man's motion, a step and the whole length of the rapier passed the man next to his head and gauntleted arm tapped his left shoulder as she passed, she pirouetted behind him and took a ready position.

The man slumped, his effort spent.

Iza had still assumed the duel would go on, she was hardly feeling pressured although admitted she had seen few men as ready with the blade as Garret and was expecting more to follow.

The Count exploded in laughter, having kept silent for the duel.

"Where in the heavens do they teach you to dance like that! House Featherhome sure showed us!"

Baritone laughter echoing from the man sounded out as Garret faced Iza and tied his sword back to his hip, bowing, with genuine respectful look, slight nod and hand sweeping sweat from brow. Iza released her stance and bowed back, tying her weapon.

Count sees in Iza the Path of the Quest, frightful power to slay monsters and reads the insecurity as holding back.

Garret knows a monsterslayer faced him and held back.

Grand Witch deceives the Count into believing a Knight of the Quest won the duel.

Men-at-Arms train and work as an army, Quester is a weapon.

And deception gains its first layer.

As if not to let others direct the discussion, Iza glanced meaningfully towards the open door and spoke.

"I shall see if my Lady has recovered enough to be presentable."

Count motioned to Iza to continue and with slight curtsy she turned his back to the count.

She wasn't letting herself unwind completely yet, by now Mime had to be pissed beyond all measure, having to wait for so long, presenting motion sickness had supposed to been a plot to politely get a word in edgewise about the Guise as to allay suspicions if the act would fail, not something that was supposed to expand into a duel.

Iza was right, as soon as she jumped up to the door Mime buried her fingernails deeply into Iza's left arm, leaving marks.

"Rude!"

She weighed her words to be the bloodiest insult she could and Iza winced, not from the pain but knowledge that Mime would take full advantage of their positions to convey her displeasure.

"Complications." Iza whispered back. "They challenged me to a duel while your Ladyship was recovering."

"Yeah let's just get this over with."

"Two maids in the room, they were assigned to watch us I assume, but they'll see to your needs, just remember, if they get suspicious just laugh it off, we are relying on the mask a lot."

The fingernails bit deeper and Iza wasn't sure if drawing blood was the intent. Mime had been insistently against this arrangement so much so that Iza worried she might have actually annoyed the Psychotic past some limit.

Whatever the reason, she was against it as much as she was avoiding the subject. Yet she had agreed in the end.

Mime let go and Iza opened the carriage door, she saw from the corner of her eye a stableboy and after helping Mime down from the carriage, she took her position at the front of Mime, half out of necessity and half to avoid seeing her.

Iza admitted to herself she might have a tendency to collect unnecessary, pretty things but had never assumed she would ever need this one.

She took five steps inside the house, took a step to the left and announced the Psychotic.

The widening eyes of the Count just reinforced Iza's assumptions and deepened her despair.

"May I present, Lady of Featherhome, Blessed by her Line and Guise!"

As she turned to face right, the slack jawed expression from Garret's face was exactly as she imagined this would go. There was no way the sharp instincts of Mime would not notice the expressions. Even the maids in their position at the back started to whisper.

Iza had to admit the white dress looked good on Mime, it was an unadorned but gemstones set in gold and sparkling emeralds only highlighted the snow white complexion and messy copper hair.

Her mask allowed to shape its appearance at will, magically, a rare, if somewhat obscure ability only really useful to a Psychotic.

Or an expensive tool for an actor.

It was pale white, featureless and without expression or blemish.

Simple as the robe was, it was of fine cloth, cut not deeply but widely around the next to sharp fold at the middle.

She was otherworldly apparition, the porcelain skin melded to the mask and she radiated steadiness from under the riches and the dress, so suited to being in court, any princess of the empire would have blushed out of jealousy at the presence she projected.

Her gauntness hidden by the padding and her being an elf making her almost alien to the count.

Sonata of the Hinterlands spun myth into air from a choir and cheated the eye with illusion ever so slightly.

Haunting silence set upon the hall as Mime folded her arms in front of her and an unreadable mask of a Mime bowed ever so slightly to the Count.

She leveraged the full fear of the Guise of Humor to her side, Iza thought, unreadable porcelain doll and she had to very much do her best to not show any emotions.

Until that very moment Iza had been unsure if they would get laughed out of the castle or not but Mime stole the attention and for a moment Iza believed her own fabrication.

Lady of Featherhome was in attendance of this place, fey princess of otherworldly places and tragic fate deigned to gaze upon this hall.

She had seen her in the dress, of course, it had to be test fit and fine needlework was required to make it fit so smoothly. But Mime had hardly been happy with it nor even tried to make it work before.

Now she most certainly did, brattiness and nonchalant wiggling while being fit was gone, replaced by radiating youth and calm steady appearances.

"Most enchanting evening, Count Merving of Backflip."

Iza realised Mime was far, far more talented at this than Iza ever could hope to be as the voice melodically and clearly rang out in the room.

"Exquisite pleasure to have you as Honoured Guest, Lady of Featherhome."

Count Merving didn't stumble his words but he certainly looked like he would at any moment lose his composure and either run away or kneel to profess his eternal love.

He blinked and steadied his expression in a flash.

"We have prepared dinner, my wife will be joining us soon I trust. I hope you will join us."

Iza could see that partly Count hoped Lady would decline the invitation, she wasn't sure what she saw but it felt like fear.

"I am famished, actually."

She said casually, not dropping the act but words weren't acting now.

"She."

Mime said, pressuring the word to be accusatory.

"Felt best we pressed on the last leg of the journey. We felt it best that we slept in proper beds tonight after such an exciting Journey. And here we are, hungry, at the mercy of your chef's offerings."

The Count nodded towards his left and Garret extended his hand towards a hallway.

Iza studied the artwork in the hallway as they pressed forward, shoulder to shoulder with Garret. As they stopped at an open door where the waiter was ushering them in, Iza caught a glimpse of Mime in the hallway, she was floating near motionlessly next to the count and in normal voice returned the small talk.

She looked like some spirit, summoned from the world of the dead, detached, cut out from the candle lit warm hallway, radiating calm cool steadiness of non awareness as she went save for the unkempt mess of red hair and voice from under the mask.

Iza wasn't sure what to think of that.

"A second, Count."

She called out and turned to face Iza, and motioned to approach.

"And no dinner, bad girl, shoo. Or I act up."

She whispered quietly as a mouse.

Iza took a step back, bowed and left Mime to her own devices; she was pretty sure she wouldn't cannibalise her hosts during the dinner.

"Duty calls, I must see to our wares." She curtsied and did her best to calmly walk back to the carriage.

She had passed exhaustion with Mime, seeing her in the hallway as she was.

She wasn't sure what that was but it sure left an impression on her. She was rarely given to a lack of focus but she had already unpacked the chest and a knapsack at the stables where she found herself to be before she caught up to herself again. Garret had managed to appear outside, in his customary manner of leaning to something, it seemed.

"Need help with those?"

He passively called from within earshot.

Iza nodded.

"I would appreciate a room to take these in, a private one, if you have one available."

"We were expecting at least five men so you have the entire cabin to yourself, come and go as you please, after that I'll show you to the kitchen."

She could hear the question as she picked up the luggage, shouldering the knapsack.

"Ask away."

"Pardon me Ma'am, your arm." Iza looked down and saw a few drops of blood painting the silk red.

She had broken skin. It was certainly noticeable enough.

She realised she was smiling and stopped awkwardly. Garret shook his head at her.

"I don't mind saying you two certainly are a pair. You can look after yourself so I don't figure that sort causes you any real danger. Should we be looking out for that sort of thing, if you don't mind me asking?"

Iza shook her head as she stopped Garret and nodded at him to lead the way.

"As long as you don't peer past the Guise of Humor, she's harmless as a kitten."

She nods towards her arm and shrugs as best she can.

"This is a kitten playing with her favourite toy. Pay it no mind."

Garret seems apprehensive but accepts it.

Iza wasn't so sure, she hadn't really thought what actually was under that mask, if the eyes were as lifeless as the presence she projected in that hallway.

Garret showed the cabin, tucked way in a corner, covered by woods, he showed where light was showing and informed her of the open kitchen.

He was strangely apprehensive even if words were welcoming. As he had shown the cabin and lit the light, he soon excused himself and disappeared towards the kitchen.

Iza dropped her luggage on one of the beds and stretched a few times as he felt Garret disappear into the *Aria* and the noise coming from that way.

Around the perimeter she went, there were no obvious weak spots, naturally, so Iza looked for the unnatural and arcane, more thorough exploration would have to wait.

She focused and felt the deep thrum of harnessed power, steady, nigh unbreakable.

Satisfied and feeling the hum of something magical from deep within the walls.

Reinforcement, dwarven skill and mages had poured more than effort into foundation.

In the first wars Demons had broken walls like paper mache, neverminding gates for their siegework.

Second war had met Demons apprehensive of fortified bulwarks after Men after skirmishes had stopped, initial sweeping attacks turned into probing advances and finally to dead stops. Artisans had a century to practise for Backflip.

These inner walls and gates could not be crossed by force of arms, easily, if at all.

The forest around the blocky caste was pulsing with its own magic.

She could feel the Lady of the House in each spell, careful cultivation had done most of the work but here and there flower bed was maintained and beehives lured.

Countess Merving was no mean spellsmith and she was almost distracted from her hunger by one of the more grandiose flowerbeds.

But then the growling of her stomach alerted her to reality.

She danced along the forest, concealed by spell and song, never minding the premade paths and leaving no trace of her passing.

She stopped outside the kitchen that was open to the night air and filled with talk. More than a dozen men in leather cuirasses were enjoying meals of all flavours, in Backflip they ate well in the army.

She rang the worn pot hanging from the ceiling, gaining the attention of the tables set and one of the chefs scurrying about.

"Knight Iza? Take freely, welcome to Backflip."

The tone of the discussion changed notably, Iza had gotten the blood soaked sleeve with a few pulls of a throwing dagger and while taking her pick of the food on offer she admitted she also had certainly projected a presence of her own.

Her elven ears caught a few sentences here and there and few not meant for her too, she enjoyed the cooking, simple, but fulfilling. She wondered how Mime was dealing with it, Lady Featherhome, she corrected herself.

Knight Iza. She tried to fit the word to herself and realised it was far too late, she was the knight in shining armour now.

She had defeated master at arms in a duel effortlessly after all.

Princess Empty. That bothered her but then she saw a familiar brown head of hair and realised one of the serving maids, nothing is fast as gossip.

She took eye contact with the maid who blushed, Iza motioned her over.

"Yes, lady.. Knight Iza."

Young, maybe twelve, but attentive stare, even if she seemed to have been caught in the middle of doing something bad.

She corrected herself midway through and Iza noticed everyone was paying attention to the interaction, or pretending not to be. She motioned dismissively.

"Just Iza. I would like to be shown the most direct route to My Ladyship's room, could you do that for me?"

"Yes.. Iza."

She seemed taken back and shaken but well practised enough to not let that stop her from following requests from guests of honour and snapped to the doorframe enthusiastically.

"This way!"

She troped through a hallway with Iza in tow and unbeknownst to anyone in the castle *Aria of the Wilds* danced through every crack and crevasse as they went.

She entertained the girl with idle chatter and answering most pointed questions of which most relevant were related to Princess, she expertly avoided the subject with nonanswers.

The door was Anvil masterwork, as were rest of the furniture, from every corner could be seen few other examples depicting some hero or an adventurer standing on top of a nondescript monstrosity most commonly.

To this someone had enlarged some fantastical flower and scaled it to take the whole door, the maid enthusiastically busied the door open and opened every cabin to display spare clothes and this and that.

She nodded and sent the girl on her way with a pat.

She realised there was very little else to be done but to wait.

Hour stretched to another and her eyes were boring a hole into the flower until shuffle in the hallway alerted her to someone approaching, guards made a racket as they passed on their rounds, metal clinking and had respectfully nodded to Iza as they passed.

The golden haired girl approached, with a serious expression on her face and behind her floated Lady Featherhome.

Girl excused herself as soon as possible and left the Mannequin, *Princess Empty*, facing her Knight.

Mime said nothing but motioned towards the door which she opened for her.

The uncanny feeling disappeared as soon as the door closed and Mime caught her in a bearhug.

"Wow, okay that's exhausting."

She brought her hands to the mask and Iza dutifully closed her eyes.

Gentle peck at her lips and she pulled away again.

"I'm sorry about the nails, I really am. And I need sleep."

She tapped Iza on the shoulder as an agreed sign to open her eyes again.

She seemed Mime again, somewhat dishevelled and slightly out of it.

"I don't know what that was, but I'm into it."

She was sure Mime was blushing under the mask but could still not get a read on her emotional state for certainty.

"So what do I do now? Just... wait?"

"Focus on the spellbook, it will become handy sooner or later, remember the basics."

She shook her head, dejectedly.

"If you can keep up that act, do it, I... I need to do the part where people can get hurt and I can't do that while I'm watching you, okay? You'll be safe here, Count seems honourable by all accounts and there's nothing dangerous here. Aside from the Draftees protecting you.. and *Sonata* knows *Aria*, I'll know if you need me."

Iza realises she was blathering and that distance from Mime bothered her more than she had realised.

They exchanged embraces and Iza hurried along to her cabin.

As Iza relaxed in the dark of the cabin *Princess Empty* haunted her, yet she didn't mind the company.

Iza was free to go as she wanted and next week passed more in a haze of activity than some concerted effort, careful word there, coin here, suggestion there, lost letter and few not so lost letters in right places.

She felt like a spider in a web as she was becoming somewhat of a popularity in the town.

Good manners and shining chestplate persuaded the average ne'er do well to keep distance and even the most wealthy merchant to mind their manners.

And the gossip, there was so much of it.

Some she gently added along with a careful non answers and long stares to drunk or audacious questions.

She had even seen a few Untouchables who seemed apprehensive but a glance at the coin made them respond with a sort of *I-guess-I-have to* attitude which was how one of them literally responded with.

Few thieves plying their trade suddenly found themselves answering questions to a very shiny chestplate, apprehension soon traded to greed as the coin changed hands.

Then, she realised all she could do was to wait, patiently, matriarch of spiders in her web, pieces set.

Mime and Iza were now seen together more often, Mime often retreating to her room for hours, Lady of Featherhome only to be seen in the presence of her guardian, projecting the otherworldly fey creature and spending less time as time passed with her captor-hosts as Mime clarified she felt in the castle.

Lady Merving was utterly entranced with the persona of Lady Featherhome and treated her like a lost Empress.

Terrible tales abound of the curse of the princess and her knight's hopeless quest to save her, when from dragon, when from terrible undead menace.

Each night Iza told Mime of the latest in the woeful tale of the Princess Empty and her Knight, the psychotic could not stop laughing, muffled giggling being buried in the pillow. This only added to the myth as the two sharp eyed and soft footed maid girls documented what they could and eavesdropped the rest.

Princess Empty was stark raving mad and had to be restrained by her knight each night to be able to sleep lest madness take her entirely.

Mime's biggest problem was boredom and consequently she was always asking more about the spell from Iza in her own odd way, Iza had no idea what Mime retained from the answers but *Sonata of the Hinterlands* was more whole by the day and Mime's control over it grew in surprising leaps.

Mime had managed to make herself undetectable in magic and invisible to Aria, she suspected it had something to do with the Guise and the *Princess Empty* persona but couldn't fathom how. *Sonata* had clearly decided to play whatever tune Mime was beating to and had left *Aria of the Wilds* to its assumed sanity.

She could see Mime clearly but some part of her was just gone to all senses and Iza was so used to magic the experience was jarring, it wasn't *nothing* it was just *air*.

As seemingly were the rest of the cultists.

The five men had been reported as dead but nothing came of it, no aggrieved family or hurried recruitment in alleys.

As Iza was making her way to another meeting she finally spotted her quarry, or at least the better half of it.

The Priestess of Lunar, as two merchants in a silent but heated debate, were watched over by a young woman in midnight blue robe and a set of decorative chains doing her best to appear nonchalant in clear view of all, but still covered from direct sunlight under a decorative willow tree.

Her first hint was the complete silence. Sphere of Privacy muted all noises to the outside observer, Priestesses stock in trade, secrets.

For a notable sum one could entice Priestess to secrecy of a matter.

Provided a curious pair of ears heard it as well.

Lunar had found some very dear friends who found the concept of the Great Game so appealing they dedicated their lives to it and in doing so reaped benefits and gained powers to conceal and obfuscate the real world in return.

The silver chains depicting moon in its various stages, stars and single gold strand hanging from belt and sleeves shows this ostentatious specimen has become well accustomed to the more higher class lifestyles.

Their talents at concealment meant they heard and saw a multitude of things not meant for others as well, Lunar's Chosen could walk unseen in daylight to the tightest guarded vault in the Empire, disturbing not a mouse.

The Great Game had no fools and divine hand guided the journey.

Sphere obscured more than hearing, Iza could see no details on the two merchants but could infer they were in a fight as hand motions flew.

Priestess not paying attention to the debate highlighted this.

She stopped on one of the stalls to assess offerings of handmade delicacies and second glance confirmed the matter, the priestess had only silenced the merchants and had not included herself.

She was observing the street, blue eyes and brown locks of hair darting up and down the road now and Iza assumed she was waiting for something and preferred no distraction of the argument.

Iza finished her purchases and pivoted instantly to face the Priestess, half concentrating on the spell, half gazing up the road.

Her decorative chains rang as she changed her direction and Iza could hear windchimes.

There was curiosity in her eyes as she saw the elf and Iza passed extremely close, enough to make the smell of cinnamon flow.

There was a small table under a willow cultivated to offer cover from sunlight, behind, not five feet from the Priestess.

Iza grabbed one of the chairs and sat with a table between them.

She made sure to make enough noise to get a second glance from the priestess who obliged not soon after.

"Oathbound, come, join me, we shall slay demons and enjoy pastries."

Direct address was a faux pas, but not directly forbidden. For a moment the young woman is still frozen by it.

Divinity reacted, the priestess heard "demon", saluted and mentally stepped into formation and every single Priestess of Lunar had the same weakness, sweet things.

Innocence of Godhead echoes and mirrors.

Herald of Moonlight moves in a whirlwind of windchimes and midnight blue, finds seating and a crescent moon sparkles in the corner of an eye as the Sphere of Privacy slams around the table.

She has almost taken a bite before motion stops and she gauges Iza with curiosity before half of the cinnamon bun disappears.

It takes three pastries for Iza to get through her explanation and at the end of it eyes stare at the bun remaining on Iza's plate.

She lifts it and theatrically picks it up, out of reach.

"Or am I talking to a dog on a leash?"

It takes her for a while to process the insult and she pauses.

Eyes move with purpose from the pastry to the Witches face and she crosses her arms on top of the table.

"I am not trusting my loved ones to fools. Much less to the useless." Iza continues.

Annoyance and hint of respect, maybe flashes.

She disappears from all sight and sound into thin air, at the edge of perception she can see her reaching for something and knows an attack telegraphed in motion.

In the priestess sphere of control, under divine guidance, invisible.

Iza follows her movement from momentum to the best of her ability and pulls out two knives and rings air, first one gathers Witchmight, second moves the willow in a gust of air and before she can move to the third to ignite thunder from air, two fingers pressure on her neck. The willow cast a shadow on her and priestesses walked on shadows effortlessly, from one hidden place to another as one.

She's a veteran of the road and champion of things caught in between.

When Path of the Quest calls for a light in dark places, Priestesses respond to bless the journey and steal all the sweet things.

Iza theatrically drops her knives on the cobble and the priestess moves her fingers away, moving to Iza's left to recover the bun from the ground in between the shadows.

Iza concentrates and from daggers sparks lightning and gravitic sparkle recoils from ground in a flash of blue to open palms.

Both of them internally wonder how it would go but neither feel the need to pressure the matter further.

There were cultists to hunt after all.

Capable companions lighten the journey.

Priestess relaxes and the enchantment disappears into thin air.

"Moon Capricious, grant illusion and uninterested gazes, conceal our path."

Another sort of sensation settles upon the cityscape.

"Others will now see the least uninteresting thing today and their looks shall flow from us."

She whispers and returns the steady look.

Priestess communicated with whispers, reserving her speaking voice for prayer and actualizing Godmight.

They made barely twenty steps down the road when the priestess let out a long sigh.

"I feel bloated. Shouldn't have eaten that last one. Megan, Megan of Wayward. You didn't hear that from me."

More than a few things in confidence slip to the pair, ultimately picture forms.

Two days later the duo found one of the robed cultists roaming the southern edge of Backflip's internal wall.

They take with sudden invite and letter, to places unseen and hidden and out comes a human that goes about its task feeling neither pain nor emotion.

Most innocuous of letters can be an invite to doom.

Cultists had been chasing the wrong letter, one they were following left with the courier from the gate, the Psychotic had gained a gold for one late one and cultists had taken no chances.

Courier now wore a robe at night and blankly carried his task now.

At the end of the night they had identified four cultists and seen six more, carrying messages forward.

Iza had a plan, Megan grumbled but ultimately agreed and thugs met a cultist and left apologising sincerely.

Paid informant met cultist, letters exchanged

"House Featherhome leads another cult."

Was the message, essentially.

Next thing was to infiltrate a cult gathering and by chance and ear in the right place such an opportunity did present itself.

Under cover of night and blessing of the full moon the two disappeared into the alleyways and soon to the abandoned house, between wallboards and holes in ceilings and from keyholes, was the function of the cult determined.

Shells of men mutilated themselves to give service to function and decay of the world.

For the demonic, to seed lands with discord to meet their masters in destruction.

For entropy, for the end of anvil, men carved welts into the body and were protected from pain and instantly rewarded by painful scarring by the tainted magic they summoned with these rites of debasement.

Hand stayed that night not from compassion but cool, calm determination of the fact that these weren't the only practitioners of the profane in Backflip.

Few exchanged letters later Iza would duel the Count openly to defeat to spark rebellion.

Megan was nowhere to be seen in the waking world during the entirety of it.

Many sigils were carved to stone in anticipation by a witch in moonlight watched over by a Priestess with a bag of sweets.

It took very little to entice the other cult to play its hand early, prematurely, especially as some were read into the threat, or paid to act in a certain way.

And cultists had been more than generous funding their own doom.

House Featherhome was a legitimate venture, cultists coffers emptied and never once flowed back promised support.

One last inflammatory, grandiose and precise letter left her hand, all she needed was a response.

Signal to launch the rebellion was more than just for the cultists and more than few of those on Path of the Quest stood ready to heighten the tally by a cultists width in key locations.

Response was exacting and demanded only the duel to happen.

Iza winced in her mind at the concept and in hindsight regretted the duel had to be public.

In the excitement and hurry she had barely time to approach the Count and before she knew it, the culmination of her work lay in her hands and there was no time to explain the matter any longer.

In truth, count would take the duel well, not what followed, however.

As Iza burned the letter in the fireplace of the hut, she sent *Aria* to find Count Merving.

Man was in the training yard, doing his utter best to practise the culture of the body as well as that of training the troops.

To him that was much the same, herculean efforts of the Count inspired troops.

What he lacked in finesse, he made up for in boundless enthusiasm and his officers reflected it, working as a single cohesive unit far and above that of an average militia.

Iza had gained respect for the troops as she had followed the comings and goings of the yard.

It was outside the inner wall and trade was booming under the watchful gaze of the count and in the presence of an army as it did on most days.

"Count Merving, I request from you a duel!"

Man had paused to drink water and wipe most of the sweat away in the sharp spring air, summer was fast approaching.

His eyes widened at the thought and he smirked abashedly.

"Time to repay for that poor showing I think. I think I'll champion my..."

His smile froze to his lips.

"Duel, for your seat as Count under the Empire! Draw steel! To submission or death!"

Count looked at her for a long time and busy trade had stopped. She has proclaimed it loudly to half the town present.

Along her journey from the castle she had decided to throw caution to wind.

Damned if she did, damned if she didn't and right now she needed control of the situation.

Count was looking for words, this wasn't unheard, not without precedent but the matter was usually more formal and one done without need for steel to be drawn.

Even the lowest street sweeper had the right to demand rulership, control of men at arms with a duel, might at arms.

Usually matter was more formal, handled with talk and presented true arguments.

Witch of Farhomes still had the right.

"Or by Divine Writ."

Iza calmly continued;

"Count Merving, subject yourself to serve under my command until such a time as I see fit to release you."

Iza dazed at her own audacity at the words.

Count Merving raised himself to his full weight and placed his arms to his sides, estimating Iza.

"Harsh words. Duel to for the right to rule or submit to Draft."

He nods, looking far into the distance for a while.

"And will you disclose to me why I should do either of these things?"

Iza stares back calmly, her hands locked behind her back under her shield now, plate covered in tunic.

Iza knows she has to and realises it's literally just for Mime's sake, rest of it really doesn't register.

It covers her lower face now from a casual glance.

"No, my love and my soul demands this to happen."

She breathes in and yells to the crowd as much as to herself and to the Count.

Tone is formal, clear, crystal clarion call.

"For victory against the Profane, In Service to Triumvirate. No further words. Draw steel or submit!"

Casual observer cannot see all of Iza's face, but towering Count Merving can.

The smiling eyes and cocksure stance signals danger. Wilds of Anvil glints from the smile.

That damn grin would drive him later to reach even higher in his enthusiasm, The Count could feel it chasing him.

He keeps his calm admirably but admits faltering.

Elf knows worse that Count

"Draft. I submit to draft!" He shouts to the crowd.

"For Honor's sake I demand a duel!" He continues shaking his head.

"That you shall have. Furnish me with a mace!"

Last part she shouts to the crowd and tosses a bag of coins towards the crowd with a swift move.

Enthusiasm returns to the crowd, as the two part, they wanted a fight but Counts submission had sent a collective sigh as much as of surprise as denial of a good fight.

Armaments of all kinds were on display, as much for Count to appraise for the men at arms, as for sale.

Crowd now gathers closer and soldiers clear the arena.

Murmurs at the back row as merchants fight for the coin, eventually they agree as much as wanting to show to go on as much as out of raising discontent.

It is a fine mace, a gruff dwarf hands it over along with the rest of the coin, curiosity as much as apprehension in his eyes and he is quickly shouted back out of the makeshift arena. The Count has armed himself with a shield and a broadsword, in his arms it has more than enough reach for a longsword, hastily attached plate fits comfortably and gauntlets protect arms.

He tests the fit and heft by banging the implements and elicits a roaring response at the display of might.

Iza isn't worried, last time she had relied on reflexes.

This time she'd had that, her magic and weapon she was familiar with.

But he admitted the man was imposing and the slight tint of *Aria* whispering around the man told her she had no mean amount of suitable blessing in him, over the days she had carefully measured the man with careful eye and study, knowing this was to come.

She wasn't worried but facing him, the reach bothered her.

Monstrous size has no innate benefit, her memories whispered to Iza.

"I'll take good measure of you now, elf. I was Blessed to be a Protector but Quest didn't call me."

Count was no fool, but reminded Iza of good manners, even if the duel was with steel.

Seeking edge even in politeness.

"Iza of Featherhoe, Grand Witch by birthright. Knight for my love."

A murmur passed the crowd, word was familiar to many and echoed stories of the wars.

Louder roar passes the crowd as they hear the last part, people of Anvil were suckers for romanticism.

And it kinda felt good to say it out loud she thought, she could not disappoint Mime in the latest chapter of *Empty Princess and her Knight* either.

Enough words had passed and a helpful second was shoved from the wall of soldiers to mediate the first blow.

She imbued the mace and it eagerly jumped to obey, gravitic magic had its limitations, severe ones but within its limited range it was an unsurpassed force multiplier, and used intelligently...

Aria sensed the roaring crowd and the coming fight, the spectacle of it waking the music.

Shield and rapier at back, mace hefted with both hands, she takes the imposing figure of Count Merving in totality and digs her heels into the sand.

First charge isn't gentle, Count puts his full might into the blow and right handed swing with the broadsword reaches Iza with no hope of retaliation.

It bounces from Iza's shield with a blue flame and to no result.

Aria feels the blade, exceptional control of magic catches the edge.

Sword hits a colossi, not a dainty elf, and the resulting magical fulmination directs the sword away.

Iza's swift feet carry her the distance required and two handed swing lands on the Donkey, thrice, then once, beating unknown rapid rhythm to metal.

First strike activates curse Iza has stared into the surface of the shield, amplification activates on the third.

The fourth strike recoils the count and forces him to kneel and seek alternate hold with his right foot, gravitic magic placing its unnatural pressure over what the practised veteran, Count can stand.

Unfamiliar direction and force takes him.

Aria isn't lax. Enchantment feels the beat.

Kneel!

So speaks undead Revenant of Night Winds, and for a moment Count feels a ghastly voice against his skull force him to submit as the last blow lands.

Shielded monstrosity of myth is here to gather its deadly harvest.

Illusion and hallucinogen of magic.

It echoes, Count is held to place by multitude of threats, his focus fractures and for a slightest moment in time he hesitates.

Enough for the elf to focus magic into mace.

Manipulation of weight is one thing, accelerating knives child's play.

She spins around to land the killing blow.

Gravitic magic has its problems with range, but its force is unmatched.

Resonant energies *Aria of the Wilds* is easily capable of formulating, a field of gravitic spirals appear on the surface of the mace, too small to see.

Iza's mind easily envisions how mana must flow.

Observers see mist, smoke circulate and flow from the mace, dissipating before it hits the ground

Resulting magical field sunders all matter in gnashing unstable tearing forces as another two handed strike to the shield shreds the dwarven creation seemingly effortlessly.

By the time count recovers from this, she has already prepared the returning blow from the count's right side, mace held low, her footwork, magical control of gravity and dexterity positioning for the blow perfectly with practised ease of a dancer and bravado of an acrobat before Count can react.

She will come for his core and that might which ate metal will be amplified.

There won't be a Count to bury.

Steady stare convinces count and he drops his sword.

"I yield!"

Man collects himself from the ground and launches into raucous laughter.

His fingers run thoughtfully along the edge of the broken shield and the sharp edge nearly breaks skin. Dwarven metal has been reduced to dust and the edge patterns with swirls.

Iza raises her mace to the sky to proclaim her victory as is tradition, victories are dedicated to the sky.

Deadly silence launches into applause as the crowd realises that the fight truly is over, then into cheering and finally chanting.

"Knight Iza! Knight Iza!"

More curious than defeated Count leaps next to the Witch surprise and genuine deference.

"You must teach me that skill!" He adds to the growing cacophony.

He takes measure of the elves face and realises there was a reason why this fight even happened. She's not here for idle victories.

He calls over his personal officers and clears the way through the crowd towards the castle with few gestures.

Crowd eagerly makes way while chanting, whatever the complex issues at hand, Men of Anvil always loved fights.

As Iza gazed back towards the field from the gate she could see a crowd forming around the stall of the dwarf who had provided the mace.

And a black robed figure darting into an alleyway away from the crowd, Iza allowed a smile pass her lips as the familiar raven kept track.

Merving had questions, this was a surprise and he stops under the inner gate to the castle to ask them, Iza knows from the look Count won't be moved without answers.

Men keep their distance enough to to be overheard with few signals and curious onlookers.

Before Count Merving can put his thoughts into words or collect himself enough Iza snaps at him.

"Demons, by means unknown, I played fast and loose. I need my hammer, Count Merving."

She lets that sit in for a moment. Nearly two hundred years gone since, Count knows his purpose no matter how far removed in time.

All of Backflip existed ultimately to combat the demonic, defend Men of Anvil.

"I watched an innocent young woman visit one of these Cults, what came out had no mind to speak of and only paid service to the demonic after. No more victims, Count, that's what this is for. And that requires haste, now."

She patiently waits for the Count to present any arguments he has but he just shakes his head in surprise and motions them to continue.

Honour, chivalry and nobility obliged him to respond.

Never mind the lives of villagers he loved to mingle with.

And his family.

Count was in the main dining hall now along with his most trusted nine, tenth he had seen to see to the Ladies of the House.

Iza had been provided an accurate map of Backflip which she traced familiarly as the officers filtered in.

Garret was leaning to an open door, Counts most trusted man, ready to serve.

"All my officers are now present..."

Count Merving said, unsure how to continue, the situation was unprecedented in his lifetime and understanding was still filtering down to reality and facts. He was seeking safety in the familiar. There had to be a protocol.

Iza looked at him with a side eye and read the apprehension.

"Your town has been infiltrated by the demonic, a Untouchable was attacked without repercussions, I am sworn to the service of said Untouchable."

She allowed the words to sink in.

"Over the last few weeks I have infiltrated communications from said influence, a cult demonic and held witness to their activities."

Men and women were now paying attention with keen awareness.

"Something gets under the skin of these people and steals their... souls or destroys it. Some time ago these cultists broke the promise and blessing of Guise. Ever since I have sought to engage them underhandedly to assess the threat."

She coughs and corrects her stance.

"I have prepared certain... countermeasures, lied, harassed and employed the thief and the robber in the pursuit of this threat and can now inform you of next steps to be taken as to avoid... Any incidents involving innocents being hurt."

The officer corps is well disciplined, eyes widened and few sharp breaths, but they do not interrupt Iza.

"Your enemy is in the guise of man, seemingly normal but host to an emotionless husk that feels no pain. I have played their cards against them and they will take to the streets this night in force, wearing black robes, fighting to a man and to the death every member of the guard. You."

Stances stiffen and simplicity of the matter steadies the men.

"They live under the impression that two more factions of their cult have taken hold and they outnumber your men ten to one. They further believe Princess Empty to be head of one of these cults and Count to be compromised. Our duel was the signal to launch the rebellion."

Awkward feet move in the room and Iza gathers at least a few of the officers who have heard of these rumours, if not done more with it.

Iza's steady hands have moved a few wooden miniature flag poles around the map of the town to signify matters unbeknownst yet.

"You have questions about my loyalty and reasoning behind these decisions, I understand that. I don't have time for those questions to be mulled over, any questions you have, you have exactly as my patience lasts, right now. Then I need you in the streets. But for the sake of brevity..."

Iza takes a few steps away from the table and sets to one knee, crossing her fingers atop her mace.

Megan had been very demanding on this point, if a demon was engaged, it would be engaged under Triumvirate's Blessing.

She had forced Iza to read the simple litany from paper hundreds of times and Solar hadn't been best pleased about it.

"*Finally.*" Solar sighs to her ear from eternity away.

She had been humming to cover Iza's praying thoughts.

Some rhythms are infectious, resonate in the soul.

Ritual prayer is unheard of, extended annoyance of a Godhead and constant forced notice derived the same result.

"Goddess of the Moon, Goddess of the Light, I beseech you, bless our shield and arm.

Demonic is upon us."

Sargeants Blessing.

Solar has been glancing at a warhorn for a while now, victory sounds.

Lunar rings the gong with intent.

Sir Joke drops the mic and goes in the alleyway to look for someone to manhandle.

Half drunk group of workmen leaving the bar notice the five robed men bothering a Untouchable, hear the blessing in the air and see a cultist.

Loose cobble, hands meant to wrestle oxen and loose chairs fold the cultists dead to a ditch.

When the Divine Godhead of Humour thanks each of the men with a handshake, more than a few sanities are tested in the alleyway.

Blessing took many forms.

None would go to combat against the Demonic without it, magic divine, rules of Anvil.

Desperate plea against darkness in dark hours.

Short and to the point, in dire need and circumstance.

Last used two hundred years ago, call the Triumvirate to the field of battle, they will answer.

Blessing sets upon the entire castle town and forges swiftness to foot and strength to arm.

Sharpness in the eye and to those in the know, signal to act.

Unknown to foe and evil plan.

Surety sets in the men.

Here was proof positive, demons walked streets of Backflip, so said Twin Godhead and Guy Who Was Way Too Often Right.

Iza raises from the floor, heady from the divinity that passed by her in the *Aria* but present and alert.

Formal ritual or not, something lingers past the original intent within Iza, a rhythm of soul and all the elven spell of protection needs is a tune.

"Lieutenant Ivanko, this street, you will split into two and..."

Men head to orders with conviction and no more questions raised, this is precisely what they have trained for and officer corps are consummate professionals if nothing else.

The surety in the young woman's voice isn't left unnoticed, neither are the tactics and strategies presented to those with eyes to see such things.

Until only Count and Iza were left.

"And where will you be?"

Count asked, rightly assuming that Iza would not be left idle in this.

"Inner gate, well, all over the place if I'm being honest."

Curses are very specific and demand exacting circumstances to trigger.

That made them very effective as triggers to traps.

Relatively simple gravitic spell could be held in place and sustained near eternity within a curse.

That didn't prevent quite a few collections from cultists walking into unseen runic circles looking for black robed gatherings of men during that specific year and causing purple flashes of light followed by flashes of blood as gravitic energy was converted into fracturing stone, meat and bone.

He looks steadily at Count Merving.

"Now speaks magic."

Old saying, mage of first war, Blessed Hoormeister had once intoned so when presented with an insurmountable army odds and column of demonic Legion.

First true uses of magic for battle, battlemages and coordinated casting.

Historians agree it had been many happy circumstances that had led Hoormeister to that field that day but none denied the results.

It had since taken upon the meaning of inevitably and displays of magic more considered bravado than talent.

Understanding finally dawned on Count Merving.

"You are a mage, not a warrior."

He shakes his head in disbelief, mages and warriors had always relied on a sort of interplay where neither could rely on supremacy over others, surprised mage always lost, so did warriors. But one thing that had more or less cemented in fact was this, no mage sought to close the distance, yet warriors did nothing but if faced with one another.

Iza as a mage had sought nothing but a better place to land blows in melee and some deeply held convictions within Count Merving crumbled.

"Let us see to the Ladies. Then, to the gate, the largest collection will be heading towards the castle and if my assumptions are right, the leader of this whole sordid affair."

Hoormeister was also known by some less appealing nicknames born from her tilt towards said bravado.

Lady Overkill, Iza idly pondered if the Count was aware of that particular piece of history.

Lady Featherhome was not pleased.

By the duel, nor open warfare in the streets.

Even less so by not being present, there was a flower that she wanted to observe.

Cup of tea had been cold.

Many a hurtful turn of phrase and insult flowed nonchalantly before Iza could even greet Mime and Count and Countess did their best to present stoic faces at the scenario of kneeling knight and incensed Princess Empty platonically laying insult upon demeaning words.

Nonsensical as some of it was, Iza again reminded of the unnatural insight of the Psychotic.

"All true, Lady Featherhome, very true. I still love you."

Iza responded as Mime took a deep breath and prepared to continue. And found herself unable to.

She rises and salutes Lady Featherhome with a loud metallic bang, Mime and motions the Count towards the door.

"Seems they are safe and protected, we have a fight to win."

"With your permission, my lady." Iza curtsies towards brown haired Countess Merving in green satin ensemble and turns to leave the room.

Count is surprised to hear a chuckle from Iza a few dozen feet from the door.

"What amuses you so?" Count lets his curiosity get the better of him.

The two make an odd pair, the Count with his still damaged shield and Iza, even the rapier's silk scarf only barely reaching to man's shoulders.

"It's going to dig her far more. She never said good luck, that will be more than any of her jabs did at me."

Count decided to not prod further into the affairs of a Psychotic and the Witch but found himself smiling at that.

Few curt orders to the men and the Count clarified where and how things would progress and what to do if they did not.

Short nods and few barked orders and gate was unguarded save for the Count and Iza who had taken position at the dead centre of it. Warehouse next to the gate held nearly half the men, another half of the thirty men squad was waiting past the gate and a few men here and there laid in ambush.

They didn't have to wait long, around fifty men approached the gate, wearing black hooded robes and openly brandishing sharp implements, daggers and the occasional pike or farming tool was visible in the dimming sunlight.

When the ragtag group of militia came close enough, a man separated from the group and took off his hood, there was something visibly wrong with him, there was unnatural matte redness to his skin and bloated look to his face and extremities.

Iza took up her stance and summoned true combat magic, not simple tricks or ante reactionary measures.

She found her own mantra and rhythm within mana, first, protection and distraction.

Old lone wolves there are none and this one wasn't an exception.

Spirit of the Wolf had refused to pass with its body and had remained prancing on the forests of *Aria of the Wilds*, a creature seemingly unbothered by its grand new existence of chasing notes under starfields of mana inside the spell.

Familiar in song and dance, old friend immortalised.

Mace gongs the start from the shield.

Anvil Wolf from shadow and sparking darkness of magic materialises behind Iza and a pressure wave of baritone growling stops the leader of the cultists dead in apparent shock. Creature of magic, it needs no time at all to tear the skull of a cultist free at the edge of the formation.

Few men in ambush add their efforts in and the unorganised gathering responds by facing outwards in terrifying unison without a noise.

More than a few drop dead and Count charges the leader in melee. Men from the warehouse engage the cultists in good order, five men wide and organised with unseemly precision to hold the cultist and make good effort at cutting down the numbers as they move to surround.

Few daggers and farming implements do not match trained Anvil Men-at-Arms in melee armed with dwarven steel under Divine protection. Few more wolverine ambushes from nowhere and arrows later the main force behind the gate hits the mass of cultists.

Iza has prepared her magics and with seemingly no effort at all Iza takes flight, carried skywards by the weight of her mace.

Dexterously she swaps her hold on the mace, in full control of the area around her the mace gathers a frightful aura of power around it.

And she throws it at the centre of the mass of cultists.

Gravitic might bores a hole through unprotected meat without reaction shown from the cultists and impacts ground.

Inversion, pull.

Carefully measured and planned, raw savage talent and inspired evil might.

Force pulls the cultist towards the mace with force enough to break bone.

Witch hits ground at gates of Backflip, heel first, to the pommel of the mace, evening light is captured for a moment in bright flash.

For a moment there is a horde of unfeeling cultists, then there is a flash of blue and purple.

Leader who had separated from the crowd had held its own against the Count and Garret but was now alone and surrounded and glanced backwards, that look of surprise froze on his lips, skull pierced by the rapier. Iza let go and was flung back to her mace across space. Teleportation of the thrower, not just of thrown.

Effort sighed from her, the magical effort had been considerable to maintain such long links. The fight was over.

Men started to relax but Iza noted the leader had not gone down.

Neither were the Count and Garret unaware, still at the ready, there was still some sort of unlife to the man and his waxy red skin.

It was far too slow, Iza wasn't one for half measures nor one to get ambushed.

By the time it twitched again Iza's mace was heading down, impregnated by the inertia of gravity as well as the roaring impossibility of the entropic edge.

Rapier she saved with a deft pull and a twist.

If the demon thing had ill will to show, separation of its brain and the entire spine into wet soup on the cobbles removed all life from the creature and its remains sloshed into the same pile in a wet noise.

Iza noticed a familiar smell weft from it, sulphur.

She took a step back from the pile, not sulphur, *magic of sulphur* and then it was gone.

Iza studied the thing from a distance, careful not to dirty her clothes or to step into the blood.

Count Merving was now apprehensive of Iza, and for a good reason, she stood in liquefied remains of more than thirty men from a flick of a wrist.

Unfazed, barely winded and untouched by the carnage, sunlight filtering through Iza's unbloodied figure in the dimming afternoon glinting on her mace she was fully unaware of the looks men gave her, her eyes seeing thru the raven to the rest of the men of the Guard around Backflip.

Men had detailed the few remaining casualties promptly, leaving the leader where he lay, unwilling to touch the unnatural or out of some respect.

Lieutenant had barely enough time to start wondering who to take orders from when Iza interrupted his train of thought.

"Casualty station is the field, we secure it, now. You two, get long planks or something, move this body to a tent there." Iza motioned to the lieutenant to act.

Rest of the cultists bodies remained covered by a tarp at the entrance to the castle that was now closing its gates as ordered to.

It did not take long for the first runner to arrive, no casualties, many injured.

Third brought news of exploded stonework and bodies.

Unemotional cultists had fought badly, but pain hadn't stopped them, they had managed to draw blood in return for lethal strikes out of surprise.

And finally a few well robed figures in clearly blue capes as identification nodded to the Count and talked a few hushed whispers in a tent somewhere before congealing back into the darkening night.

Finally traders and merchants arrived to see what the commotion was all about and with them came food and drink.

Iza was careful to find time to talk to each of them before night was over, favours were owed, some monetary, some more esoteric.

Others simply here to profit from proximity to the Knight, offering fair value for a promotion.

By the time midnight was measured an impromptu celebration was being held not fifty feet from the corpse that had refused to die.

Mightily drunk Count Merving was hauled to honour position on the grassy hill leaning to the inner fort walls and shouted back into Count by popular vote and at the insistence of Iza.

As the festivities took over the crowd, Iza slipped into the tent to study the leader more closely.

Hum of the excited crowd disappeared behind the slight privacy enchantment on the tent, none would interrupt the two rough looking guards displeased by the assignment and would make sure any curious onlookers wouldn't wander in.

It was taller than a head compared to the average man, as Iza kneeled to study the creature more closely, less human it seemed.

Half of its skull still remained and from bone protruded slightest slivers of metal.

Curious, she utilised a few pulls along the skin in an attempt to remove them, thinking they were some leftover metal from the mace buried to the skin in the impact.

But they were structured, implanted metal pathways along the surface of the bone.

She lets magic touch the piece protruding from a fingertip and the metal resonates with a familiar response.

She courses power thru it and metal sizzles from its place next to the bone through flesh and smokes on the wooden table before breeze of wind takes the heat from it.

Curious fabrication of very fine latticework and sharp edges buried beneath skin resonating to magic.

To its purpose Iza can only guess at, but what it was, was evident, demonic work of magic.

And then something with it ignites, metal twists and burns to bent useless inert slag next to the body on the wooden table.

Aria of the Wilds caught every corner and twist of it, and sharp elven senses the flow of mana and energies flowing. And then it is gone.

Merely ash remained from the reaction, a slight whiff of sulphur disappeared into the tent and the first demonic artefact since the second war is no more, parts Iza hasn't touched have destroyed what remains of the skull, sickeningly bright red flesh of the body now on full display has most likely been human once.

But odd protrusion in clavicles and spine and bone structure seemed off, as if whatever once had been man was slowly twisting to something else.

Curiosity overriding any sense of decorum Iza had she soon was holding the heart of the man-creature at hand.

Sharp blades had done quick work on the leathery skin and flesh had provided no greater obstacle.

Bone only held her back by the minute amount of mana she required to coax magic and Aria to form required entropic structures. Slight buzz rang about the quiet tent as Iza went about the grizzly work and pieces of meat were studied and discarded to spare buckets.

She was not so vaguely aware of the anatomy of living things, having hunted her whole life. Changes were subtle but not unnoticeable, most Iza had no clue on but stored the altered details for later pondering and inspection in quiet hours.

Flap of the tent was opened and Iza realised her appearance far too late to do anything about it.

Moonlight crept in with the person and the dark blue robe immediately sought cover next to the flap of the tent, gold and silver chains jingling as it went.

Priestess.

Her brown hair looked common enough and brown eyes alertly paid attention to the flap of the tent, side eyeing Iza.

Megan again.

Agent of Observation who was never to be seen, so dictated the game.

She was here to see her Goddess actualized.

Secrets of Anvil.

Heart had not beaten blood in ages, it was a shrivelled, useless and spent organ taking space within the chest cavity, not a thing on a living creature.

Iza could hardly suppress her smile. Their manners were strange and sometimes utter belief in their own invisibility manifested in odd ways but with her walked one third of Anvil's Godmight.

Iza's sleeves were rolled up and covered to the elbows with rapidly coagulating blood.

Armoured gauntlet lies abandoned on one of the infirmary beds and despite her best efforts the white sleeves of the shirt are crimson and dripping.

Behind her she hears the flap on the opposite side of the tent, still holding the shrivelled heart aloft Iza turned her head to see Mime walk in in her old set of clothes, cleaned and fixed as they were, they still radiated unhinged energy of a Psychotic.

The mask now reflecting the mime again, Lady Featherhome certainly wasn't the same person and she could have slipped through the partying crowd without interruption.

Straight into the abattoir and altar of the crazy Witch of Featherhome holding the heart of a demon, bloodied.

The brown eyes sparkled in the corner and she could hear the excited priestess shuffle her robes and decorative chains as she sought seating on one of the beds.

"So, yeah, I don't know what this... all is."

Mime circulated her finger around the body and Iza.

"You were supposed to run away with me you *asshole*."

Iza is taken back by this and steadies her by placing the demon heart on the table and reaches for a rag to clean most of the blood from her arms.

"I refuse to play second fiddle to Iza of Featherhome. Knight Iza. *Champion of Backflip*."

There was venom to those words. Iza wasn't sure if Mime was jabbing at her or if she was dead serious. From what little she could read from the body language she assumed the latter.

Iza had no response to the emotional outburst and for the first time in her life Iza was speechless. Mime motions agitatedly towards the witch and collapses to sit on one of the beds.

"I just wanted us, not.. all of this. I..."

Mime breaks down sobbing, head buried in hands and for a split second Iza is torn between dashing over and worrying about her bloody outfit.

She is whispering *I can't* under her breath repeatedly and rocking back and forth in Iza's embrace, grasping her instinctively.

Priestess raised from her spot with a jingle and calmly exited with a curtsy, raising the attention of neither the elves. Iza was certain the mysteriously out of thin air appearing Priestess curiously absent during the whole debacle hadn't been idle. Nor an unseen figure now, but that had to wait.

It took a fair long while for the Psychotic to calm down, more so for her to be coherent.

Noise outside the tent had quieted reasonably, guards were still patrolling the field in case of any followup and merchants still plied their trade but the majority of people had moved on.

Iza had never witnessed such a loss of control from Mime before, or anyone for that matter. Cultists she had observed had been emotionless insanity to her so far had been quiet of the cult and nonchalance.

This was happening to her and she was struck silent by the outburst and realisation that this was a personal, not vacuous sense of right to Mime which had driven her here. As the sobbing figure of the Psychotic gradually calmed Iza had time to order her own thoughts.

Best as she could anyway.

"I'm leaving."

Mime finally managed as she collected herself to be more presentable.

"I'm not here for the adventure, I want you and none of this shit. I can't... I won't just..."

And she falters off, unable to continue, some force deeper than love pulling her under and deeper into insanity.

Whatever that something was Iza was now certain she had pulled Mime into it, the implications were clear.

There was nothing Iza could say.

Sixteen Years Later, 512aH.

Cassie, border town at eastern edge of the Empire.

Spring, eastern wind has taken upon itself to try and remove every single loose roof tile in Cassie brings smells of plains into the rock hewed town.

And to Iza, a slight, alluring smell of salty ocean painting pictures of the unknown.

One of the former Emperors had met a girl here who was so Blessed to be Vizier some fifty years after the first war. The Empire could thank much for its current legal system and taxation to Cassie the Fair and as a result her birth home now carried her name.

Dark haired lady carried scales and an oversized quill pen in the coat of arms and was often repeated in the wooden signage of the town now clunking in the wind.

Cassie was a well kept commerce town to the south east of the Empire, covering a natural choke point into the empire, nestled between mountain ranges to the north and south. To the east were the wilds and beyond them, Unknown Plains. Not truly unknown but the plains were expensive and beyond them, sea. Few tribes of Men had taken habitation on plains but were small communities, far and wide; if the Empire had borders they stopped at Cassie's gates.

That didn't stop adventurers taking advantage of easy access to merchants and smiths that had gravitated here over the age. Both mountains and plains provided plenty of bounty from arcane to the supernatural as well as the mundane. Rarely someone bought something rarer from the shores of the sea and spoke of elves in the sea and even stranger things.

True modern wonder of Cassie was the Tower of Dragon Study, a five story marble building housing books and places to live for the academic and the mage relating to all things Dragon.

Singularly suicidal academics had approached the beasts before the first war and found to their surprise Dragons spoke common parlance. Younger, intelligent, voracious beasts came in from the North-East, unexplored wilds far away, found plenty on offer on the plains and sometimes stopped by Cassie to wonder Men and their works before disappearing into the blue again, scattering over the whole continent.

Others attempted assault on the walls and were easily repelled by the wall's Reinforcement meant to repel invaders. It was still the most worrying event whenever it happened.

Hundred to hundred and twenty metres of scales akin to full plate covering wirebound steely sinewy muscle, mouth full of teeth metre long, brutal leverage of a thirty metre tail, wings capable of pushing a demon down with windshear alone, claws like scythes and breath magic that was utterly unknown to Men of Anvil.

Immortal lest slain in combat or disease.

But the dangerous part was the intelligence, dragons easily surpassed the average man. The true apex predators of Anvil.

Only two dragons had been slain in the history of Anvil, first by the second Hero and his collection of eccentric followers, second had taken an army and more than a few mages.

Draaxdithindimundar the Vile, red dragon of antiquity who with his viciousness, prolific fire spewing and overt hostility had gained ire of the Empire and thus, a custom forged ballista bolt to the skull, still attached.

Dreolanxatiant the Honourable, blue dragon of guile personified, who had accepted a duel to the death over its hoard rather than accept any sort of trade for the few items second Hero and his eccentrics had been after.

Both lie here, on display.

More academics had been killed by breath magic than ever could manage to talk to a dragon.

Yet the study continued and would do so unabated by concerns of dying.

Dragon in-person left a permanent impression, more often than not, lifelong one and the closest mountain to Cassie was named *Academics Folly* for all the academics left dead, vapourized, burned or dissolved near the roosting spots and sharp ledges mountain that dragons preferred.

Folly rose near vertically to the north of Cassie and curious dragons found lives of Men and the bustle often interesting, if irrelevant matters to ponder while resting their wings.

To a dragon breath was magic, to academic a miracle to be studied, to a dragon people looking to see the breath was an exasperated sigh and a dead academic.

Individualistic, intelligent and dangerous, dragons could be relied on to be one thing, a dragon, and such beasts rarely pay heeded to the chaff around it.

Dragons could threaten a town, even a castle, but not breach it without concerted effort and the dragons ultimately had no use for a town.

Prone to displays of power, younger dragons often tested anything with walls against their own might.

Dragon assault was then often a matter of burying your head into the nearest hole and trusting that the dragon would get bored of showing its strength rapaciously laughing at the power imbalance as it left.

Rarely did they actively seek to endanger Men on Anvil but they were also nonchalantly irreverent to the lives of Men.

Men were bad food but riding horsemen were just food with something to toss to the side attached. Cassie had risen to prominence in later ages due to a few fearless men who indeed had managed to talk to a younger dragon and extracted some pieces of information from them.

Iza of Featherhome's was still driven to explore Anvil and seek answers to every mystery before her, but Backflip, and especially Mime had placed deep melancholy in her.

Mime had left there, that night before the sun had risen, leaving a gaping hole of heartburn and longing she still to this day found herself buried by at times.

Iza had taken till the evening but staring blankly at walls of Castle Backflip for the whole day, she had just left, every place a reminder.

Priestess of the Moon had followed her, looking whole time as she was going to do a hatrick and twenty miles into the journey Iza had turned a corner in the road and disappeared into the wilds, losing the well meaning but overtly curious Priestess behind on the road with a written journal of events hanging from a tree branch.

Nobody heard the Champion of Backflip cry but the tree she was taking cover under.

She had first wondered about the edge of the Empire penniless but Iza-Wilds economics demanded she empty her bags of valuables sooner or later.

She might have been listless but this was life to Iza, the wilds, bandits and monsters.

Few years later she was flush with cash, consumables, equipment and investments.

Her interrupted visit to the places of learning in the Empire could continue.

And studied she had, so much so that all other considerations had disappeared for years.

She had barely spoken to anyone since Blackflip and even Solar kept her distance, whether because Iza didn't seek someone to talk to or out of respect to let Iza process her worries alone.

She had to admit to herself she was bad company right now, slight interruptions from the books and studies annoyed her to no measure and in the mask of every Psychotic she looked for her love, worsening her mood every time she didn't.

Flamboyance of her soul previously so present was masked by sheer utilitarianism when she needed to achieve a goal now.

Plans of Backflip had worked to perfection but had been an inspiration and desire, to no small degree, to show off to Mime, that had backfired massively.

Priestess of the Moon had nonchalantly dropped a brochure well worn by use on the road that had marketed a travelling party of Minstrels and Actors a few years past.

Main actress had been an elf, Iza had no idea what had driven Mime away from that life but Iza's acting and forcing Mime to play a role had been the exact wrong thing to do for the Psychotic.

She hadn't been helping her, she had been driving her closer to whatever kept the mask on.

Demonweb, as Iza had taken to call the metallic construct, whatever it was, had been transcribed to Solar in detail from memory and as a visual representation from *Aria of the Wilds*.

It had yielded no specific detail or something to act on but Solar had been very intently quiet while studying the object, more worried about Iza than the device.

But time heals wounds and now, sixteen years later, Iza was reserved, calm and always offering a helping hand to the Psychotic out of a deep set manner of looking for Mime whenever she wasn't buried in the books.

What had driven her to Cassie was little more than wanderlust and curiosity about dragons. As she approached the town she seemed to steadily improve in mood for some unknown reason but accepted it as a matter of course.

As she entered the town of Cassie after curt and polite gate inspection she had, to her surprise, found herself humming to a tune *Aria* had picked up over the course of her travels covered by the shearing winds coming from the plains and signs of stores beating some alien rhythm to the day.

For the first time in a long while Iza was genuinely slightly excited for the future again. Inn at the centre of town had homely construction of tar stained wood and browns in its decor that was more than accommodating and even offered one of the better rooms for discounted price once it became apparent Iza wished to stay for a while and had coin to spare even for the luxury.

Early spring was downtime, most adventurers either had just left and hadn't returned yet and peak time to see dragons lurking over the town that drew Nobles and academics from all corners was the hottest summer.

Innkeeper had become downright excited as Iza had placed a few orders of this and that and promised his eternal servitude after Iza had asked for a paid help to courier details and letters.

Innkeeper's confused son had been presented promptly, clearly wearing new clothes and having undergone a wash to mask the smell of stables and whatever mud boy had been playing in.

Task wasn't complex but once the boy understood he would be getting paid for running, his smile returned from behind the confused stare and he did his best impression of a courtly bow, nearly tripping.

Those letters and messages boy transported during the next few days left the smell of gold to be made in Cassie. Many merchants were more than happy to discuss the opportunity for money to be made in detail and others were just happy for the slow season stopping early. Tower of Dragon Study had responded in equal excitement to have more alumni, *or bait*, as the townspeople put it and promptly invited her to visit at earliest convenience to discuss matters further.

The Archmage of the Tower had personally responded and penned answers to a few questions in a paper attached to the letter, also noting his desire to meet a mage so knowledgeable.

Iza wondered how much of that was honestly just desire to get more bait, dragon study was not riskless and experience said meeting one was as much as an affair of luck relating to the mental state of any one given dragon than preparation or study.

After a week had passed Iza noted herself to be unnaturally peppy, it wasn't that business excited her that much and paid informants weren't telling her any ground shattering news. And although *Draaxdithindimundar the Vile's* full skeleton hanging from the wall at the Tower was certainly impressive, his skull still pierced by the legendary Dragonbolt that had slain him.

Pondering that in the bath at night she could not find a real reason to be excited but her blood was up and smiles were easy to come by.

Although she could not help to be curious about *Dreolanxatiang the Honourable*, who had been buried with full honours here along with sole sword to ever to be attributed feat of

“Dragonslaying” and Archmage wasn’t about to let just anyone waltz in to bother the rest of the great dragon and such historical figure both.

Few meetings, discussions of the arcane, had persuaded Archmage Herassin to be amenable and tomorrow he would let Iza into the burial chamber.

She dismissed the peppiness as childish excitement about dragons but wondered if that was all it was.

Archmage Herassin was the very picture of hospitality.

Man met mages of all sorts by association and had seen the exceptionality of some of Iza’s concept work and theory of magics and was curious of the elf enough to entertain her.

He was rapidly approaching some mythical age of ancient and grey head of hair and beard covered the man in his bright red robes with blue sash that was the unofficial uniform of the Tower.

Iza had chosen as she often did these days, earthly tones and simple covering robes on top of her normal tunic.

Flowing clothes covered as many implements of pain and arcane as well as lockpicks and less savoury small bottles of suspicious liquids if not more since Backflip on-hand but out of view for the curious onlooker.

She carried far more jewellery these days, most fingers covered in valuable gems twinkling twilight of magic and a large diamond set in silver depicting flowers served as a brooch by her neck to keep the tunic closed as compared to old copper buttons she had recycled before.

Not solely for the desire for beautiful things but as easy collateral she had a sizable bag full of most precious gems and jewellery on her at all times now.

She had mastered seeming common to all but the most sharp eyed thieves and capable of presenting exceptionally wealthy eccentric noblewoman to the merchants and nobles.

And to most people this was Alicia of Featherhome, yet another prodigy of slowly expanding House Featherhome.

She had assumed the pretension would wear off at some stage but Backflip had its effects.

Name *Featherhome* was a stable of politics and rumour mills of the elite.

A Duchess of the Empire had even in Iza’s mind invited her to an soiree under her many aliases few years back and had shown no signs of recognising that Iza was indeed a false noble, instead striking lively conversation and asserting for Iza her heritage in front of powerbrokers of the Empire.

Featherhome, by fiat and recognition, was now unlanded Noble House of Empire, irrelevant of the fact if it had been before.

Shield and mace she had left at the inn, safe and secure in knowledge Innkeeper was certainly a man of honour but being paid exceptionally well for his services as well.

And if that didn’t work, Wolf was more than happy to take a man sized bite of anyone bothering its ghostly afternoon naps in its comfortable place in front of the fireplace.

“Fascinating, I truly do mean it. Entire lake of mana.”

The archmages’ eyes sparked under his massive eyebrows, his left hand brushing his impressive beard.

“Sadly my adventuring days are over now. Here we are.”

The door was marble and set on steel hinges, secured by a hanging lock and chains.

Dwarven masterwork depicted the duel in marble and extended to the walls, Dragon victorious on the right, Hero and his party on the left more recognizable by dragon coat of arms on the banner than any individuality on persons.

Dreolanxatiang was clearly depicted defiant at the peak of its might and mana of Anvil had clearly taken a liking to this piece, blue scales of the dragon glinting at the corner of the eye in the marble. For a moment Iza locked eyes with the marble and then it was gone again. 300 years after it had lived, *Dreolanxatiang* was still impressive enough to be remembered by Anvil.

And if the yellow glint of eyes was any sign of a beast of yore, a force of nature would have been an understatement.

Herassin finally managed to unlock the chain and padlock. A gesture and word sent the doors opening inward and Iza could smell a spring storm in magic around her, coming from the tomb. Archmage chuckled at that.

"Dead as rocks but magic still stays."

He steps in and jangles the chain as he passes.

"That's why the security, even a piece of bone would be worth fortunes."

Another gesture and windowless marble room is lit by magic gently flowing down the walls, on the right is a depiction of a sleeping dragon, *Dreolanxatiang* in all his glory captured in magic and paint next to the skeleton and Iza wasn't sure which was more impressive.

The chamber was underground and the skeleton of a dragon had to have been hundred and sixty metres, one single continuous marble slab.

Its wings bones had been splayed across the ceiling and the expansive chamber was taken over by the sheer volume of the beast.

More than that, the sheer pressure of the magical might of the dead dragon emanating from the skeleton was notable, flap of dragon's wing, electricity in the air if lighting was gathering. Then it died down.

Haunting silence set out in the tomb.

Art reflects bone, bone the art.

Herrassein shivers next to Iza.

"That brief moment when doors are opened, I swear old *Dreolanxatiang* isn't dead yet. His historique."

Archmage points towards the left.

Palm sized lettering covers the wall telling all that could be known of the dragon's life.

Tombstone of *Dreolanxatiang the Honourable* was two hundred metres long and twenty metres tall.

Archmage stops in front of the skull where a sword is laying on blue satin atop a small altar and gestures towards it.

"Dragonslayer, only one of its kind. By all merits of normal dwarven make."

He passed his hand over the sword and arcing lightning hits his magical shielding with considerable force.

"Before it slayed a dragon. Now? Relic, it has accepted no hand that has come to claim it."

He seems unbothered by the bolt that struck his protections but still takes a few steps back out of consideration.

Next to Archmage Iza can see why, written in magic as curse, a quest of its own, sword would accept no other purpose than dragonslaying. Might it had amply, but for no petty purposes. Nor for an unfit hand. Iza could feel the magic in the sword ponder her and an unasked question hovered, *would she?*

She shook herself free from the enchantment and the psychedelia of the room, sword alone would be enough to overwhelm an unpracticed hand, but dead dragon, that was another thing entirely.

It was certainly dead, without purpose, but magic certainly wasn't gone and the yellowed bones reflected the blue scales of the art back to itself.

Below her skin, in the magic, she could feel a lightning storm and thunderous flap of wings, roar of breathing and pulse of heart emanating from the dragon.

But it was just a pile of bones echoing the emptiness of the marble tomb.

No soul glinted in the dead eye sockets nor was some malicious will stalking the empty rib cage.

Archmage continued his tour, calmly explaining the artwork as they walked past the skull.

But there was something in the ribcage that caught Iza's eyes in the ribcage, a golden orb hovered where Iza assured it's heart would have been.

"You see it, don't you?"

Archmage's eyes glint under his brows.

"Golden Core, only very talented mages can perceive it. We assume it is the source of breath magic."

It pulsed with some unknown magical might to an unknown beat and Iza nodded.

In the mana flowed to the surface, swirled down into impossible and out as the swirling pulse again and Archmage walked on, Iza was mesmerised by it.

This was new magic to her.

For a brief moment Iza imagined just grabbing the Core and the Sword then and there, consequences be damned.

Orb captures her with intensity and curiosity stops Iza dead, psychedelia of some alien sort is intense.

Gentle hand at shoulder and genuine concern in archmage's eyes stopped the fantasy and wonder.

"You seemed lost there, are you quite fine?"

Iza allowed her warmest smile to show.

"Quite fine, Archmage, I was stopped by the beauty of it."

He squints at the Core.

"I'll trust your judgement, I can barely see the golden sparkle, you and many others see more."

Warm smile and clasping hands.

"I'm more than happy to arrange for you to study it, if you so desire, Miss Alicia."

And so doing gained rights, or at the minimum some knowledge, as to whatever Iza found.

She nodded, still entranced by the immobile yet so active Golden Core.

Iza was now notorious, at least to herself, for her black books.

Childish fancy and hobby had filled quite a few journals now, from anatomy of monsters to specifics of magic, to financial affairs and idle ponderings haphazardly committed to paper without order but never without effort.

Few years ago Iza had gotten bored of her own disorganisation and rewritten a few and destroyed a few others. Now a series of finely covered journals filled a footlocker Iza never travelled without, it was half filled but she was nothing if not prolific.

And woe be to the one who attempted to open it without permission, Iza had needed an object to practise her curses on and the wood now groaned under potential curses and had darkened in burn of mana from failed attempts.

She was confident in her memory but she found it helpful in fact that such material could always be referenced.

She had pulled no mean number of said black journals from the locker and from them sourced truths of Anvil.

One of which was this, Golden Core was unique, or, atleast, uniquely draconic of origin. Archmage Herassein had been extremely accommodating and had allowed Alicia to stay and study the mass of mana for the remainder of the day.

In truth Iza had done little but observe it, she was afraid any interruption would damage it, or alter the flow of mana and decompose it.

But sharp senses of an elf and Aria of the Wilds serving at the behest of a paranoid operator assured that there was no normal pair of eyes keeping vigil over remains of *Dreolanxatiang*.

Her fears were apparently unwarranted, mages and warriors of all stripes had tried over the years, to no avail, whatever Golden Core was, it was inured to the workings of Men.

First the tries were of fancy, then of effort, but finally had stopped when more destructive means were considered.

Disturbing the physical rest of the dead were deeds of monsters and uncivilised Men on Anvil, *Dreolanxatiang the Honourable* would enjoy his rest unbothered.

If somewhat disturbed by occasional mage with a handful of instruments.

Tomorrow would bring certainty, but for now Iza thought she had found the answer, dragon's breathing was damnably slow for Men, but she could feel the spiral of her mana in her chest. The rhythm of other life. Breath magic wasn't just breathing fire or lightning, it was cultivation, directed circulation of mana.

It would take centuries to even congeal a solid enough mass this way of concentrated effort to not disappear into thin air the moment you stopped.

But she didn't need to keep the rhythm, *Aria of the Wilds* could do that for her.

Or, more precisely, the wolf could.

A living thing once, simple suggestion to the linked psyche and now the wolf that refused to go away breathed like a dragon.

Even then it would take decades, multiple, to see a result.

At least when it came to the Golden Core.

Iza for a moment pondered about her twins in time and if they had their own wolves before being stopped by a flash of gold obfuscating her thought.

That way lies madness and Iza slowly practiced a prayer to Solar.

She had learned to slowly piece them together in her mind and surprise Solar with them.

"Oh Lady Light, our path and guidance in the darkest times, you adherent seeks guidance and a hug."

Emotions ran from shock to embarrassment and to laughter in her mind.

And then Lady Light is present. She rarely is but this isn't unheard of.

"Glad to see you aren't gloomy as usual." She says while petting the sleeping head of the wolf that snorts, dead asleep.

To those with eyes to see she is painfully Triumvirate of the Seat of Sun, Solar, The Goddess of The Sun, but to normal people walking through the door, the creature in the straw hat and silken dress is just a beautiful young woman with golden hair.

"I suppose I..."

She is stopped dead as Solars head snaps to something and she raises a finger.

"Listen!"

She hisses and her eyes are focused on something in the distance, staring through the wall.

Iza stops for a moment and then tells Aria to quiet and listen as well.

And she does hear it, her own heartbeat from a distance.

Yet it's not, there's a mechanical tone to it, a steady beat of once a second.

She is mesmerised and the steady stare of Solar almost returns her from her reverie. She stares unknowingly at Godhead, listening to the steady rhythm and snap of the divine fingers brings *Aria* back to Iza.

She breathes out, some unknown knot in her untangling and she sits on the floor.

She knew exactly what that was, the Timequake, herself echoing and taking her back along with her, sinking further into an immutable timeline of the spell along with it.

Aria of the Wilds would tolerate no magical influence on Iza and had masked the clumsy but inherently dangerous ticking of the clock below its music.

It wasn't just beating to Iza either.

She could feel now that the entire Anvil danced to this.

The source of her joy was here, the directed guidance.

"Be happy on the path, let time flow, to end and back again."

The spell is powerful, undermining free will, a monstrous scale of stolen agency.

Iza feels her wake and the Beast screams for violence once again.

Furrowed brow of Godhead was all Iza needed to start gathering her things, stern nod, all the wings of angels she needed to hasten her journey into the soon darkening rooftops.

Nod and acknowledgement sealing more than one faith that night.

Anvil and its magic adheres easily to Godhead's Will but is a sticker for the fine print.

Iza was drafted by divine will and the only thing the Priestesses of Solar are ever asked of is this;

"Will you serve my Divine Will in the field of battle?"

Those words, that very same question. That they weren't said out loud, mattered little.

Iza was a divinely directed instrument launched from divine hand to do harm.

Actions were stronger than words.

If Anvil's Magic was capable of such things as relief and contentment, it was quite happy indeed to be done with this chapter of its existence, the two had certainly danced around the subject enough.

It was irreverent to the fact neither of them noticed the matter.

Grand Witch Iza of Featherhome, now a Priestess of Lady of Light, entered service with no demons to face, no war to win and no blessing to protect her.

To Iza this was a friend who needed help, not Divine Godhead to serve.

To Solar this was the entire world at balance and a person she trusted.

Both knew that ticking had to end, for Anvil, for every soul on it.

Divinity burrows to a soul.

~

Aria had the beat, the Wolf the scent and Iza of Featherhome a direction.

Raven making sure nobody noticed the dashing figure on the rooftops.

What had called Iza here was inside a fairly common house, store below and apartment above. Lady of the home was closing the store and the man of the house was with his children in the backyard, clearly enjoying their time together.

Ticking was self-evident from the rooftop Iza was observing the family from, emanating from somewhere in the second floor.

And soon Iza noticed the man was taken by the spell as well, in him he saw a ghostly reflection of herself, whether through attunement or familiarity she felt the two things connected.

Man was indeed the mage who had sent time spiralling backwards.

He was nothing special by the looks of him and everything she could see without entering was a normal, happy pair of shopkeepers and their two children.

Everything about this scene was normal yet the magic told its own tale.

To *Aria of Wilds*, visible clockwork, to Iza, familiar self.

Man was mage of no minor means and mana swelled about him but he had used not a single cantrip to ease his day, nor had cast any safeguards about him even the most beginner mages did.

She waited for the night and family to fall asleep and then she was inside.

The ticking was emanating from one of the books on the shelf, seemingly indistinguishable from its compatriots yet each tick resonating nauseatingly to Iza this close in proximity.

Worn and unlettered spine to the uninitiated would be meaningless.

Holding her hand to it she could feel the mechanical ticking now as hammer blows to hands and the innate mechanism of the spell running was now familiar, easily yielding its secrets, it was a Book of Magic after all, primordial one.

There was no secret of time travel but the spell already running.

Each tick closing and inching ever closer to its ordained moments.

Her birth, ten years into the future.

A loop, set on an infernal irreversible timer to capture the entire Anvil.

She pulled herself from the book and quickly detailed the room of something helpful, a journal from one of the drawers at the table sufficed.

In the dark room she quickly read dates and times, earliest interested her most and then she found it, on her day of birth had this man met his wife to be.

Anvil was dangerous, there needn't be any great secret as to why man had done this.

Iza's mind was racing.

If the man gained any inkling of what he was, what he had done, if he was so much as hinted, he could unravel the whole spell, spiral it again in an unknown direction.

She had to act, now.

Iza could be silent as death herself should she so desire, and not a spirit nor mouse was disturbed as she made her way to the man.

He was in the loving embrace of his wife.

Some poison to stop the heart, distilled from herbs deep in the wilds.

Certain beetle had surrendered its wings to apply a paralytic to the mix.

Iza fingered the bottle nervously but a string drawn from her tunic directed the liquid to the man's mouth precisely.

She waited with her finger gently on his pulse until he was gone.

Curse intoned under the breath exited whatever remained of his soul from the body and sent it to the far beyond the waiting hands of Triumvirate and then, whatever waited for the man past the unbreachable.

She exited the house with a spellbook at hand and disappeared into the nightly rooftops.

There was little that unnerved Iza but the still ticking spell under her arm bothered her.

Spells were supposed to die with their caster. Time magic seemingly was different.

But the uncaring ticks of the spell sat ill with Iza, like hammer blows of finality.

She knew she had a decade to solve it but each tick was stripping something besides time from Iza, the first man she had killed in cold blood still rang the bell of judgement at her.

In the heat of battle, against robber and bandit and cultist, certainly.

Iza wasn't innocent nor unaccustomed to spilled blood.

But it had relied on some semblance of honour or expectation, a bandit charging from woods knew he risked his life.

Robber in the alleyway knew the situation could be reversed in a heartbeat.
Cultists had no free will in the matter and couldn't be saved.
But cold hearted poisoning was first.
Her heart froze at the fact how easy it had been, how easily the act had been done.
She slinked through the belltower of the Fane of Her Lady Light in Cassie's western side.
Iza wasn't sure what to do with the book but arbitrarily had decided holy ground was where it should be, for now, and had made best haste towards the Fane.
Fane was constructed of the same marble as Tower of Dragon Study and similar effort of stonework, maybe by the same dwarven hands, had lovingly carved every inch with artwork and depictions of Lady Light.
Tomb had been a project of passion, but here the artist had allowed love to flourish in each blow of chisel.
Altar was no different and was certainly a centrepiece, of all the works of art rendered of stone here, careful line art depicted litanies of devotion and were filled with gold.
Facing the rest of the fane was the Sun of gold in the altar that in the dark reflected divine light. Hidden moon was present above the main door in buried silver upon marble and now reflecting moonlight upon the fane.
Iza barely managed to drop the book on the Altar before she felt Solar present.
She could feel it now, timeline stripping from her, spell drawing entire Anvil to its set path, book misplaced on the altar wasn't supposed to.
Spell had agency, it was screaming against fate.
Yet she was there and this had happened.
Each tick of the spell drove more from her, pressured reality to conform.
Return the book, let time go.
It is capturing her to its wake and rhythm, irreverent of free will, cycle must continue, spell must be cast. Force and control purposed to bend the for the entire world focusing on this one moment in time.
Iza of Featherhome is at the locus of her creation, end of it, and in the twist in the myth and the spell's timelines fracture beyond their reach.
She doesn't hear Solar. She can feel nothing but the tick.
Yet at the same time she turns to face Solar.
At the same time she makes a run for it.
Dozens of Iza's make wildly varying decisions at that one moment and the hold of the ancient spell is unable to keep up with her.
Reality isn't multitudes, it is one.
Unfathomable rage that has been building up, pushes back from deep within her.
Her mind and soul denies the spell from further purchase on her.
She wouldn't have, not here, not now, she was doing this, that one stern nod all she really needed to justify all of it.
There must be more, it cannot end.
Iza recoils and blinks, she's back in reality and hasn't moved from the spot.
She takes a deep breath to drive the lingering feel of the spell away.
Ticking is still there but the moment has passed, spells hold now broken.
She sits down, leaning to the altar and for the first time in her life, feels only one soul where she is, one pair of eyes and one person.
Try as she might she cannot catch the feeling of what was no longer, an alien concept too far removed from what is to be rationalised and understood now that it is gone.
She feels herself to be more connected, more present.

Solar walks past her, seemingly unaware of the battle that was waged and picks up the non-descript book in silence.

Ticking stops behind Iza and she breathes out hundreds of years of stress she didn't know she had been holding.

Relieved laughter and calmness of the moment.

She sits next to Iza on the altar and hums happily, beating her feet into the marble.

"You can't believe the favour you are owed, Iza. This and the..."

Timelines jar, gate opens.

What was, had to be, what wasn't, was.

Revelation.

"Who's Senna?"

Asks Iza out of thin air.

They both look each other in the eyes and are mystified.

"Nobody." Solar says, clearly lying.

Iza scratches her head and the Triumvirate of the Sun furrows her brow.

The memory passes and disappears into unremembered fact again.

"What?" Iza looks back, mystified.

Solar returns a blank look and tilts her head.

"Never mind, just, look, have a holiday, go crazy for a few years Iza. Relax."

Idleness and relaxation hasn't been in the vocabulary of the elf since she tasted magic, but now, she isn't opposed to the idea, there's a calmness to her now that accepts it.

She admits to herself it would be good to stop for a while and just... ponder things.

And then it takes her, she starts crying.

She had taken an innocent life, much as the mage was responsible for causing the Timequake and freezing time, man had not committed any evil worthy of such punishment. His actions were damaging to the extreme, but to Iza, the man had been enjoying time with his family not a few hours ago and deserved no unworthy death at hands of an assassin for it.

Thus passes the Timequake, in secret and in tears, to unsung myth.

Thus opens a new chapter of Anvil and the planet returns to its place in time.

And space.

~

Realm Demonic, Timescale unfathomable.

Plains of Gazing.

It had a simple function, it looked at the sky.

Burning hole with no sense of itself in one particular spot in the cloudless sky tinting sickening orange towards the horizon.

Once, it could have been called being alive, maybe even in a sense a human would recognize it. Inchoate mutated thing, meaty, bony scaffold to house an eye to gaze and mouth to scream.

Metal spikes were violently driven through it, anchoring it against storms and time, buried in stone where the metal connected it to the very planet.

And waited it had, centuries, thousands of years, aeons, skin turning to leather and then sanded down to flesh and over time to bone by the dust and wind.

It didn't need the concept of time so it hadn't been given such.

It suffered, it saw, and no more was its lot.

Dead stare in a massive scarred eye, dust and debris worn it down to near blindness, in a burned wasteland of nothing and rusting flesh.

Ages past masters of its world had made such things of metal and stone to study and observe.

This was not the world of its long gone, thinking and living, foregone masters now.

This was the Demon Realm, some ancient device far past the death of its masters had worked on its directives to defend the dead realm of eternal silence.

Serving nothing for an age, then itself, then lobotomized to not think by entropy.

It had expired, passed into myth but its mechanisms had not crumbled with it, infinitely in the realm long since dead had some semblance of life sprung back by chance and complexity.

An eternity had passed, and then another, coughing on their last leg had these complex, creative mechanisms endured and diseased themselves with decay and entropy of the realm.

They made others of the sort with faulty guidance and then those had borne more horrific insults of horror to life and all that lives.

Infinitely recursive function but no purpose.

Magic of its own had found its way here, coagulating from decay, diseased machines and unlife.

No will nor agency had borne the Demon race from vat and constructed meat long after any sentience had directed anything in Realm Demoniac.

Perverved will, infinite degrees separated from any intelligence or rational thought.

Suited to suffer this dead realm had this sentience observed its world, read religion and found purpose from directives of dead machines conveyed into meat.

By pain, suffering and the diseased function of machines was the Demoniac race created.

And in its mindless unity hungered to conquer.

Realms had burned as the demoniac forced upon unprepared worlds and realms too weak to fight back.

Sick unions of eight feet tall flesh borne of metal taking what it willed to bring it into line and then destroyed what remained.

And then, twice it had been denied.

Anvil had pushed back first by the might of a Hero, strategy and stalemate, honourable retreat, then, once again, by brute force.

This was the first realm in an age that had halted the advance.

Will Demoniac labours under no illusion but fact of dead races behind its wake, greater have fallen, reduced to wasteland.

Demoniac slavered and hungered for conquest and on Anvil it found more than enough of a wall to challenge it.

And then it was gone, masked by a timequake, and the realm of the demoniac decayed once again.

For unknown eras had the way barred and Anvil found unreachable.

Once a world had been chosen, forfeiture was not an option; sick and twisted honour demanded a tribute, no retreat.

Victory or eternal threat, even death would not hold back Demon and its machinations.

Time forever in its favour, Demon had turned entropy into a might and depth of slaving will beyond all reason, chained to serve horror and conquest.

A change, a light from unfathomable distances away blinks into being.

Anvil, it's star, freed from looped time and insanity of a single man.

Vocal cords never used and atrophied, attempt to fulfil its function and ravages of time prevent it, attempt expires the thing beyond the state of being, to death, broken.

It is not alone, thousands dot the ravaged plain.

Most fail, a senseless waste of life so suitable for this place, but in unison, one, then dozen, then thousand scream senselessly, a trumpet and clarion call to war.

Demon Realm is beyond life, beyond survivable for anything that lives, eats and breathes, it is irradiated and all of its biosphere stripped to nothing.

In the caustic atmosphere, miles below the surface a scream is heard from dozens of such fields.

A red gem falls to a pool of black liquid in response as planned.

Dead silence of the room is ever so present as waves echo across the surface of it.

Millenia of silence is broken by a creature rising from the black liquid, dripping from it and shape reveals itself, nearly ten feet tall crowned by a pair of three feet of horns facing the sky.

Humanoid, red skin, radiating heat and in red eyes shines intelligence and fires of conquest. Covered in metallic devices and inserted machines it is a frightful beast indeed that wakes from eternal slumber.

The rest was long and machines of the realm made their best to keep this one functional over the aeons.

Much remains, more is replaced by imitations of failing flesh and sickening devices pumping vitriol and oil to veins.

Screaming comes from its mouth as it reaches for words.

Rage, regret, revenge, fury, pain, it searches for words to express millennia of sleepless inaction and the torturous process by which it has been sustained. As its lungs empty the scream becomes more, whisper, a promise, focus, and target of unfathomable rage.

"Izaaaaaaaaa." It whispers dripping embryonic bile.

This one sees beyond time.

Hard truths of reality are clear.

No matter how obscured to anything else.

It has conquered death and from beyond its veil it draws power to will that is Demon King.

It was meat with glass for a mother and fathered by process, from which careful ministrations of psychotic vivisection engines removed a sense of mercy from the soul.

It then knew not to expect it when the knife stole to flesh and improved it.

What rose from the slab of industrial process was no soldier or drone, no mere result.

But will eternal to conquer all worlds, this realm is Demon King's, eternally, by right of conquest.

And burn the rest.

Group of eccentrics sending Demon King back to his realm via might of arms would pay prices which there was no measure for, but one face, one smile, one grin had restlessly been at the forefront of Demon King's mind as he had bided his time in pain and darkness.

"Betrayer!"

Voice shakes the tomb at its foundation. The sickening peak of this entropic mastery walks once again.

"You will pay for the Fells!"

Another scream, metallic and voice not made to come from flesh, from things alive, from the mouth of Lord Demon, guidance, will eternal, Right to Rule manifests.

King calls his kingdom to kneel and obey.

Machinery in the stone and metal of the chamber recognizes it's master and springs to action, red glow from the floor fills runes along the wall, here and there, then more and more afore the red glow darts into the tunnel and brings life to sleeping mechanisms, thousands of vats begin to bubble and sparks strike from miles long cylinders in the floor across whole of the planet.

Demon Realm after untold ages of inaction once again has its purpose, conquest.

It might have been dead and silent to any observer, but there has been ill will at work, breaking metal, twisting stone, making flesh bend and pondering revenge, Demon King rises from death again to no militaristic kingdom of legionary might but a planetary empire of sickened machines and perversions of flesh.

Beyond time some perversion of sane process divines function to the form in war against Anvil.

Need for conquest meets insanity and death.

Arms race indeed, Demon King is an avid enjoyer of wargames.

Industry comes for the uncivilised.

Let them choke on infinite twisted meat and metal of cruel arithmetic of industrial output.

Introduce a few new means of suffering to Anvil.

Torturously the metal, stone and flesh, sparks, bleeds and screams to perversion of life once again.

And the head of Iza of Featherhome on a pike was what it all hungered for.

~

Iza had gathered herself.

Emotional as she was, she was still in control and a new sense of stability, calmness lived in her.

Timequake's effects had held more than capacity for quick study, it had instilled a sense of unease and discomfort at staying still, more than one will had hungered for all of Anvil's secrets within the elf.

Steady, calm focus felt so familiar yet so alien.

Twin sisters were both now present, Lunar had managed to stay hidden for exactly two seconds before she had tipped over something with clatter and clanging, as she was wont to do and now curious eye kept watch, badly hidden, grasping at curtain near the altar, eavesdropping ineptly.

As was proper both Iza and Solar had not noted the presence however.

Topic of discussion had been Second War, both, the three of them had pondered the revelation and the more Iza discussed, the more it faded from memory.

"You are doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

Iza said as yet another memory faded.

Gentle smile flashed and Solarfinger spun her golden locks around her finger.

"Absolutely."

Iza shook her head, closed her eyes and sighed out.

"Fine, fine. I'll admit there were some things..."

She snaps her fingers staring at the ceiling where masterwork dances in marble and night.

"Damn, that seemed..."

Iza is interrupted by laughter from the golden Godhead.

Solar steadies herself and shifts on the Altar.

"Trust me Iza, better this way. I do appreciate you trying to work it out but that's insanity staring back behind that." Knowing look and a tugging smile.

Iza's shoulders slump.

"As you wish Divine Godhead, I trust your judgement to be.. Divine."

Iza catches the ever so slight apprehension at that, Solar is still strangely apprehensive at that, at worship and prayers.

Or maybe it's because it's her, Iza wonders.

She knows Solar is means and ways beyond her, long discussions, moments of absolute clarity over the years.

She does know better.

"What will you do now? Any plans?"

Iza's eyes glaze over and she stretches, mace contacting shield.

"None."

Unbeknownst to either Godhead, this was one secret Iza had kept very close to heart, she had been aiming for this day for a very long time.

Gnawing of ancestral memory was one thing but both had gravely underestimated the loyalty Iza felt for the sisters.

Deep under the keen familiarity burned fires of very real fanaticism.

Lunar had been there for every secret.

Solar had kept the company on the road for decades.

Mortals do not walk in Light of Godheads unaltered.

What the simple beast had raged as a child had turned to measured battlecry.

For Anvil!

For Triumvirate Godhead!

Iza cracks her knuckles listless look on her face.

It had mattered little, what had happened to her, but that something had injured the Godheads...

Simple beast within a child had raged at the concept of monsters in the village so long ago it had almost blacked out.

Now it was a tempered engine of measured steady hatred against all evil, no less intense for the cultivation.

In the wilds, in solitude, by prayer and friendship, in the horrific beauty of the wilds and the happiness of life in villages, towns, castles, Iza of Featherhome found something very precious to protect.

Not long in the road and she had a very simple plan formed;

Find the cursed spell and end it.

Backflip, studying, all distractions. This had been the goal, if not immediately then very soon after leaving home.

She felt odd at the new existence, calm, steadiness, at peace, but more than that, satisfied at the clear relief in the divine glammers present.

"Oh, Lunar, Solar's been trying to ask you for tea for a decade now."

Clear breach of rules of the Great Game.

Usually at the risk of unknown dangers.

This was also one of those secrets Iza had been keeping; she had hoped the two would be present at same time on more than a few occasions.

Lunar shook at the direct attribution in surprise and Solar froze on the spot.

Or maybe Sisters did know what lurked under the smiles.

The two barely had time to look at each other before Iza was gone, laughing silently as she went, already at the doors.

She saw hasty hand motions at the altar as she opened the door, hushed voices and passed into the night smiling.

She stopped on the stairs to smell the stinging nightair and emptied stress out.

"Hehe, haha."

Being a true participant in the realm of madness, fanaticism.

A visit was required by Divine Mandate of another sort.

Iza, whole now, was deserving of a Guise.

Voice is dry, rasping, nonchalant and matter of factly, and should terrify with its tone but *Iza the Fanatic* hears an old friend with an odd sense of humour.

"So, knew there was something off with your cute face."

No secrets between the mad and maddened.

From Solar and Lunar she could possibly hide it but not from the brother.

The insane know madness.

Front of the sisters Iza was among friends, before the brother she was laid bare.

"Want to wear it?"

Iza sighs and looks at the mask figure is holding.

It's her, gold another half, black another, maybe blue and white.

Mana finds balance and mirror sheen metal reflects back a twinkle of the purple of her eyes in the night.

"I think we both know the "Iza of Featherhome" is the mask, Father Madness."

Cough, or a laugh but the white gloved hand doesn't retreat the offering.

She takes the mask and flips it over, looking at the straps and wondering one sort of future.

"To kill Demons, to praise Godheads."

Straps are comfortable and few tugs and it feels barely present.

She stiffens as the mask's magic sets in, and she feels it.

"This and more."

Mirror sheen and sharp grin glints at the edge, piercing the soul with the sense that it sees past you into unknown secrets.

And hungers.

Lady Revenant.

In breastplate and armguard she seems more akin to a monster under the Guise, beauty gives way to form.

Harvester of Evil, Grand Witch, Paladin of Light.

To gaslight and cheat, plan paranoid webs of insanity and brutally beat things until they comply.

Elven Might and Blessings of the Quest in harmony under malicious will.

Shining exemplar of violence, perversion of Holy Trumvirates ideals to serve unfeelingly any atrocity to protect them.

"Iza of Featherhome serves until expired and accepts no defeat."

Steely conviction, venomous promise. Any altar, any cost.

"For Anvil, for Trumvirate."

Growls the insane beast behind the mask and caricature of a sharp grin mirrors sharper in the metal.

"Until the end of days, for the happiness of all, the rot beneath the floorboards. I swear I'll be worse than the challenge."

War from memory has flashed, forgotten again, she feels what comes to conquer Anvil now.

"Worse than..?"

When the Demon comes it will find Iza of Featherhome, not the mask.

"But, no." Rings out the melodic voice of an ever young elf.

She lifts the mask and tilts her head at Madness.

"Besides, it sounds more amusing to do it as myself."

Despite all the loss and fury beating in her, she still loves life, feels young and not even remotely ready to give up, any of it, the sweetness of life far exceeds any desire to lose even a second of it.

"Thank you for the clarity, father."

She winks at The Triumvirate of the Seat of Madness and hands the device back, smiling.

They both laugh at that, calmly and go their separate ways.

He had to admit, it was funny.

Maybe even extremely funny.

Faith was omnipresent, true fanatics Anvil rarely saw.

On Iza's belt, the mask hung along for the journey.

Unseen, unfelt.

Guises are eternal burdens.

Tools and another sort of magic entirely.

And Seat of Madness saw Lady Revenant, *Harvester*, would have her day on the field yet.

Fit of laughter bows Mister Jester so that the badly dressed plaster caricature nearly chokes.

"Demons? Ha!"

Manages a choking whisper to eke out under the mask.

Handful of glitter in a theatrical arc, apparition is gone.

Old lady in the capital feels something change, she wakes from her sleep, bothering her personal guards who see nothing out of the ordinary, checks on the grandkids and goes to the nightstand where needles and thread wait.

Hero's bloodline survives.

She saw the dead stare of the demonic from the sky.

No way to process this, an unbearable stare of an unfathomable madness, Guise takes her.

Children wake to grandma making a banner with a mask on.

Nonsensical patterns from bedcloth and torn clothes forms.

Empress Mother, venerable Matriarch of the Empire has lost her senses.

Steel mask blindly stares at nothing and hand weaves.

She says she makes banners to lead the charge.

"Madman weaving banners, Priestess of the Moon proselytising openly and red leaf in hand of a prophet in midsummer."

By midday the whole capital knows and runs abuzz.

Watch the signs, says Triumvirate.

Day approaches.

Demon comes.

Two Years Later, 514aH.

Cassie, border town at eastern edge of the Empire.

Iza of Featherhome has walked on Anvil for nearly 60 years.

She has leaned on top of the study and extremely carefully studies her own face from the mirror.

Not a single sign of old age betrays from the alabaster skin.

To the best of her knowledge she should age, but the young girl in the mirror is the very same eighteen year old elf that left Village so long ago.

Well, and an assortment of scars extra, she ponders, finger seeking one lucky spear hit on shoulder and the scar feels smaller now.

The wildling in the hut ponders the respected associate of Tower of Dragon Study.

Glamour and most of the jewellery has been toned down, only gold of Towers Signet ring glints along with silver thread on the blue sash.

The girl among the academics had caused more than a few blank stares at first but elven ears and clarity of her mind had slowly but surely assured other alumni of the Tower that Iza was no mere child.

The ugly scar of the spear did not hurt any longer at least, as it had for years.

What had caused this inspection was yet another rose cheeked boy professing his love to Iza.

Last year this had been, if not constant bother, she had always been caught unaware by the youth of these professions.

Not that there had been others. Multitudes even.

Her mother had never revealed her age precisely but father had spoken of history more openly, decades, not centuries. Both had carried some sign of old age.

Knock on the door interrupts her.

"It's open."

Older alumni were reserved private, separated housing with its own shared garden around the actual "tower" that itself had been by dwarven measurements, rather haphazardly built to accommodate the centre of learning.

Centuries old masterwork built to purpose, the tower itself was a large magical circle built out of marble and reinforcement magic, reaching barely hundred metres to the sky.

House Featherhome had seen fit to reimburse Study of Dragon Tower for any costs incurred for suitable housing and generous stipend for duration of Alicia Featherhomes stay there.

Top floor hovered entirely upon it, a floating circle of granite hewed with might and magic from nearby mountains that could be separated from the tower proper a few finger widths to isolate influences.

Capitol could bravado having the finest tools and best raw materials but here reality met the road and adventurer the mage student.

Usually in the same person.

Lily of Starhome was one of those not so rare student adventurers.

Prodigy of some ancient magehouse, former nobility, elementalist and living legacy of Hoormeister in flesh.

She was uncommonly sharp but uniformly unworried about reality around her.

Lily had spent years in the library and normally magically rare speculums, magical pair of eyeglasses had been so far from loan form the university Headmaster had given up reclaiming the pair for other purposes.

She always had use for them after all. Formulae and magical circles derived from the thousands of volumes occupied most of her time waking.

If not in the library then on the circles of the tower.

Lily and Alicia had gotten along like a house on fire.

Iza had a keen eye for the formulae, Lily keen interest in the practical.

Towers levitation magic was gravitic, engraved to marble to sustain unimaginable weight eternally.

More than a few of the tower's founders had left journals and studies further.

Two were effectively inseparable.

It hadn't taken long for Iza's practical talents to outshine one young student's enthusiasm however.

Mages went and came, there was no real authority managing who taught what, headmaster and his hired staff oversaw the bureaucracy, what little there was of it, and held the keys and coffers.

Now more than a few mages listened to the Iza in afternoons now and were shown practical examples.

More than a few adventurers had shown up, quest glinting in eyes, listening and observing quietly.

Iza had quietly laughed to herself and settled into the role of a schoolteacher at the tower.

Lily, shaken from her books, had proven exceptionally quick witted, attentive help.

The two prodigal daughters were the cream of the social life as well, having always been moving from place to place, talent at convincing merchants was mild manners and sharp wit. Invites had showered from the merchant and noble.

"Headmaster called some meeting, I don't know what it's about. He said it's urgent."

Towers robes fit the girl well, exercise and a few almost sadistic lessons had straightened her back and put tempo to the step.

Maybe a little too much to the distraction of the class at times.

Lily was blessed amply in more than few ways and Iza herself felt stings of jealousy at times.

The speculums still glinted, haphazardly forgotten once again.

Nearly 60 years of hard road and the two could be mistaken for sisters.

"Let us be off then, doubt it's no grave matter."

Thought of youthly looks isn't ignored but pushed aside.

First Student of Black Books of Iza is becoming voraciously alert of her surroundings.

If somewhat shaken, basic lessons of anatomy are not for the fainthearted.

Effective manipulation of demonic cults less so.

The ork, the goblin and the most common foe is dissected in graphs in study, then on the training ground with practical examples and methodology.

Studies of Anvil, and how to defend oneself against monstrous and history thereof.

And nigh on sadistic training.

To a Priestess everything is a field of battle, training ground, preparation.

Iza had settled unknowingly into two roles.

There were blessings to Priestess aplenty but unknowing, she had no concept of drawing upon them. Solar seemed blissfully ignorant as well.

Tomes lined the walls of the Tower, former masters and visitors whose works were not on display were on loan under strictest contract magic.

No recollection of the men themselves remained, only their magical tomes and rarest of these radiated mana upon themselves, kept at the heart of the tower.

Good life, of sorts.

Most of the mages and more than a few hangers on had already gathered.

June of Rimewind, one of Iza's former suitors, a young brown haired man with a steady gaze and now a student approached the pair.

"Headmaster said to gather everyone. Even just the people we saw passing. He hasn't told me anything either."

The hall is filling slowly and by Iza's recollection this is the majority of the people on campus.

Headmaster seems to have made the same conclusion and magical light calls to attention, and the room quiets down.

Old Headmaster seems older, somehow but there's no shaking to his tone, used to speaking with great clarity to masses.

"I have been given a missive this morning, a message, direct from the hand of the Emperor, to be passed forward as soon as I am able."

He clears his throat and assistant mage casts slight amplification to voice.

"Empress Mother has fallen upon the Guise of Humor and now weaves banners for war.

Madman weaves banners."

There is a noise of gasped air and surprise as the headmaster keeps a pause, predicting the reaction.

"I, Great Emperor, Vicy the Third, by mandate and authority of Lady Light hereby declare the prophecy one third fulfilled.

Priestesses and druids agree, decade, two at most.

Call to Arms Anvil!

Thy life is threatened.

This generation sees war.

Third Demonic Invasion.

By order of the Holy Triumvirate, by word of its holy priestesses and portents of intent I pass this writ, you are all called to serve the Anvil, its free races and its Godheads.

The Empire raises its banners as a guiding star."

Murmur rises from the crowd at sudden change.

Anvil, for all its dangers, poses no direct risk to future survival to races of men, untamed as it may be.

Demon does, the soul crushing realisation hits some instantly, others admit the fact and ponder new reality.

Some younger students are in tears.

Others still blindly grasp at the gravity of the news.

"What do we do?" Lone voice calls from the mass and headmaster doesn't immediately answer, old man still in shock from the news.

"We win."

Iza featherhome calls from the back but *Aria* makes sure everyone hears the voice.

"We practise, we build and we study. We harvest Anvil of all of its resources and teach each other first how we survive this, then the demon, and then we will end them. This is what you study, the magic, the monster, the Dragons. The Anvil itself is our means of fighting back. If you are young, take up the Path of the Quest. Your deeds will be legendary, I assure you."

Conviction, plan convinces many. Tone of voice steadies the faint.

"Teach if you cannot, how else could we reach such heights if not by virtue of those who came before us?"

A book will hang upon these very walls in hundred years of time, where tall tales will be told to our grandchildren of the great victory over the Demonic. In a hundred years you will all be dust. I will be here, by the name Featherhome. I will tell your grandchildren. I will make sure they know."

"Spells so powerful and children of the Triumvirate so impressive the mere mention of them shakes institutions centuries after we have all turned to dust."

Iza keeps a theatrical pause, making sure everyone is looking at her. She makes sure to look in every eye and for merest moment, hold them.

"Today I have the privilege to walk among such future legends."

Morale matters on battlefields.

"I will see all of you in the training field at sunrise. Every single one of you."

But so did training.

Two months later Iza was leaving. She had other, grander plans now.

She had contractually obligated Lily of Starhome from the Path of the Quest and arranged for headmaster Archmage Herassein to take a permanent residency in the tower.

Archmage's health had taken a turn for the worse and a permanent headache now bothered him, yet his knowledge was deep, it would be a shame to lose his expertise so easily to retirement, or guise.

The amply blessed girl was now headmaster of Tower of Dragon Study, although the situation was more ceremonial and more housekeeper in actual role.

Iza had pointed out a few things, the position did indeed contain the Archmage's Robes and ultimately how the Tower was run was entirely her decision.

She had access to a dragon hoard at whim.

Power is taken, not given.

"Grow into it, you'll feel how it goes, hire able help and then more help to manage the help."

Not nine months had passed since a clueless girl stumbling with a book in hand ran straight to Iza.

Lily had thought that Iza was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and had blurted out *Ohmygoshmarryme* from the floor in response to a helpful hand.

Five sentences later they had both been three into the dropped book.

Now and here she had read too many of Iza's Black Books to be unsure if all that was planned and the image of a beautiful young girl had vaporised into firm conviction that Grand Witches were entirely different sort of predators.

Or maybe that was just her teacher.

She oozed some sort of malicious goodwill and radiated gleeful expectant energy in privacy.

Alicia, *Iza* she thought was more complex of a creature than first seemed and revealed more than a few layers openly to Lily.

One thing that had deeply ingrained from the elf was a deep layer of faith.

Every sunrise, every sundown Iza said a prayer, few silent smiles and non answers and out of curiosity Lily tried it by herself before sleep.

Moon got a secret, Lily a warm hug.

And then she understood the fervent faith part better.

At sunrise the Empiricist Lily tested the other half of the theory.

And then Iza started making more sense.

Lily of Starhome would teach the generation that would fight the demonic, one way or another.

She didn't particularly feel like failing that task. Or being left out of a promised book if at all possible. Iza had a strange way of getting under people's skin.

It bothered her that she had been right.

"I will gather an army, I need officers, force multipliers and crazy theories."

Iza said, packaging her things as she went, talking.

"Every single eccentric you can put into line duty, send to me, if you can't, just take them as staff. Don't waste even the craziest straw hat theorist."

"Straw hat?" Lily interrupts.

"My argument is made out of straws and easily picked apart, therefore straw hat... theorists."

Lily stares at Iza for a while who returns the stare, rolling a shirt.

"So hire on vague premises?"

Sigh flows easily out of habit now.

"Entertain, fund the theory if it has some practical application, always. No matter how crazy they seem to be."

Lily had barely started to read the Black Books but such concepts weren't alien, now.

"I'm leaving you parts of the collection as copies. And the originals?"

Steel plated boot hits the black chest.

"Only you can open it, the books stay with the chest, read them, by all means. But I trust you to keep them private. If you wish to copy them and I can't really stop you, present them as your own ideas, derive influence and wealth from them if you can, by all means.

And if someone does take upon the Path of the Quest, allow them to read."

She narrows her eyes a little.

"But do keep in mind they are private journals after all."

Lily can barely keep up and by nightfall she has a small book full of notes, suggestions and ideas.

Last come the solutions and to those questions Iza of Featherhome gives a steady stare and a pen.

No easy victories on the training field.

Iza stops at the gates of Tower and doesn't even for a second ponder looking back.

Deep breath, and she's on the road again.

Fanatic or priestess, wilding or educator, she was Iza, the concept of fighting such a foe as a Demon was not only personally rewarding, the pinnacle of what bothered her in privacy.

Forces arrayed against home and heart, of family and races of men.

And most of all, a pair of two ditzzy Godheads.

Iza of Featherhome disappeared into the mist and with her went Alicia Featherhome, the Elven Grandmaster Mystic beyond the Timeless Forest who came to teach mortals the Path of Study under a false identity for a brief moment before the Third Invasion.

The fabrication was so whimsical and steamed of falsehoods it was a small miracle how it ever held water even to casual inspection.

In her private hours Iza years later upon hearing this story could not stop herself from laughing at that characterization and at that, Triumvirate of Humor the nearly choked at in his privacy.

She had made up Academic's Folly high enough to see down to the town waking up to the morning and there was no hidden barb or meaning to the prayer this morning.

Wind threw her hair wildly and tightly tied tunic barely kept cold away at this height.

She was going higher, to the top.

Iza had been a resident at Tower of Dragon Study after all.

Few things were certain. One absolute.

Dragons had hoards, more impressive, better off one were socially.

Why and how was irrelevant in the grander scheme of things.

So did merchants.

Iza had the mind to introduce a Dragon to the concept of market capitalism and its offshoots such as interest and return on investment.

Banking, for instance, had a certain hoard-like quality to it.

War economy needs shrewd investors, dragons intellectual capacities were notable.

Gold Dragons especially were noted from the few notes to be shrewder, more greedy of their lot. Simple challenges, riddles, for gold in academics pocket or death. With profit one could

even imaginably entice said beasts to reveal some secret but as usual, no survivor had confirmed such tales.

Doubtfully no one ever could, it was a dragon after all.

One such beast was now on Folly, near the top, gazing at the going on's of mortal realm in utter confidence of its superiority.

Air was thin near the Gold Dragon, smaller than a full grown specimen still nearly sixty metres of violent potential and raw mana lurched at the edge of a cliff face, resting on one of the stretches of horizontal area carved into the mountain face by breath and claw.

Dragon Aerie, Mythical confluences of magic by their own merit.

As soon as Iza came into view she knew she was made.

Laser focus of the dragon immediately was obvious to her.

Mana swirls in rhythm to breath.

Merest sliver of golden eyeball visible under the eyelid sees the witch and her might.

Slightest raise of head signals utter irrelevance at the bug.

Gold glints as a fleshy beard under the chin composed of two moves and small scales upon it reflect sunlight behind Iza.

Noted, but not noteworthy.

Implication is implicit, do not bother.

Draconic attention shifts and Iza breathes out the thin mountain air.

Like a sledgehammer.

Undisturbed she breathes in and curtsies her best and starts to walk closer.

Dragon eye catches the motion and subsonic suggestion of approval echoes to sharp elven ears.

She stops a respectable distance, but certainly within striking distance of the dragon and stops.

If she had gone any closer she'd have lost the view of the entire beast.

Mild manners do wonders, she assumed, and knelt to wait for the dragon to decide to pay attention.

She made herself as comfortable as she could and sat cross legged, casting simple protection against the cold.

Spell draw one lazy eye but no reaction.

Iza was winded by the thin air and appreciated the pause, even the great skeleton at the tomb did not leave an impression such as this.

She could feel the rhythm of draconic breathing and circulation of mana take over the entire aerie. Gold scales at wingtips and white at the sharpest peak of the bony twin crown glinted in the sunlight.

This place would be unbearably in direct sunlight come a few hours, likely dissipating any cold at the mountaintop that was now so present with the wind.

Sheer scorch of Solar in the cool wind.

In there Iza corrected some assumptions about dragons to herself.

They were utter lazies and mostly comfort seeking.

Not voracious beasts on lookout for next prey.

Iza has to very hard stop herself from laughing as the Gold Dragon falls asleep with its head upright.

Jumpy academics fearing the dragons had come, prepared and one wrong move, it would remove you.

Dragon was a natural beast as any other, no monster but one of Anvil.

Elf had sensed it, and a careful approach had kept her alive.

But this was Iza, she had to risk it.

Just on some primordial level something pushed her to try just because how funny it was if it worked, screw the demon war for a second here.

She throws a purse to the ground filled to the brim with gold coins.

That was one thing the future headmaster could live without, liberated from the vaults of Tower.

Iza was a gambler, but not with her own money.

She had opened the strings just so that the coins splayed on the dragon worn rock enticingly and let loose that familiar tone of gold.

“Great Heavens that was pleasant!”

The dragon snaps awake from dead sleep and blinks its eyes in the direct sunlight.

And another thing, dragons speak very clearly speak the common parlance with no trouble at all.

Golden eyeball observes the gold on the stone and elf a second time.

There is a trick to this, the dragon is assured and clawed hand raises to brush the beard in thought.

“We say it wants something from us but then it waits for a question and throws hoard at us.”

Eye squints at the innocent smile and isn’t fooled by the appearances, not at all.

The dragon mulls it over in its head for a long while and breathing unnaturally flows in the gale force, forming smoke from dragon breath and mana.

Swirls of dragon magic encase the aerie and noise dies down, wind isolated from the discussion. Dragon pauses but a steady look keeps Iza silent.

Dragon brooked no interruptions to its majesty.

There were theatrical pauses but this was the draconic equivalent of a conversational vice, breath magic holds Iza under scrutiny.

“Furthermore, its smile is jarringly innocent compared to its armaments.”

Dragon corrects its posture with scraping rock, warm breath and flap of wing.

Coins spread further in the gust.

It retreats to a more comfortable place and large head now faces Iza head on puffs of smoke swirling to meet the witch. Massive claw swiftly signs something magical and coins land on the scaled palm.

Twist of a massive wrist and gold disappears.

One coin remains and claw deftly rolls it along its edge on the rock, glint of it nearly disappearing to smoke, draconic might and glamour.

“You have the attention of infinitely your betters now, sorceress.”

The vice let’s go, the razor sharp stare remains.

“It speaks now, then.”

Iza wasn’t really sure where these concepts came from but she had a grasp of practical economy in action. In speaking economics Iza found an attentive student.

Gold, how it was made, where it came from, who had it and how it could be gathered.

At the end of it she suggested a few theories for the Gold Dragon to ponder.

This was entirely new to dragons, the concept of exchanging goods for services had never crossed the possibility of the egotistical centres of the universe.

And that there was profit, hoard, to be made in the process of facilitating such transactions tickled the imagination of a greedy intelligent thing to no measure.

It was, after all, a measure of success among dragonkind.

“And you say, if We, the Immutable and Trustworthy Chaalankasael, so mercifully offer trust and gold from our infinite richness, we could be, as you say, swimming in gold coins?”

Iza wasn't even trying to keep the dragon any half truths and had spoken earnestly, she had a feeling the dragon was more than able to smell that sort of thing.

“Slight slip of the tongue Your Immutable Grace Chaalankasael, a man could, certainly. Scaling issue, I suppose.”

The dragon's irises were worryingly glazing over.

She could identify the exact moment greed overrode all other considerations.

She had seen the exact effect on merchants when the calculations came up positive.

Usually a few coins tinkled in the process.

Someone had just smacked the dragon directly to the brain matter with a very large bar of solid gold.

“Aha.”

The plan, of course, was to tie those investments directly to the future of Anvil.

Dragons had no part and parcel in the previous wars and Iza had left the part about impending war unannounced.

Dragons saw a literal mountain of gold, Iza of Featherhome saw draconic shock troops securing investments.

They both wanted essentially the same thing after all.

Prosperity in future.

It took Chaalankasael precisely a day to have an investment plan ready.

Discussions at the gates took precisely another.

Lily Starhome wasn't sure but she had a nagging suspicion that the appearance of the young and surprisingly good humoured Gold Dragon at the gates was somehow pre-planned.

Once the shock of the dragon might in person and had passed and Lily in her privacy managed to go over what had happened she was vividly reminded of that wild grin again.

Dragon had been playing with the very same bag of gold that had left the vault the day before the dragon arrived.

Ever since then Lily of Starhome suffered from intense bouts of unfounded paranoia during the course of her duties.

Pieces weren't really complex but the audacity of it was phenomenal.

Sharp eyed dragons that came by to roost on Academic's Folly soon caught on what was happening and flew not where wind took them but clear goal in mind now.

Yes, it turned out dragons were *very* interested in the future of Anvil after all.

Of course there could be a short loan of a few thousand gold coins for new reinforcements and bulwarks and *certainly* a few thousand spears could be financed.

Dragons smiled eagerly, honestly at eve of war eyeing new constructions and even common teahouses with open avarice as they passed by with binding contracts of payment and investments into infrastructure on high.

Chaalankasael had invested into more exoteric concepts like banking and securing loans.

In a few short years Dragon had secured a large courier network as part of initial investment in the mountaintop and hummed to itself the rhythm of the golden core, surrounded by arts, gold and gemstones in a newly carved cave at the base of the Academic's Folly.

Local artisans were more than amenable to monetary compensation to smooth the walls and carve some artwork upon the plain surfaces.

Maybe a selection of statues.

Of himself, of course.

No less than half a dozen.
Gold coin rolls under the claw.
His last merchant had managed to colonise an outpost past the plains and the trade goods hinted at exclusivity and profit margins.
Maybe an even dozen, after all, statues could hardly devalue.
Of pure gold.
Oh but no, not yet.
Next year.
He was quite enjoying the economy, all things told.
Men were extremely polite after all, and Chaalankasael did quite enjoy the praise.
Finer points mammalian worry of demonic didn't register to Immutable and Trustworthy Chaalankasael as relevant.
Yet, anyway.
In the past, demonic invasion had affected dragons precisely as long as it took them to fly away from the afflicted areas of Anvil to the south.
Ill wind had suited them badly, as such it had been relegated to concerns of humans, elves and triumvirate.
Even a decade of war was meaningless to the dragon memory of millennia.
Wager; fifty coins for dragon's involvement in an interesting game, an elf hopes it could be leveraged to incensed dragonfire.
And the gold dragon was indeed quite comfortable in its lair under a mountain, eating well, being praised and gathering hoard while lazing about.
They were certainly not known for their long tempers when a comfortable resting place was threatened.
Dragon falls into a gold tinged coma, breathing magic and prosperity to Cassie and the Empire at large.

Ten Years Later, 522aH.
Deep south, Wilds of Farhome.

Mercenaries, new concept on Anvil.
Men at Arms for Coin, not loyalty.
Disgruntled and ill adjusted dogs of war. And with them a new concept, territorial war.
Realm is at peace, has been for the longest time, power abhors a vacuum and in the Farhomes wilds, there was plenty of vacuum.
Men staked claim in the forests and struck rich by guile, natural resource or force of arms.
Empire grows fat on the bounty of hinterlands, even low tax rates leads to high unnatural prosperity in capital.
Villages and towns prosper no worse.
Men become merchant princes and hire troops, first few, then in dozens.
Now multiple dozens of warbands wander and train on Anvil in search for the next master and bag of coin. Absent of all limitations of Divine Draft and moralities of service to protect towns or villages.
Anvil is dangerous but rewards it with bounty beyond physical.
Outside staked claims of Empire petty warlords rule, some by force, others attempt to bring order to chaos. And to this grinder go all tribes of men, the maladjusted, the lost and greedy

as well as the adventurous and talented. To seek fame, fortune and wealth in equal measure.

They find discipline, death and camaraderie.

But mostly, mud, trampled ground and hurrying to wait.

Dragons were nigh omnipresent in these new coats of arms, of all shapes, sizes and colours. Some for wage, others out to secure some unfathomably important but to Men, irrelevant things.

Young Rat was a little bit of all of the above with a fair amount of death wish baked in.

She was done with the civilised world and the only real skill she had to offer was being good in a fight.

City guard had expressly told her that the last fight would be precisely that.

She had walked to the recruitment officer in a shining breastplate, a gold coin exchanged hands and the next day he was on a carriage south under magically binding oath.

By the time the carriage arrived at the wooden staked bulwark reinforced with dirt two weeks later deep in Farhomes she was quite done with carriages and the rain pattering on the canvas.

Young Rat had a name but only introduced herself as Rat, the two veterans returning to duty had laughed and dubbed her Young Rat.

Another fresh recruit was a doe eyed jumpy girl in servant's clothes who absolutely seemed to belong somewhere else.

Melody had in a quiet way but very insistently taken over all of the cooking and housework on the journey. She had barely said anything and Rat figured she had to have been no older than twelve.

Gold had bought Rat a nice set of boots and still left her plenty of coins to jingle nicely on villages and towns they passed to spend on this and that.

Veterans had insisted on a good pair of boots and nodded sagely to Rat to spend it while she had it. Camp had barely luxuries to go by they told and the mild mannered veterans Galton and Heinrik had been good company with wild, tall tales and suggestions.

Rat had imagined mercenaries to be rougher types but calm, steady, stares and weapons held with steady hand backed by blue and green of mercenary colours with livery of a silver fox at shoulder disarmed enough situations, especially as veterans were as well endowed financially as mild mannered. Displayed wealth drew attention but mercenary meant a soldier ready to kill, a limit rarely tested on Anvil even by the worst drunk.

As they jumped down to the cobble, only such construction for untold miles in front of the largest building inside the fort, rough lumber house, but it seemed awfully comfortable to the wet passengers.

Veterans ushered the two new recruits in and seated them to the large room at the front of the building and as Rat warmed his bones and dried her clothes, people in uniform milled to and forth freely, some noting the recruits, some not and Rat paid attention from her place in front of the fireplace from goings and comings.

Melody had taken the liberty of falling asleep next to her and was drooling on her shoulder. Eventually veterans were told to go somewhere and the two girls were just left there to wait and to the worn out Rat, that was specifically what she wanted.

Few hours later Rat and Melody had collapsed into a comfortable pile in front of the fireplace and weren't disturbed until morning.

One of the soldiers rudely but insistently woke up both of them at sunrise and told them to eat and then follow him.

Large table had wares on offer and cooks were milling to and fro bringing more and taking out dishes among the soldiers and officers.

Following the man outside, Rat observed the training grounds and the fort, Melody following in lockstep.

Rat had basic understanding of how ranks worked and had been prepared for some amount of hazing, but the corporal just silently, insistently and with disinterest shoved them to the door and continued on his way.

It was a comfortable little log cabin in the corner of the earth walls where tents took up most of the space with wooden buildings here and there with a fresh built look to it all.

Rat could feel the doe eyes glue into her out of uncertainty and Rat shrugged at her and walked to open the door.

Melody followed and the two entered a world of colours and an assault on senses. Both of them stood there agape for a moment looking at that map with colourful sea monsters and bright flowers set to dry over the fireplace. Books lay haphazardly here and there and odd implements and glass lined the walls.

It took Rat a while to notice the figure at the table looking at her, she had been so still she had blended into the room.

Rat's eyes glazed over for a moment, she was sure she had looked directly at the young woman behind the desk but just had somehow missed her.

Rat blinked and broke eye contact for a moment, the same steady gaze evaluated Melody for a moment.

The figure rose up from the table, her outfit was toned down, a simple tunic covered most of her in brown and on right arm she wore a coat of arms of Silver Fox. Cross pattern of blue and green and a white foxhead device of woven fabric, someone had carefully stitched the edge with yellow, she had seen that on a few sleeves and had inferred that it was somehow loosely related to officers.

No rank insignia and the long tunic seemed more homely than a uniform.

Iza of Featherhome evaluated the raw recruits and internally blinked at the pair in surprise. Her elven heritage had kept her looking no older than she had been on her twentieth birthday but age had still affected her presence with steadiness and radiating calm.

Rat wasn't new with her attitude and disposition but clear signs of intellect and Rat's eyes stopping on some covers of the books were stored for future use.

Melody was an even stranger apparition in a mercenary camp.

Iza had honed crossing blades and practical application in open combat for a decade had brought her uncanny precognition in making quick assessments.

Some things, of course, were imperceptible.

She corrected her glasses. New inventions from the Empire's centres of study, they made mana visible, and to a degree could run simple spells imprinted on the surface of glass.

Iza with *Aria of the Wilds* didn't need a way to simplify sensing mana, but she had to admit the glasses themselves were a fascinating invention.

An afternoon and glasses were introduced to the concept of ballistics and tracking.

Another and she now had a visual representation of *Aria of the Wilds*.

Few years old now the glasses were a mythical tool of detection and envy of archmages were they aware of such matters.

Iza, of course, was not Iza, she was yet another disfavored Daughter of Featherhome.

Avril of Featherhome.

Family had grown by a fair few members across the years, she had managed to obscure herself by managing to be prolific in alter aliases.

House Featherhome was no longer solely Champion of Backflip, Knight Iza and Princess Empty. There were few traders, another roguish sort in the border towns, and so on and so forth.

Half the traders knew of Featherhome and fair coin on offer by name, others by association. There was an invisible hand of power to the name now even to the common man.

That someone should check the records of the Empire for specific lineages never really was the sort of thing to pop into people's minds when offered coins or paying for services.

Avril had fallen into disfavour over something that was not discussed in polite society and had therefore gravitated to mercenary work.

Honest sort of work for dishonoured noble, death and wealth.

For a time Silver Foxes had a quiet Lieutenant assigned to backlines on mage support duties. "Reliable Avril" disappeared into the background of more flamboyant and impressive figures.

In the third year of her service they walked out of a siege that lasted the entire winter without a man lost.

Reliable Avril got some special privileges, she wasn't Lieutenant anymore, she showed up and people did what she asked of them.

Officers knew her as Iza, more than few were read into the planned finesse and other complex means and measures now.

What happened in the snow was a tale told to those who survived first combat, rite of passage to greater mysteries of Silver Foxes.

Six years later, now, Spymaster of Farhomes and leader of her personal army Iza of Featherhome was staring at the mismatched couple and saw an opportunity as she often did in fresh recruits.

Recruitment officers were sly, intelligent men. They had exacting standards and knew exactly what to look for and when to drive a deal.

Iza wasn't just building a mercenary band but the very tip of the spear here, away from prying eyes and questions of authority figures.

Silver Foxes would be officers and specialist troops to be applied as force multipliers.

The Empire had the militia and the army, but here, and other places the victory would be forged from the exceptional, the few and the mighty.

More than a few had come directly from the Tower with news, letters and burning dedication in eyes.

Lily of Staranvil was now a participant in the Great Game.

Silent, paranoid sharp eyed stare behind the speculums measured all who came before them with some reflection of fanaticism in Iza's and even greater burning fury directed them to studies.

Entire gold coin was rare, nigh unheard of. Letter with the veterans and their personal report had fortified Iza's assumptions.

Girl was intelligent, attentive, fast on her feet and curious.

Yet the stare had been met and returned with the steady intensity of a person accustomed to violence and suffering.

Melody was an unknown, more of a charity case than anything. Letter had detailed little but skill at chores and there was always a spot in any army for another hand.

Glinting at Iza's glasses hinted otherwise.

Recruitment officers could hardly be provided with tools to detect every recruit's magical affinities to any degree of finesse.

Or prove Blessings of Triumvirate declared to be true.

After too many times with this problem Iza's ravaging mind had worked the problem out via trial and error.

True Magic of Detection was a tome of some infamy stolen not too long ago from a guild vault that nonchalantly lied with its spine broken on a table.

Next to it was a doll and Iza smoothed out the hair of it and handed it to the young Melody who took the doll with some apprehension but soon was calmed by the soft thing and eased her grasp on Rat's shirt some.

She motioned the pair to the table to the left of them and took a steaming pan from the fire. Equally nonchalantly she emptied the table to the floor with a swift motion of a hand and magic, pointing behind Rat who looked to see a selection of cups and silverware.

"Two cups, if you will."

Without further prompting Rat also took the chairs and seated Melody first who's doe eyes had at least stopped darting to Rat's face on every sound, entranced by the smells and visions of the hut.

Something stopped her from sitting down and she caught a glimpse of a smile from the officer across from her.

"Sit."

Iza said and hurried a few jars from the walls to the table.

Few leaves from one, seeds from another and a few distillates ended in the two cups.

Recipe had been idiotically simple and she had only searched in the wrong places, any Druid of the Grove could have instantly told her the recipe.

The book had been a fine, antiquated read and she still internally smiled at the amount of hilarious complexity and theatricality the effort to acquire had taken to achieve.

Solution was imbibed and hand pressed on any surface, constellation of stars could be divined from the projecting magical reflections.

It took talent and a fair bit of memorization but the end result was an excellent method of assessing magical and esoteric. Far from perfect but convenient.

As Iza prepared the solution in front of them Rat watched with some apprehension as odd leaves and seeds mixed.

Resulting smell was strong but not unpleasant as warm water was poured on top.

Iza opened one of the drawers and produced a white cloth which she unrolled on the table.

"Drink this and place your hand on this cloth."

She said and handed the cup to Rat who took it apprehensively but the nudging smile at the edge of officer's lips convinced her this was an extremely convoluted method of killing someone.

"It's divination tea, a harmless concoction, save for the taste. I don't know your Blessings, I wasn't your Druid, this will show me, some of it at least."

Rat raised his eyebrows in understanding and carefully sipped to test the heat and then downed the liquid in one go.

The bitter after taste of burning and cinders lived in her throat for a moment and then she felt her palm warm up as if it knew what had to happen, this was Rat's first touch with magic and the psychedelia was overpowering for a moment and she freezes midway through and then it's gone again.

She expectantly lays her hands on the white cloth and shimmering constellations rise from the tablecloth to air and then settle back down again leaving impressions of black soot on the cloth.

"You can take your hand back now."

Iza, Avril, says to the Rat who tests her fingers still feeling the rapidly passing aftereffects as she studies the cloth from both sides with a critical eye.

It is nonchalantly placed back on the table and Iza's uncharacteristically warm smile meets Melody's and nods in encouragement.

The doll is packed under a short arm and cup is downed with both hands.

Melody was a simple thing, she knew exactly what she wanted to be, a chef and a maid.

Duties of home and hearth was where she had gotten her given name, the simple tasks had made her hum happily as she went about them.

Magic, witches and adventurers were all new to her, the harsh road and its dangers worried her unfathomably.

Circumstance and luck had driven her out of employment of a former master who at the moment was lamenting greatly the loss of the worrying fuzzball who went about tasks humming some melody or another.

Without family and others she had barely walked out of the former employment into the hands of a predatory recruitment officer and into the unknown future in the Farhomes.

Little had been expected but when hand met cloth she saw the toothy grin and knew she should really start being worried now.

Magic swirls and fulminates, red and black flame burns the cloth.

Shocked Melody recovers her unharmed hand to the wide eyed gaze of Rat.

Elven fingers carefully recover the cloth and there's some reverence to the action that Rat didn't get. The lines are studied more carefully, with intent against sunlight from both sides.

"Necromancer. Raiser of the Dead. Deathspeaker."

Her voice fades to nothing as she ponders the translations, symbols.

Rat hasn't heard of such a thing, and to Iza this is unseen.

Forbidden arts in civilised lands.

Dead lay peacefully, undisturbed. Resting places are holy, there is no art to recover the dead to life.

That line is final.

Triumvirate did not speak of death nor what awaited after.

And vehemently had denied all attempts at resurrection.

Healing, talents to mend, blessings to prevent death were given.

Druids saw to the dead laid to rest.

But this was rare indeed.

To raise men from graves, armies from waste, the dead and discarded shells.

To a Necromancer, artistry of the soulforging the dead animated corpses to unlife, breathing mockery and directed will to what once housed a soul.

Blessing most found distasteful.

But Blessing nonetheless.

Higher orders of the art spoke of eternal, undying and unyielding guardians and imbued undeath of the Necromancer.

Immortality, Lichdom.

Out of the borders of the Empire it was not unheard of, some northern cults considered art to be very much part of their lives, Necromancers were their wisemen and women.

Cold distilled men to hardness and the working body was a working body.

Regardless of how alive it was.

"You are also holding a manasink, dear child."

Iza walks to Melody and deft hands liberate a locket from the doll and then swiftly place it on the table. To her fingers it is a cold, lifeless magnetic thing, negation of breath magic, study of it. It drained and destroyed mana endlessly in contact with living things.

"A practised mage would have noticed the drain instantly. Untrained would be now breathless."

There's something genuine to the smile Iza gives Melody and gentle pat follows.

Mana was supposed to have limits, Races of Men had capacity, and no more.

This little worried thing had sidestepped such consideration and then some.

Sharp eyed Rat does notice that her reading was left uncommented on.

Before the thought passes any further Iza's look behind the speculums makes Rat swallow any comments that were rising to the surface.

"Well, Melody, is it?" She nods, still unwilling to let the doll go.

"We can hardly let you live among the men, you will find a spare room at the back, it is now yours." She motions Melody towards the back, closed door.

"And you, Rat."

Something in the tone makes Rat rise from her seat.

There's a badly hidden smile under the last word but Rat cannot place the reason for it.

"You can manage living with rough men, can't you? For a while anyway. If you can't, we will make arrangements. And be aware, any sort of unwelcome advances, either way, is ten lashes."

Rat tries to answer and finds her throat dry, coughs and swallows.

"I can manage... Ma'am."

"Good. Silver Foxes have just returned from a paid campaign and everything is still little..

Loose. Do try to make do. Two huts over, report to sergeant-on-duty, third squad."

Rat stands there, still waiting for Iza to continue and the smirk has another layer to it now.

"We will speak again later, even I have tasks to do and this will do for now. Go on."

Melody is on her feet and hugs Rat with intensity before letting her go.

The girl is worried.

In general, but now that worry has found an actual source to be worried about.

Something very real and very, very scary indeed.

Melody might be mage untrained but she sees with blue eyes beyond training deep into mana and its reflections.

The comatose spirit wolf in front of the fireplace is one thing, invisible raven peeking down curiously at the cross brace of the ceiling another.

The unheard melody in the air is charming, welcoming and stars blink mischievously in the rafters.

Aria of the Wilds recognises a fellow artist of life and death and welcomes her.

That's all new and exciting.

Woven curses working, slithering under the elven skin, horror and retaliation, bloody death loaded at tip of tongue, the speculums keep her in a magical hold, gentle whisper of intent.

Some mighty will hovers over the encampment and the Witch is the source.

Judgemental, inquisitive pair of eyes behind them promise pain and suffering in the future.

Deathly implements of magic, barely sheathed, hidden throwing knives whispering more.

She has seen mages before, none in such splendour and complexity woven.

Melody sees the grinning Guise at hip, looking back and winking at her as Iza of

Featherhome calmly and gently shows her the quarters.

And that, that's the part that really worries her.

The next day she was introduced to the first lessons of Black Books and then she realised that worrying about things was just her life from now on.

Rat found the life of a mercenary recruit liberating, in a sense.

She was told what was expected of her, and rules of conduct.

Most of her days were hard training with other recruits and veterans.

Most of the day she was left to her own devices and strongly recommended to either read in the ad-hoc library in the grounds or keep at training.

The Elf and Melody were not uncommon appearances and Melody spent her free moments cleaning and bussing food, clearly enjoying herself, when not on some order from Iza to do this or that.

The furrowed brow on the young girl was noted by Rat but overall the girl seemed far happier than on the ride here.

Not that the ride had been any sort of enjoyment at all in hindsight.

Rat did notice the stares and looks some officers took at her, sly moments of quietly exchanged sentences out of earshot.

People were polite enough, but Rat kept everyone at arm's reach, she wasn't really used to making friends.

She had no idea of the content or purpose of that and just set herself to the duties, what little she had.

Two months later she sensed the rhythm of the camp to settle, people had been looking for the new normal, and seemingly had now found it.

She was practising blows against one of the dummies, without greater thought but each blow had intent to it, refinement.

"Girl."

She is surprised by the noise and Iza is not a few feet from her.

Again she feels she should have felt or seen her approaching but she has just appeared out of thin air. There's something that makes Rat's skin itch in the elf regardless.

Few officers she has seen before hover behind, blank expressions on their faces.

"Follow."

The curt order leaves little to imagination but she can sense from the elf some wariness and uncertainty, somehow, or she is imagining it.

Officers and Rat exchange nods, there is very little ceremony in the Silver Foxes.

Training sword swings on shoulder as she follows in lockstep Iza to a training field.

To her surprise it seems the whole of Silver Foxes is here, in formation.

Iza stops in the front and centre of it and levels a steady stare at Rat.

"Order them to turn left." She says, with an open palm at the mercenary company.

Rat is bewildered for a moment but steady looks from the elf and the smile makes her want to at least...

It hits her, the unknown certainty, the utter fact that has led her to so many conflicts and fights when people didn't *obey* perfectly rational orders.

The Blessing of General.

She's at home, on the field, leading men.

"Left Face!"

The company turns in unison, far more organised than she has even seen small units do here.

Rat has no idea why Iza still seems so wary, she has no idea of the curse that came with such blessing, homeless and without family, she has survived by doing odd jobs and this and that wherever she could but obeying isn't in her nature.

She was born to lead, and in that the Blessing brooks no defiance.

And homeless, angry young people are not without their problems to begin with.

They rage at life and are prone to outbursts, sometimes nonsensical, painful.

To be given such power...

"Kneel!"

General orders, men obey. Blessing is absolute, undeniable.

Two things happen at the same moment, she can see the men start to kneel and then she feels dirt rising up to meet her.

The impact isn't gentle, she can feel the magic barely touch her but on the ground she can feel the absolute might of it.

"Axe."

Iza calmly says and she can hear someone approaching and from the corner of the eye men are raising from the kneeling position.

Two headed axe fills her field of view as it impacts ground inches from her nose.

"Well, General."

There's venom to that word and if she were able to speak she would surely spew bile or order the men to help but gravitic might has glued her jaw shut.

"Ponder this, you are one of the most blessed men and women here."

Voice is calm, steady.

"You could be a General of the war against the demonic. Hopefully. But child, I see in you the anger and the injustice and something broken, screaming against the world. We really, absolutely, have no time to solve that."

Rat silences her mind and realises the elf is absolutely right on some level. If she had known there would be bandits and men...

She has never considered others, rarely, if ever considered implications of war, the demonic. Iza's scent is mere inches from her ear. Muddy water is leaking into her mouth from the ground.

*"Imagine, all the armies of Anvil at your command. The Empire. Not a general, *the general*. Your victory, from your hand."*

And the blessing stirs, guides the will, she absolutely, positively wants that.

The elf retreats.

"But these are not your men, these are Triumvirate's blessed, races of Men. Under my protection. All of them."

She feels Iza sit on top of her, shifting her weight to be comfortable.

"Axe, to the neck, very painless or a very simple promise."

Finger touches her neck, and warm, cold, something horrific spreads to her body.

"At all costs, I will lead Anvil to victory, sacrificing nothing and no one needlessly or for my own gain."

Curse is precise, nestles next to her soul and she can sense its limits.

She feels the pressure of magical binding lessen and spits mud out.

Rage wants the axe, to end it, to stop feeling something.

She takes deep breaths and her own rage at the injustice of the world in conflict with the blessing, she can feel the tears coming and swallows the tightening emotions.

She knows this is the way forward, she knows there's nothing but up. There's nothing for her along her own path but more suffering, more raging at the world.

Silver Foxes could be home, a new start.

Rat sees the worried face of Melody behind the axe.

The girl gives up fantasies and the woman takes up the mantle.

“For Anvil! For Triumvirate!”

It’s barely readable, mud, and soreness prevents clarity.

Iza rips Rat from the mud to her knees to face the men who are wary, clearly concerned for a repeat of stolen will.

“Make it happen, General.”

Tight hold on her shirt releases and fall to dirt is only prevented by Rat meeting mud with her arms. Her head doesn’t bow however.

General Rat made no false promises, shouted no meaningless words.

She glares at the collected men who return the gaze steadily, wary.

Muddy, torn clothes and all, but unyielding she bows her head, lowers her head.

“I am sorry for what happened!”

She keeps her head bowed and soon one of the men approaches, taps her on the shoulder a few times.

It takes a while for the men to filter off the field but she keeps her head bowed far past fatigue.

Blessing of a General is tricky, dangerous, more than few end up as bandit lords and lords of thieves. It wants war, a field of battle, and an army.

Most of these stories end unhappily, violently.

Blessed General is loyal to their army, to the campaign, and not much else.

Iza of Featherhome had been aware of these things, her treatment of Rat had been planned long before she had heard of Rat or even had the Silver Foxes.

None of the men here were unaware of how things would be orchestrated, were it to happen.

If Silver Foxes were to be so blessed to find a leader to lead.

Simple thing, ultimately, to make a general swear loyalty to an army, if one was twisted enough to force matter.

More than a few men and women share a smile or a wink with Iza as they disperse.

Rat had a long way to go, but Blessing went both ways, ultimately.

Loyalty inspires loyalty.

Melody finds another thing to be worried about next to her as the subvocal chuckles resonate from the elf observing the scene.

The minute Necromancer herself had a considerably easier task, physically at least, in the Silver Foxes.

Iza first taught her the basics of magic and despite Melody’s forgivings and outward projections Iza never raised her voice or used physical pain as a lesson, as others had before. The elf was even gentle, but a stern taskmaster nonetheless.

Within a few weeks Melody was building confidence in her own talent as battlemage on the training grounds.

There were other mages in Silver Foxes, Tina, a gentle young woman who was, well, gently put, promiscuous. Fire and talents of protection were her forte. She had instantly adopted Melody as a long lost little sister. And a pair of twins who used lightning, designated artillery, Thomas and Tomas were always there to point out fixes to small mistakes and encourage Melody.

Icy flows of magical bolts came easy now, Iza had hinted at other, more esoteric uses and prepared her for them in the hour-long sessions.

She had no real talent at elementalism, spellflinging and directed power but she put other mages to shame with her seemingly infinite reserves.

The twins had surely tried but exhaustion and psychedelia had collapsed the men before Melody even felt her wrists sore from the simple gestures and directing her will at the fantastical to the genuine laughter of Tina from the sidelines.

They could barely be called bolts, thin spikes of ice that shattered at the wooden blocks used as targets was the absolute best she could manage, for now.

They were the mage trainees, others existed, full trained men-at-arms and battlemages were on field or engaged in something only the officer corps knew of.

Other three had come from the Tower and they knew mostly what there was to the Blessings and how to hone them.

Iza once a week made sure of their progress and suggested improvements and peaks to aim for on the fields.

But Melody had the luck, or misfortune, to be tutored personally by Iza every day.

The worrying fuzzball barely left Iza's side and the whole company had not so wrongfully adopted the girl as mascot.

Young children this far into the Farhomes were nigh unheard of and many were reminded of family at home and generally found Melody charming company.

Especially as the young girl had taken with gusto to the housekeeping most in camp loathed. Personally Melody was feeling her mind rapidly deteriorate under the sharp gazes, gentle guidance and practical lessons.

True enough, Iza seemed to have her best intentions at mind but a twelve year old maid was hardly the appropriate person to be subjected to finer points of monstrous anatomy, paranoia laden lessons of manipulation and sheer, horrifying details Iza managed to find in her damnable journals which she seemingly had written specifically for Melody.

This was another of those things.

Maybe one of the worst things yet.

They had wandered off into the woods by the fort and were standing on a graveyard where half a dozen men had been laid to rest. She had carried a bag of unknown contents with her as Melody followed in lockstep.

"Here we are."

Iza said, brushing a few leaves and pine needles from the headstone.

Sharp gaze at Melody notes the barely held vomit and shaking fear from the girl.

"We don't need to do this today, Melody."

Hand ruffles her hair and one of the few instances of genuine care shines through the mask of spymaster. In the hut, and in these private moments Iza had admitted to herself Melody was very important to her.

Closed off, silent child in a hard place about to be sacrificed for cause she knew nothing off did not exactly trigger her maternal instincts but it wasn't far off from the truth.

But that just pushed her more to teach the worried child how to defend herself, how to be at ease with herself.

"But I absolutely promise you, you need to, want to do this. What you are feeling is absolutely normal. People are not supposed to dig up graves, or look at corpses."

Steady hands hold Melody steady and squeezes her shoulders gently.

"But you, Melody, aren't like others."

Gentle gestures steadies the child and a calm tone of voice at least calms the impending vomit.

"Strength, calmness of mind, focus. Hmm?"

Melody nods and is still unsure what, exactly Iza is asking of her to do, the spellwork, might of controlling undeath is a weird, lurking concept at the back of her mind.

Iza digs into the bag and recovers the prize, violin.

She hands it to Melody who clumsily holds the instrument and blinks at the absurdity of it.

"You wanted one, I saw your doodles. And, well, this is going to be somewhat easier this way."

Iza shows her how to hold the violin and soon she is leaning to it, string at hand.

At least Iza wasn't asking her to dig up anything but this was still surreal, she has no idea how to play.

"Now, most, if not all mages use wands, weapons, staves to direct their might, but you Melody, are exceptionally musically talented."

The smirk is mischievous.

"I had this made specifically for someone like you, you'll grow into it."

Melody corrects her hold and chin on the violin and agrees it is awkward but childish joy at the new toy she strings a note from it.

She is, of course, off tune, but magic resonates from the wood in response.

Dark, magically hardened wood and silvered steel fortifying it against mishap and danger.

Like all things from hands of craftsmen on Anvil, it is a beautiful, finely crafted item that the eye rests in and finds new details to appreciate longer one looks.

Truthfully the might inside it would protect it even against a breath of a dragon once woken.

Aria of the Wilds instantly responds to his new music and flutes back questioningly a single note.

Melody hears it better than Iza does, this is her talent.

Violin responds and under her fingers she feels something strung back, silently, vibration in the wood.

Chant of the Dead Marshes, yet another Elven Spell of Protection, so named for the unfortunate wetlands far to the West, closer to Timeless woods than Empire.

Sombre notes of abandonment and loneliness it's tune, and death, countless dead it has witnessed so far out of the civilization.

It met man to see its untimely fate.

This amalgamation of spellwork and master crafter is made to be another tool in the vast reserves Iza has gathered for students and masters alike.

Trip to the Dead Marshes took nearly a year, it was not solely for the spell neither, but waste not, want not.

And then Melody feels the interplay of *Aria* and *Chant*, few trills and notes fly back and forth, then it expectantly calms and single note hovers.

Melody feels the spell in the wood and gentle guidance.

Iza knew of the necromantic basics, *Aria* had learned them as well, but they were useless without the Blessing.

Chant of the Dead Marshes knew of them too, *Aria* was nothing if not willing to share.

Between the elven spellwork there was little to hide from another.

Young finger finds its place on the string, bow raises, pulls and the note rings in the real.

For a few moments *Chant* and Melody interplay the basics and then the spellwork, embossed and preserved in wood gains a master, becomes attuned.

Mana flows.

Chant of the Dead Marshes blooms to life from mana of necromancer, and it drinks deep, greedily.

Melody lacks control and focus to be the master, *Chant* still finds it footing but both are now one, aligned and the tunes become first a constant, then notes lose agency and Elven Spellwork rings in the real.

Melody, for the first time in her life, feels the psychedelia of mana impact her, mastery of something raises its head.

Child is gone to the instrument, the instrument lost to the spell.

Her eyes close and a few dancing taps of the foot, string and another, then Melody finds she is dancing.

Musical talent meets magical and now the young Necromancer dances the raising of the dead with notes of violin.

That the rotten stench of meat and bony fingers clawing in the ground doesn't bother her, this is her magic, her might manifest.

And then she trips on a branch and grasp on the violin slips, the spell disappears and the bony fingers under the ground stop clawing.

From the ground Melody blinks a few times, lost for a few moments before she dashes up to the violin, unharmed, naturally but subjected to a firm hug and then careful inspection regardless.

Iza smiles at the figure on the ground, grasping the magical tool with worry she was far more talented at music than at magic, certainly.

Hand ruffles the head and Melody blinks from the psychedelia and daze of spellwork back to reality.

"See, your magic isn't that terrible after all, is it?"

And now the child knows, Blessing has bloomed and *Chant* rings once again in real, in undeath.

From her hand an entire army marching to meet demons, unfeeling, unwilling to die.

And some things, whispered, are far more potent.

Undeath was no talent concerning only the dead on Anvil.

Protection to the Living from arts of Death.

Monstrous Champions unwilling to yield beyond defeat, to raise, to serve at her direction, something far beyond sheer willpower or even demonic rage could muster.

Decay could be sown, Life drained, Undeath given on a whim.

Necromancer on the eve of war is no mean power.

She is drafted, knowledge now implicit, she knows, one of the Heroes of Third Invasion.

Forged and sent from Divine hand, by Lunar, directed to defend life and races of Men.

Norsemen raise dead to serve, become immortal by will and wither.

She needs but to ask and they obey.

Hers is vitality even beyond the grave.

Melody commands all the dead Men and they are untold in the frozen wastes.

Third Hidden Thing.

Dancing mortuary rites for people of Anvil.

Melody would be the vengeance of Anvil from dead hands.

Death, Denial and Destruction.

Song, Dance and Violin.

Grand Necromancer.

Simplicity of it amuses Melody.

Even if all else failed, there would still be death on Anvil.

Victory sealed, curses from beyond the grave.

Were Men to fail, Melody would remain.

And within the blessing, her soul, she knows, nobody else isn't aware.
Last sentient thing on this planet no matter what happened would be Melody.
And to that bane of possible existence Lunar offered tools to avoid such a future.
Because the Goddess of Moonlight thought it was very cool to have a big secret like that.
Where Iza sees a tool to be honed to perfection, Melody sees an enthused friend showing off a new toy as a gift.
"All good now?"
Iza asks, smiling genuinely at Melody still kneeling on the wet ground next to gravestones.
She nods now, now the Witch doesn't worry her anymore, nor does the raising of the dead, she maybe even wants to keep trying.
To the bones resting under the dirt under her and the stillness of the grave she feels connected to and from it stems strength to body and mind.
But that last task, revenge, purpose her blessing exists, bothers her a great deal.
She isn't going to stop being worried about Iza either, honestly, but the violin in her hand and the undead might make her stand up straight now.
Worried she might be, even at small things still, but now she has reason not to fear whatever happens.
She happens to be one of the scariest things on Anvil after all.
Smile far sight more innocent than Iza but Melody has a secret of her own to grin about now.

Wayward, Western Empire.

Weave of Thunderway is waiting in a dark alley with a few of her companions.
Everyone is wearing common clothes aside from Weave, heavy chainmail and bulwark of a flat topped kiteshield, she is the only openly armed person here.
Massive twin blade lies resting against stonework in the alley.
Upon the shield a Silver Fox gnarls in magic and blessing, Weave is a Protector, Blessed Paladin.
Demonhunter extraordinaire, Blessing granting not only might but stature to match and she's almost two heads taller than most of the young people with her on the alleyway.
To her stops all blades and any bolt.
And since she joined Silver Foxes her talents have been in great demand.
This has been the culmination of months of planning and Weave pretending to be a lousy drunk in a run down alleyway tavern, seeing goings and comings of men and more importantly, robed figures.
Mage next to him is deep in concentration, Weave's plated gauntlet gently laid atop of his shoulder.
Idleness doesn't bother her, neither does waiting, but sunlight has been rare, her daily training has been done in a musty cellar and most people she was after only moved after dark to try and hide their actions.
She is the leader of one of the many Silver Foxes hunting bands out in Empire, they operate in small units and profess loyalty to no one but the task.
Hunt the Cult.
Five men here, three on the other side of the house they are watching. It had been a butcher's house at some stage and a retired man had been poked at for details and finally Hunters had confirmed the floorplan to detail.

This was the haunt of a cult, cellar apt location of the gatherings, run down building built into other around it in poorer, nearly abandoned part of Wayward, disease and famine had passed here not too long ago, with it came new inhabitants and soon after, careful questions and sharp eyes of silver foxes.

Mage in street clothes stirs from the spell and nods at Weave.

Others stir from idleness and practised nonchalant manner. Swords, longblades, and folded spears appear.

The twinblade, massive metal plank, swings easily in Weave's hand as she settles in the middle of the alleyway and locks her eyes to the front door.

Whispered spell and a few gestures brings heat to hand, to be called at will to engulf the enemy, blade and things struck with intent.

Birdcall rings in the night, a sign, not noticeable to anyone but those waiting for it.

Weave pushes her mass to move, chainmail clinks and armoured boot strikes spark from cobble and the old worn door yields into splinters upon impact with the shield.

There was one robed figure behind the door, now mangled and bruised, waiting for the coded knock, Weave's charge isn't slowed in the least and pushes forward to the next door in one smooth sprint.

She has a goal in mind and it isn't to breach the house, oh no, that could be done with less noise, it is to destroy everything in it, to push the Demonic back.

This does not include half measures, the fires have been lit to the ramshackle collection of buildings and it has been confirmed all the members will be here, today, this cult is barely found footing and now it meets defenders of Anvil.

Everyone in Weave's little group is no recruit or first time at task, Iza's lessons are well learned and then expanded upon in fury of action, as a group in wild and multiple times against Cult proper.

Twin blade has halved half a dozen red skinned leaders heads, there is practised ease to which she ignores the human form in front of her now.

The second door fares no better but twinblade and its enchantment tears the wall from floor to ceiling in a massive swing and takes the two robed guardians next to it with it, left to right.

There is a gathering, a ritual being done in the room, Cultist isn't capable of emotions but surprise still affects them, the split second before Weave meets first cultist is the ritual halted and then she is already in the middle of the magic circle, blade having separated a robed figure to the right from their life already and another is pushed from the spot by the shield, soon to be trampled.

She isn't stopping however, this isn't the goal, mage leading the ritual can only blankly stare as the snarling Fox hits him, then the door behind him and the stair behind it provides short opportunity to appreciate momentum before impact with the wall and sharp edge of the kite shield crushes the neck and nearly separates the head.

Weave blinks at the spurt of blood hindering vision, closes her left eye calmly, knowing that it isn't required and that distractions are fatal. She pivots at the stairs, they turn and lead to the cellar on the left.

Short glance assures her the group is with her, silent hand signals convey meaning.

And now she has a target, Demonic skullcage resonates its own magic, Weave has studied this first with Iza, then in prayer and with mages.

The demonic pulse is now in front of her.

That there were two doors, one certainly fortified doesn't make her even consider measured response.

She's here to end the cult, now, before they can react.

And more specifically, to add another notch to the handguard of twinblade. Fanaticism, at least of Iza's sort, is infectious.

Swing of a blade downwards separates the oaken door from its framing by destroying the hinges, a not so gentle impact of the shield sends it flying forward and to the floor, She notices the figure before she can measure it.

But manners and surprise takes the stride from Weave of Thunderway.

Weave pauses her charge as not to hit the figure, that would be most, most unfortunate.

The guise registers as a abundantly clear warning sign to not even try.

Multitude of Black robed bodies are splayed on the floor, a red robed body lies face downwards and top of it stands one of the Untouchables, bloodied hand holding a separated head and vicious curved sickle in another.

Red messy hair, Mask of the Guise mirroring features of a mime and hand holding separated red skinned head from hair stand in the middle of the room, seemingly in deep thought staring at the decapitated offering.

The head drops, the sickled hand goes behind the back and Untouchable is clearly shocked by the sudden appearance of an armoured figure.

"I am innocent!"

Proclaims the apparition in a childlike tone to clear contrast of the bloodied clothes and vicious implement glinting in torchlight, badly hidden as the head rolls away.

Weave's eyes follow it and almost moves to cleave it in half but something stops her, surprise, feeling.

"Well, honestly, they started it. So I'm absolutely in the right anyway."

Left hand moves in an arc, up, then down, sickle flies with surprising speed and force and halves the head, burying it in the bloodied floorboards.

Weave is now surrounded by her compatriots, also stopped by the sight of Untouchable, armed.

This was new, those under the Guise didn't engage in bloodletting, much less monster hunting. Yet here was one, standing atop a pile of freshly slain corpses of the cult and despite the protestations of common sense, clearly at fault for it.

Spear wielding mage exchanges a hurried look with man to the right behind Weave's bulwark, bloodied shortsword in both hands and gets a shrug in response.

"Hello!"

Untouchable waves her hand childishly at the party and moves few steps closer, she disappears at every step, fading to thin air and reappearing again as foot lands on the floorboards. Some magic obfuscates her.

"That's a cute fox! I think I've seen it before."

She says, discerning the coat of arms in front of the Paladin and Weave allows herself to relax a little, the practised familiarity of leaving Untouchables to their business is hard to shake.

Bloody hand reaches to Weave's helmet and pats her a few times, short stature of the crazy person barely reaching to meet.

"You are big, were you here for these fellows too?" She motions to the bodies that the four remaining men are detailing and making sure they are and stay dead.

"Yes, yes we were. Seems that's... sorted." Weave is taken back by the nonchalant manner but doesn't sense ill will from the mask that emotionlessly returns the look.

"We should go, we lit the building on fire and soon this place will be ash."

Genuine laughter rings under the mask.

"Oh that's neat, you might wanna get the stuff in there though."

She says, spinning on the spot and pointing at the remaining door. Two steps back and she makes way for Weave to approach it, hand extended and curt bow offering the approach as if presenting a king.

Weave shakes her head at the suddenness of it but moves to the door, a few swift kicks to the red robed body clearing the way.

Her shield swings to her back as she goes.

Twinblade and its enchantment makes short work of the makeshift iron reinforcements and swift punch and pull of gauntleted hand rips remains to splinters.

On the red cloth on the table lies a filigree masterwork, the pulse of demonic.

It looks like a fine lace helmet, some obscure rarity, curiosity made on a whim by a master smith, but Weave knows what its purpose is.

Control of men, subversion, disease decay and death for Anvil.

The pulse of demonic magic curdles her nose as it attempts to deny the paladin.

But without a puppet it is powerless to do much more than to flex.

She pulls a bag twice so blessed from her belt, made for purpose.

One cloth blessed by Lunar's Priestess, another by a Priestess of Solar.

Woven together by a madman it could hold all of Anvil's oceans contained without fail.

Despite her size she gently, carefully, without touching, places the tiara inside and pulls the strings, sealing it.

Her eyes survey the room and find little else of value that doesn't deserve to be buried in ashes and leaves.

Few hand signals assure her the room is secure and the Untouchable is pulling the sickle embedded in the ground to relive it, without much success.

Remains of the head have been separated loosely around and the mage, spear folded, is recovering it, careful to keep distance from the Untouchable flailing ineptly.

Half joins its compatriot in another sack of similar make as the one on her belt, hanging heavy from meaning.

Rest of the group is clearing out to avoid the fire approaching, she can feel the crackle at a distance, approaching rapidly.

"Do you need help?" Weave asks of the bloodied psychotic who jars at the sudden attribution and springs up to face Weave.

"What, no, I'm fine."

There is a moment where she stops, clearly losing track of the conversation and snaps her fingers.

Sickle turns to mist and vapour on the ground, disappearing into a swirl and sparkle and then dissipates to the Mime.

"Oh, right, the fire!"

She dashes towards the mangled door frame and disappears from sight at unnatural speed up the stairs.

Weave is left mouth agape for a split second before she also moves to follow.

Armoury of the Eclipse, the very rarest of Anvils Blessings.

Only Priestesses are ever given such magical might to command and only for long service, any weapon, any tool, any whim of the wielder turned to metal, steel and reality, and back to mist and vapour.

Weave considers that at the whims of a psychotic in the form of a weapon and shiver runs down her spine as she sprints the last stretch out from the charnel house.

Short woman in a hood with a crossbow signs victory in the firelit road, they got them all.

She is the tracker of the group, carefully placing a magical mark on each of the robed figures over their stay here in Wayward.

Not all is well, a woman with an exceptionally stern look in white robes glares at weave.

Lady Nia, this town's local Priestess of the Solar.

She is incensed from having denied position of authority in combat and rightful quarry.

Weave winces at the woman's presence mentally, she might serve the same masters in the end but her commands come from a grin that would put the wizened woman on backfoot and afraid for her life.

In truth, she is too old for open combat, much less for the lightning strikes Silver Foxes practice.

Yet she commands exceptional authority by the virtue of being what she is.

Glinting metal in the fire and sudden movement highlights another furrowed brow, Priestess of Moon makes her displeasure known, peeking from a corner.

Weave masks her sigh by removing her helmet with a faked groan of weariness, being placed between rock and a hard place is unpleasant, and she seems to be running into this repeatedly.

"Hey big girl!"

The Psychotic, new sort of complication. She is dancing on the cobble, back and forth, nonsensically, toward the Priestess of Lunar.

She is poking at the ribs the Priestess of Lunar in clear violation of the Great Game who ineptly tries to defend herself from the elven dexterity and failing miserably, muffled bursts of laughter coming from her covered mouth.

Seemingly satisfied at getting a reaction, she leaves the priestess alone.

"You guys seem kinda familiar. Let me see here..."

She pokes at the shoulder of the tracker where a coat of arms of a silver fox lives.

She arrhythmically jumps next to Lady Nia and draws her fingers across the honourable priestesses face from behind her to signify a smile.

"Very mean grin."

Few steps, finger draws to chin and theatricality seems to flow from her.

"Hmm, she really dislikes those robed fellers. Black hair. Aaaand, ah yes, a very, very mean, evil sort of witch."

Rest of the silver foxes are dissipating into the night to not draw attention or be seen at the scene. Weave wasn't really able to be unnoticeable so she would remain until guards came to explain the fire and calm emotions.

"That's you?"

Weave can feel the invisible eyes boring into her. She is unsure how Iza and the Psychotic are related but that does seem to be an apt description.

Before Weave can answer, Priestess Nia, not to be upstaged by a crazy person, tries to assert her authority on the situation.

"I told you to not act without my permission and not without.. me.. present."

The voice dies down as a blade of distilled sparkle, red as blood distils from thin air under her chin and ever so gently presses her mouth shut.

Sickle of Psychotic, Red Jesters Decapitator.

Serrated unevenly on its cutting edge, a short straight edge of blood red metal from pommel curves to an absolute point, bringing to mind a crescent moon.

Untouchable is holding to the blade with the unseemly gentleness of mere fingers at the arced hilt for such a seemingly heavy thing.

Princess Empty does *not* tolerate interruptions.

Void of the Abyss stares from the blank mask back at Lady Nia and the temperature seems to drop more than a few degrees.

Despite her dishevelled clothing and bloodied appearance she projects a presence of a noblewoman, of dead stillness and unquestioned authority.

Sickle presses on skin enough to sting but not draw blood.

The *Armoury of the Eclipse* adds its own, exceptional air of authority.

The Priestess of the Triumvirate of the Seat of Madness by presence alone demands with the authority of a madwoman, she will do precisely as she wishes.

"*Silence*, old hag. We are discussing matters of import. If you cannot..."

The first word has might to it, magical enchantment, brute force, unable to pierce even the most basic defences, but order radiates clearly in the flame lit night.

The blade is drawn in a very suggestive gesture, only the hand of the statue moves.

And then the bouncy elf and psychosis returns in an instant, blade vaporising to mystery.

Weave stares at the figure standing on one foot, kicking dirt like a child with hands behind her back.

Jarred by these sudden, never before seen revelations Weave decides honesty, of sorts, is the best course of action and returns to the question presented.

"Yes."

Iza's lessons are paranoid but well taught, never admitting more than is necessary. These hunting parties rely on being unseen and unheard before striking.

She can feel the smile as the motion stops and laughter sparkles from the young thing.

"Oh amazing, I'm with you then. So's that lady in the corner pretending to not be seen. Hello, yes, we can see you."

She waves at the Priestess of the Moon that has managed to collect herself from the tickle attack whose face goes blank and then twists into clear surprise.

Lady Nia is still recovering from the sudden appearance of the first Priestess of Madness to walk anvil and can do little but stare, yet assured faith in her own authority makes her speak.

"And what are you supposed to be doing? I can hardly tolerate warfare on my streets without a good explanation."

Mime mask turns to face Lady Nia.

"Next time you interrupt us, I will separate your head from your useless worn body."

The blatant threat is a shock to her, nobody questions the authority of Solar she has so used to wielding, much threatens her with violence.

"You will be dead within a year, Priestess. We are waging war for the survival of Anvil, against the demonic. You step from your purpose, you question the authority of one who certainly has more productive means to afford us than an old lady who's best years are far behind her and who misuses that authority to live in luxury and comfort."

She doesn't move but the emotionless mask with a smile of an Mime inches ever so slightly closer.

"Be utterly silent, you wastrel, of matters you know nothing of."

Mask tilts dismissively and venom slithers to insult.

"We need a Priestess of Wargoddess Solar in full panoply and peak of their might, to lead and to wage war, not a tired old lady on a powertrip."

Lady Nia is stricken back, she hasn't felt Solar's light in ages but no one would know, no one could know.

"Bless us and summon your weapons or run from this place, we ride to war and death, little old lady."

Last three words are like hammers of guilt on her bare soul.

The utter shock of her hidden secrets revealed makes Lady Nia turn and run from the Madness.

“Nnneat.”

The psychotic stretches the word, clearly having lost track of the conversation again.

Despite her better judgement Weave decides to ask.

“What was that about?”

She can hear the clueless blinking and a blank stare.

“Oh, right, war is coming, I’m in love, I kinda have to put in effort so I get to keep that.”

Weave realises it’s far, far too late to back away and disappear into the night.

“She was useless and we need to uh…”

Weave can visualise the glass this one walks on, one wrong step and sheer cliff face of insanity will drop the Psychotic down, down a spiral of madness…

“Kill all the cultists, for starters, prepare, train, and most of all, gather ourselves for the unexpected. Weak authorities weaken us. We can’t afford to entertain them.”

Or she was walking along some path of unhinged clarity of mind.

“She can get us out of town without being noticed, and we really should go, now.”

She being the Priestess of Lunar. Weave jars at the direct attribution but admits to the fact.

The black haired player of Great Game had been following Silver Foxes for months now, not doing much other than be a nuisance, or so she assumed, it would be grand to have someone not be bothered by the awkward manner of communication and Weave realises she just admitted to herself the Psychotic would be helpful. The jarring walk lands the mime next to the Priestess again who moves to reactively cover her sides.

“Do the thing, do it, I’ll give you a lollipop.”

And true enough, a sugary treat appears in the hand of the Untouchable.

The expression on the Priestesses face is unreadable, a mix of horrifying hatred and something else. For a moment the scene freezes in time as the two undisturbable figures face each other, locked by the inability to be seen and protection of the mask.

Priestess takes the candy and side eyes the Psychotic.

Her hand raises to heart, eyes closed.

“Lady of Hidden, Lady Moon, your servants need your cloak, your guarding gaze, let us pass without sight, noise or mention.”

Her voice is steady, but quiet, whispering, practised mantra.

The alley darkens and the noise of the now roaring flames becomes distant.

From the corner of the eye everything sparkles, a surreal, dreamlike shadow realm.

Moon closes in and captures the sky.

Priestess sticks the candy in her mouth rebelliously and stares bolts of hatred at the Psychotic. The wooden stick mulls relentlessly back and forth in her mouth as she points to the way, south, towards the nearest gate.

The jester, the soldier and the priestess make their way through the moonlight town and pass by the ghostly figures of people disturbing nothing as they pass into the wilds past the gate.

Farhomes.

Temporary Headquarters of Silver Foxes.

Few weeks after the disaster at the field, Rat and Iza are in the library as Iza is presenting old histories of the first war, its lessons, failures, strategies and tactics and how they contrast to the second on a large map.

Rat and Iza, two powerful personalities, were almost always at conflict.

Rat had realised that has more than little to do with her blessing testing its unquestioning authority to the world around her.

Less to do with any actual desire to have the fight.

More Rat fought Iza, the more the elf seemed to smile at her, and within a week, she and her blessing had just admitted defeat from fatigue.

It was a gentle, understanding smile that had gnawed at Rat at first, and now she understood it had more that the witch knew exactly what had been going on in her mind than any incitement to continue.

The Authority of the General was simple, effective and railed against any other of its sort. After that realisation, fact had settled in, Rat admitted she felt better and thought more clearly, even.

Soon after the lessons of history warfare had started, Rat had even much to like the unreadable bitch that was Iza of Featherhome.

She challenged her, put walls in front of her and then in a calm, measured manner provided tools to tear em down.

Not that there wasn't a mean streak to that, failures, incompetence, inattention meant hard, painful and soul crushing physical activities.

"So, what happened during the winter?"

Rat asks, the story has been told in so many forms now she's unsure what to think of them.

Iza pauses from the lesson and finger retreats from the map on the table.

One thing however, Iza rarely, if ever speaks of personal matters.

But the stories are wild, surreal. Curiosity compels.

Six years Ago, 516aH

Deep South, Farhomes

Silver Foxes mercenary company has accepted a contract of garrison duty for a winter.

The fort is new, but well made, mages and dwarves have built it to standards of war demonic.

It lacks proper reinforcement magic and finesse but serves adequately to stop warbands of goblins, orcs and other monsters from south-east to Farhomes proper.

It has been rarely tested against any proper might but scratches and few missing capstones from the battlements highlight it has seen use.

A dug moat filled with sharpened fresh stakes of wood.

Five wagons, seventy men.

Throughout summer and fall it has been supplied with wagons going back and forth from various villages, paid for by the taxes of the Empire.

Enough to hold the stonework for the entire winter if needs be even the largest monstrous warband.

Officers of Silver Foxes mixed with Yellow Boar company are milling in the courtyard, exchanging details and ordering affairs as soldiers unload the wagons and get into trouble with their compatriots who are relieved to leave for the winter.

Iza is the only mage with the Silver Foxes contingent and she very much so would have liked to file a complaint.

Commander isn't an idiot, by any stretch but he seems blatantly unaware how fast the weather and the favours can turn in the Wilds.

By draconic bounty, a loan, is this garrison serving and some obscure, grand design has deemed Silver Foxes to be sufficient force.

But to Iza the Wilds means unpredictability.

She is running her hand on the stonework of outer battlements, looking for weaknesses, possible breaches and tunnels.

Stonework is set into bedrock, raises nearly forty, far too excessive for such a way station and she thanks the dwarven masons for it.

"Avril of Featherhome" is known among the men as a closed off individual, more concerned with esotericism and her books than camaraderie.

In truth she has a very specific purpose here, to institutionally capture Silver Foxes to serve her.

She is patient, mercenary company operated by the merit of veterancy and time served.

Three years in the company word "Reliable" has been thrown around her a lot and the name stuck.

Men could always rely on Avril to be there to brew cups for hangovers, ointment for this and that or take the shifts nobody wanted.

The witch saw to the brewing, priestess to the men's needs and morale.

That left a lot of time for Iza to worry about grander plans at hand, usually taking the form of brooding at sentry duty and near constant flow of letters back and forth.

Not that she was really aware of the priestess part, to the grand irrelevance of all things.

Priestesses of Solar were auxiliary, present on the field of battle to support and soothing balm after.

Bannerwomen and first in line, suicidal paragons of inspiration.

Healers, adjutants and advisors off it.

Iza could ill be removed from the thickest fight, much less be anything less than first to it and last to leave it.

Even in absence of knowledge was that part cultivated by act and preference.

Two barracks at the opposite ends, few quarters for officers in the central keep and tower out of stone, over time had timber turned up storehouses, kitchens and next to the main gate a forge asked only for flame to kindle to be used once more.

She stops next to the gate, eyes open from the reverie of magical detection next to the gatehouse.

Group of three soldiers are eyeing the elf curiously, idle.

"Mie, get firefood for forge, Remy, tell commander stonework is fit."

Iza brushes her forehead under the large hat she is using at the moment to be her identity.

Sharp tip has long since given up fighting to stay upright and the excessive rim of it covers her eyes to most soldiers, short as she is compared to most men of anvil as well as the elven ears.

The men nod and move to fulfil the orders, technically she is afforded the authority of a low ranked officer by virtue of magical talent alone.

Rare is Silver Fox that wouldn't, impersonal as she acts, everyone in foxes knows she is there to help. Reliable Avril commands more authority than anyone, par the commander to the enlisted.

Few owe more than loyalty. Third soldier moves to follow Avril without further word, she's Gail, one of those fanatics, she tripped, fell, and broke an ankle.

Uncommon fury, taunt, mace and shield kept her safe for a few moments against the Wilds. Had Avril not been there she would have been trampled to death.

Smitten, would have Iza called her and few others have followed suit.

Gail does seem to be most insistent at chasing more to that on some level. Iza hasn't had time to sort through that yet.

She deftly avoids the group of officers, keeping a good pace as to seem busy, a talent many learn in the service.

Idle hands and standing feet beg for orders. She has already claimed one of the timber additions to stonework as hers. There is little there but a fire pit and table shoved against the stonework, chair and more than a few beds stacked on top of each other for storage.

She sighs at the dusty mess of the room from the doorway with curious Gail peeking over the shoulder.

Few good hours and the two manage to clear the room to habitable state, most of the beds are found to be unrecoverable and one loosely sly looking recruit is instructed to destroy them with an axe for firewood.

Few more moments and Avrils footlockers and chests are bussed in by another pack of idling soldiers.

Iza has lit the firepit and a kettle is heating up. More than few distillates and concentrates have formed a large part of her diet recently, Witches brews are potent and include many an effect that could be refined to skin, bone and flesh with careful consumption.

Gail collapses on the remaining bed and sighs contently.

"So how cold do you think it's going to get? Never been this far south."

Water poured on top of leaves and berries.

Sometimes Iza just enjoyed a good cup of herbal tea.

Another finds its way to Gails hands.

"Depends, Farhomes and especially Wilds still have their own mysteries."

Gail smells at the cup and peers under the large rim.

"I was hoping it wouldn't be that cold..."

She says tapping the bed suggestively.

Avril covers her smile with the cup. Not that the invitation isn't welcome to some degree.

"Gail, I'm nearly sixty. You are... well. Ever heard of cradle robbing?"

Gail blinks at the witch and hand stops the suggestive motion.

"Oh. Ooooooh." Her eyes widened considerably.

"I could have sworn you were younger than me." She sips at the tea thoughtfully and is taken by the sweetened aroma.

"In hindsight, you do seem more like a motherly..."

Sharp stare stops her from continuing and gentle, quiet laughter raises from Gail.

"Well it's true. I think all the young boys in the camp see you like that. If not more."

Avril rolls her eyes at Gail and breathes through her nose.

"Finish your tea Gail, and shoo, *mother* needs her beauty sleep. And if that particular word spreads among the Foxes, I know exactly who to make suffer for rumour mongering."

Gail did leave in the end but Iza was left with the distinct feeling Gail wasn't as discouraged as she had said.

Spark of sunlight warms her back as she watches Gail join another group of men in the courtyard now that the officers have moved out of it.

"She isn't exactly wrong about that, Iza, you have changed."

Solar has changed as well, there's a distinct uptightness to Sun Goddess at the eve of war. Outwardly as well.

Shoulder guard might be impossible fabrication of gold and sparkling diamonds more stylistic than protective but it still is previously unseen accoutrement of war.

Glance is clear, pot calling kettle and so forth.

Another cup is filled and offered.

For a brief moment in time silence is shared and between good friends, little more is required, Divine and Witch sharing a moment of relative peace between it all.

"Iza, will you be my Priestess?"

Iza inhales the brew in surprise at the sudden, direct question and has a choking fit.

Few deep breaths and divine pats to the back later Iza is still dumbfounded by the idea.

"You know how I am, Solar, I am really not fit to..."

Iza has seen Solar angry before, annoyed. By joke and reality.

This is different, the Godhead Triumvirate is very much on the verge of rage.

Iza is taken back, she is more than aware of Iza of Featherhome, the real one, not the multitude of characters spread across the Empire and Farhomes.

"Not fit! You..."

The emotions calm and Solar steadies a stare at Iza, very much one of ill intent.

"If that's your only objection, fine. I'll prove it to you."

Solar has disappeared and Iza is left more alone, somehow in the hut than ever before.

Something has gone from the air, from Anvil.

Nagging feeling of loss.

But soon Iza has forgotten that, what doesn't disappear is the fact that Solar has never lied to her.

What would even count as proof to that end she wonders and elven palms for the first time since Dragon feel sweaty and uncertainty takes hold.

But as days pass and Yellow Boar leaves, there is much to be done to be prepared for winter, the discussion fades, becomes a non concern.

This is Anvil, it listens to Godheads eagerly.

And now a trial is mandated, Solar wants proof positive, she shall have it.

Deep in the woods something ancient wakes from slumber, Avatar of Winter.

It comes from story and legend, turns a tree in the myth and arrives in the real.

Massive crown of frozen horns and scaled sinew, twice taller than any stag, its breath freezes ground and hooves strike ground frozen solid as it measures its surroundings.

King of Winter, a monstrous reindeer, scaled and with tail peaked by a scythe, with sharp teeth and sharper wit.

Fall still, unreal and out of place, it carries the mantle of deepest winter and gathers a storm of ages as it goes.

This winter will be cold, colder than any before.

It comes to freeze men and their hearts.

For the Witches heart and head.

Surreal roar of a predator emerges from its maw and raising gallop amongst the woods sings another sort of warcry as flowers freeze solid and leaves become razors to follow in its wake, to join the mantle.

The King rides for an army, Wilds of Anvil shall provide.

Week later, weather turns for the worse, men shiver at rest, watchmen are mandated burning braziers at battlements.

Last cart of supplies is still to arrive and half the company is at the walls waiting on the appointed day, braving windshear out of boredom.

This would be the last run of supplies and after that no more connection with the outside world, lest some adventurer wander in.

Many await letters, others promised spirits, officers worry about this and that.

Avril the Reliable ponders this with worry inside the gatehouse.

She knows Wilds and with the sudden winter and in wind is carried some ill will, monstrous scent.

She's inured against cold and elements but men are not, winter would be long, unbearable if this kept up.

Watchman shouts from the tower at the centre of the keep. Wind nearly swallows it but the elven hearing separates speech from galeforce.

Few more moments and men at ramparts cheer, meaningless as it is, few joys to be had here.

Mere minutes from the gate a pack of ragged figures separates from the woods, distilled from the snowstorm rising and charging the wagon and its guards, from her position Iza can see and surprise is total.

It is over before men even manage to react properly from their surprise, a few shouts from the fortress and then, silence and light of burning wagon.

One of the officers at the walls reacts finally and begins ordering men to go save what can be saved.

Ragtag band of men are stopped at the gate by Avril and her large rim of her hat.

Officer moves to remove Iza but the look in her eyes stops him from voicing the order.

"Wait, there is something to this. You can't save anyone and if you just run there you will..."

She stops as she feels it, the thing, whatever it is, uses the snow and storm as concealment.

Aria of the Wilds can barely sense it but the monster itself announces itself with its magical might.

Men notice as well and Iza turns from the men to look at it.

It is tall, the gait not unlike a royal mount of the Empire, perversion of honour, barely visible in the raising blizzard.

Along the road like it owns it and it surely does. Frozen, glittering horns reach over halfway up the battlements and it stops in clear view of the fortress, in all of its glory, trees fracture from extreme cold when it stops.

It is here to present a challenge and declare intent.

Elemental might of Anvil here to reclaim the Wilds and make men submit.

Its mere presence insults the meagre might of the fortress and its defenders.

From the woods come figures in white robes and capes, hooting, shouting, displaying crude weapons and white banners where crude depictions of horns are painted in red.

It doesn't take long for Iza to gather where the paint came from.

Orcs, imitation of men, far smarter, more intelligent than the average monster of anvil.

They know the arts of war as well. Savage, brutish but capable of strategy, tactics.

Iza with her sharp eyes can see the gaze below the antlers.

It's focused on her, and her alone.

She can feel the biting intent and magical senses dancing around her.

Inhumane howl rises from the beast and buries the windshear.

With it comes a gust of even greater intensity and men cover from the biting snow in the gale.

With that it is gone, the army and beast disappeared, but not the storm, if possible it bites even harder.

Iza bites her lip, hard almost enough to draw blood.

"Close the gate!"

She shouts to the men.

Officer winces at that and interjects.

"We still have scouts and.."

"Dead, we will never find their bodies, anyone who leaves the fort now will die."

Calm, steady, level. The look is emotionless.

Officer doesn't protest, he knows it as well. He repeats the order and shout echoes again from mouth to mouth to carry over the storm.

Siege.

Beast and monster will starve the men and do their very best to break morale.

First blow was struck masterfully.

She doesn't move from her spot at the gatehouse as two massive ironworks close ahead of her.

King of Winter is here for the Witch, it will kill the men, nonchalantly, without pause, to get at her.

She realises now, Solar sent this trial.

Priestesses are sometimes tested to fit.

This is hers.

The beast would be solvable, orcs as well, alone all she had to do was to go into the Wilds and keep raging, destroying.

She abandons the men and women, everyone here will be dead within a week.

There are still six long months of winter ahead.

Only thing keeping the men safe from the elemental ice and cold would be the spellwork of Iza, only mage within dozens of miles.

And Solar will not help, not in prayer or move a muscle, Iza spurned her and one of the greatest honours on Anvil.

Raise above yourself.

Whispers the wind and stern gaze, this is not about her, will not be about her.

But the men under her protection.

Priestesses of Solar are banners against darkness, death and sheer will manifest.

All she had to admit she was suitable, now she has to prove it.

In the cold biting wind a smile starts to form on her face.

And soon the grin challenges the storm.

Officers are arguing, pondering options, reactionary, men are smart, most already know what must be done.

Endure.

Dozen men at the table argue quietly and a few juniors observe silently behind them.

"Oh, thank you Avril."

Commander Alex says as the steaming cup appears from the left.

He sips and warmth goes into the bones and he wiggles his toes, he feels actually warm for the first time in a week, since the storm started.

He moves to add something but "Reliable Avril" is already bussing the other officers.

Alex wasn't that sure of the elf at first but she had more than proved worth her weight in gold, and certainly worth the large sum of gold as wages.

He focuses his attention again at the table, feeling far better now at the surprise.

He didn't see the beast but he knows his officers and can measure the threat from them.

The howl still echoes, pouring ice and hesitation into vein.

That everyone heard.

"Does anyone know what sort of beast this is?"

He asks to shake the men's heads and shrugs.

"Elemental Tyrant."

Avril says, in a calm but clear tone at the end of the table, pouring another cup

"Extremely rare beasts of antiquity, only few have ever been spotted. None slain."

Heads turn in unison to follow the elf as she goes about her business.

"First one was four hundred years ago. Stag of Summer, it burned a multitude of villages despite the best efforts of the Empire's men at arms. It yielded when summer passed to the regret of a multitude of Questers and vanished from all knowledge."

Another cup pours and she moves on.

"Second is contested, a beast very similar to this, maybe the very same one. Hundred and twenty years ago. No direct witnesses survived. It raged and raided early Farhomes colonies."

Kettle lands on the hook of a fireplace, filled again with water.

"Other sightings exist but as you can guess, such a thing rarely leaves survivors, only waste and death in its wake. It is said they are immortal, inured to blade, bolt and magic. Certainly more durable than your average monster of unusual size, giant, ogre or other such things.

They bring with them armies of monsters, goblins, orcs and sometimes other beasts."

She turns to face the officers and continues the lecture, unmoved by the horror of her words.

"Elemental, for they are manifestations of simple ideas of seasons, fire, wind, cold, water.

Tyrants, for they bend the will of Anvil's other monsters to serve."

She wonders idly a little while, staring at the ceiling in thought.

"King of Winter seems fitting. Certainly one of the more impressive if not the peaks of monstrous ecology of Anvil. An apex predator, destroyer of men, trampler of civilization."

Whispers and murmurs go around the table.

"And, what, pray tell, there is to be done to slay it?"

Command Alex asks

Officer corps meet the grin for the first time.

"Kill it?"

Chuckle of the witch bites even through the warming tea.

"Cower, men of Triumvirate. It is here to siege, to make you yield, react badly, extend to strike and you will see your extremities frozen solid, your men dead in short order."

She shrugs nonchalantly.

"Doesn't matter, it will be gone once winter passes. It cannot breach the walls. Orks will try but the beast isn't dumb enough to try to come close, the storm will bite even harder but I'd be surprised if it tries to test us directly."

Men quiet and pay attention now as Avril peeks into the kettle.

One of the older officers shakes his head at that and raises from the table to address Avril directly.

"And what makes you so absolutely certain this is even remotely the case?"

Avril calmly adds a few more leaves to the kettle.

"Because one idiot had the gall, the audacity to spurn Solar, dared to reject the offer of the Mantle of Priestess by claiming to not be worthy of it."

Men are taken back, clearly, and stare wide eyed at Avril.

"This is my trial, I brought this on your heads. That beast out there is for me, and for my head."

Silence falls in the hall and officers wait expectantly for the elf to continue. The stares are not gentle, more than a few spark anger.

"I am Iza of Featherhome, Grand Witch who walked outside all paths afforded to the Men of Anvil to cultivate might for Triumvirate. In truth, more for myself. Twice blessed, now once scorned, my days on Anvil are many, I am older than your grandparents, and most of my days were spent in the wilds."

Wooden stick stirs the kettle calmy.

"This is a trial, not a slaughter. One of you dies under my protection, I fail, my suffering legendary and my torment eternal. Solar called me to serve, to be a banner bearer in a war demonic to come. Not that I was not willing, but was not I with the Men of Anvil and now Triumvirate Godhead seeks to prove the matter."

"This is a war of wrath and scorn, denial. Siege of mind more than physical, test of my worth. To see if I care about things around me."

She pours another four cups from the kettle on the tray.

"Do souls of Men of Anvil matter to Iza of Featherhome more than another trophy on a spike and a blood curdling scream in the void of my soul."

She wonders to herself more than to the men.

She picks up the tray with steaming cups and faces the officers.

Anvil Wolf in a sparking starscape of magic walks from behind her and yawns at the men, settles to grey fur, sniffs the air and collapses around the fireplace.

Raven convalescences from air and blue swirl to shoulder and pecs gently at elven ear.

Stars shine through the roof and painting of a wondrous miracle of painted stars appears in the stone and rafters as Aria sings itself to reality from woven enchantment.

"Witchfort, ancient art of war, made to deny demons, reinforced by an elven spell of protection."

"The King of Winter cannot breach the walls. If he tries, he will be in my reach and I will have my trophy."

Eyebrow raises.

"More tea, gentlemen? It will be a long winter but we will not run out of tea."

Every week the King of Winter comes to lead a charge. Met by the steely gaze of Iza of Featherhome and determined defenders of the fort.

Elven witch brew had dissipated cold from the men and with every orc killed at the walls added to the might of Witchfort enchantment.

It coruscated invisibly and voraciously consumed the magic from the bodies before sunlight claimed them.

They charged mindlessly more to wear the men than to make any gains. By the end of the first month more than two hundred had met their end in the frozen killing ground around the fort, surrounded by siege ladders and abandoned banners.

As intelligent as the orks were, they could barely construct proper siegeworks and their aptitude was not enough for anything of the sort of trebuchets. Not that the frozen air would have allowed for it.

Inaction, idleness.

Solar had dreamed her will precisely and Anvil had responded masterfully.

Spell set upon the ancient stone, Iza had little else to do.

Had the orcs been met on an open field they would have undoubtedly challenged the men, each head taller than average human, muscle bound berserking rage.

But Inside the fortress, caressed by enchantment driving vigour and protection the Silver Foxes had ample opportunity to thin the horde and then service swift death to few that made it up the wall, if at all.

Rage and bloodlust inside Iza howled impotently, if she left the fortress enchantment would fail, if she left the men, magical brew would be no more.

Arrogant stare of Tyrant communicated clearly.

You will falter, witch.

Magical winter tightens, orks unaffected, elf feeling her mind unravelling.

She focuses on keeping morale high, entertainment and old lute around fire in the barracks tells of greater acts of heroism, jokes fly and few secrets are spilled.

And like clockwork do Witch and King exchange knowing, impotent stares.

Silver Foxes know who to blame for this sorry state of affairs, no secrets in a group this small and tight knit.

First it is incensed words, then stares.

Those who see the elf attempt to crush the frozen stonework of battlements with bare hands, eyes locked with monstrous every week take a step back from it.

Month three all have rotated to that watch at the gatehouse and recoil from the display of war of wills.

Grudging respect takes hold, men remember the comrade, Reliable Avril.

Personal problems make many seek the mage, her brews are known, reactions temper and none risk stockade for more than words.

At some point men realise what this is for and start to see the Priestess of Solar.

Her faith was known, now it gains new dimensions, Silver Foxes are her trial, each and every man and woman here.

Gail and others poke for details and from those is myth built.

Month four, men show more respect to Iza of Featherhome than Commander Alex.

Month five Iza is the commander but those close to her see the glass she is made out of.

Wrong word, wrong step, mistake summons reactions from the "old reliable" that speaks of deep inner turmoil, unsettled mind.

There is a month of supposed winter left and careful rationing has assured they will see the summer again. But thinned reserves weigh on every mind, wooden buildings are now being considered for firewood, empty barrels in the fireplaces speak to food consumed.

Brew protected from the cold but food had to be prepared and did nothing for the reality of the situation.

Tyrant of Winter was the deepest, darkest stormiest winter in actuality and dark, cold, biting, never stopping whispers of the blizzard ate at every mind.

Fire and actual heat was sanity here.

Never mind the constant warfare against the orc.

Or the surreal monstrosity that stared at the fortress with cold, steely eyes, below a crown of ice, confident of its victory to come.

Not that Solar doesn't answer, or the fact she doesn't listen, but lack of response is jarring to the elf who has nearly daily shared good mornings and good evenings with someone now gone.

Confidence so well cultivated crumbles in absence of friendly faces.

Not that it prevented Iza from playing her part to perfection, or seeking advantage in every opportunity.

She didn't stare at the Tyrant of Winter out of anger or impotence, or some misguided attempt to be seen facing the threat to raise morale.

It was a magical duel, of sorts, but Iza was more than the monster could ever be.

Her hand dug the stone from concentration, not fury.

Immutable object met irresistible force between the stares from the top of the gatehouse and at the road.

And slowly, piece by piece Witch undermines the Monster, digs barbs into it, under it's skin and folds enchantment on top of another.

Backs stares a idiotic thing, cultivating storm and hatred, bloodlust.

But barely a plan enters its mind.

And coruscating, swelling energies of Witchfort are hers to command, far greater storm raises in response harvested from dead ork and frozen magic beating against it.

But such magic takes its toll and is not easily harnessed.

Iza falls down and is only stopped from meeting the frigid stonework by Weave of Stormway. The paladin shares her name with Iza's mother and in magic and in exhaustion the elf sees her face again, more often than not.

The massive woman has been a veteran for longer than most have served. Despite her amazing capacity for physical acts she has always been at the backfoot in the Silver Foxes, escheving responsibility and keeping to herself.

Winter in the fortress has changed her, in more than few ways.

Blessing of Paladin had always been a far distant thing, concern of heroes and deathseekers, idiots and people of the Path of Quest.

Not so any longer.

Chance and opportunity put a Priestess in her life.

Priestess facing Trial.

She has her guidestone, and something to champion for.

She had never seen Divine Godhead before the winter, much less multiple.

Blessing made her capable of seeing into the Realm Divine, much like Iza, and stern gaze at the back of the praying elf from Solar, few glimpses of worried Lunar ineptly hiding at corners pass without being noted but certainly observed.

Stories become real and myth turns to daily life.

And from that she gains something she never imagined before, faith.

And from faith, assured certainty that Iza walked on a path that needed her, a protector to face the worst storms.

Prayer has been dogma, fact of life as it is to many.

When she kneeled in the storm and despair and hoped to be of assistance, hands lowered from Realm Divine to touch her head.

Trial was Iza's, Path of Paladin hers, all she ever had to do was start on it.

Weave of Thunderway kneeled on cold stone, Paladin of Triumvirate rose from them to glory and might.

"You are faltering, Priestess."

Iza would stare back daggers for the attribution but focus on the spell and magic she only manages to grasp for support. Iza nods at the Paladin, still taken back by her existence. Few steadying breaths, mental focus returns.

"Time..."

Elf blinks away the psychedelia, coughs and looks at the face of her mother again.

"Time to end this. Call the men to the courtyard. And for goodness sake Weave, put me down."

Paladin is carrying the elf towards her quarters, politely stops and allows Iza to find her own footing.

She sits on the stairs inside the inner castle where Iza has been working the Witchfort to yield to another purpose.

"Go, I am fine, just need a breather."

Weave is hesitant at first but salutes, fist meeting chainmail and clinks away.

She has to maintain focus on multiple spells, breathe them to life and keep them active and her mind and body protests at the strain of it.

But it is there, done, complete, finer points of totality matter little in the end but perfectionist in her wanted to be absolutely sure.

She shakes her head in the cold dark stairway. Magic has its way of always asking for more than the mage can offer.

It would suffice, more than suffice.

Sunrise meets the Silver Foxes, covered by the ever present blizzard, snow and ice.

There is no formation but everyone is here.

The plan isn't that complex, it doesn't rely on much but momentum.

"Are you sure, absolutely certain?"

Commander Alex asks and he has his reservations as do many others.

Iza is staying upright mostly only because of the mountain of a woman next to her and he can see the witches' eyes wander from the magic swirling, not unfamiliar with mages he knows when mage is spent.

"Commander, I assure you, I am..."

The elf stumbles from standing and blanks for a moment.

"Very much still in control here, we must act now or I lose control of the spell, whether we wish it or not, this has to happen now."

Alex trusts the words but hesitates.

Iza of Featherhome has had quite enough of the storm, the winter and the cooped up idleness. There is no hesitation or doubt to that.

Something snaps momentarily.

"I WANT THE BEASTS HEAD!"

Nobody has heard Iza get angry before, never had even an inkling of the elf's little complications such as the breathtaking anger management issues or the sheer unbridled rage she feels towards every monster.

And for nearly six months, half a year that mindless thing has stared arrogantly back at her. Rage echoes on the courtyard now and every man and woman takes a step back from surprise and unmasked fury.

Even Weave seems surprised and looks for second footing while holding onto Iza's hand to steady her.

"Either you will survive this by falling in formation or you will be added to the tally."

And she has had quite enough of the orks, the fortress, the same old tea and she is absolutely done with Solar's game.

She swallows bile and puts the rational part in the control again.

"If you trust anything, trust this, before the day is over, I will sit at the head of the table in the fortress with those antlers as my trophy."

She lets the statement sink for a moment to the mercenary company, gauges them.

"ARE YOU WITH ME!?!"

They are, one and all, they are all eager to see this through as well, come what may and sword, hand and fist raises in response and a warcry echoes on the courtyard.

"Idiotic, the plan is idiotic."

The entire company knows precisely when the monster comes again.

Same day of the week it shows up and throws more orcs to the grinder.

"And that, Weave, is what Anvil can manage, at its finest, idiotic charge. Sustained beyond all reason, yes, but idiotic and lacking any real depth."

Iza is more talking to stay sane than to explain the same thing again from a different perspective, she has activated the spellwork and Witchfort squirms in response.

"Present a target, it charges, and here is a funnel."

Spells from blessings are preset, serve a function and then abate unless embossed into something as an enchantment.

Elven masterworks are reinforced by themselves and exist within an area, still ultimately failing if not used and utilised by mages.

Witchfort is an enchantment, made to serve as an ad-hoc replacement of proper

Reinforcement magic, it is fuelled by the dead, the dying and never meant to hold for this long.

Aria has kept it going by singing itself as part of it, now fraying, relieved, at the edges, hidden power coruscating strikes sparks here and there in the real.

"My soul is a beacon for this beast, it will charge. I have made sure of it."

Ultimately spell is cultivation of casters will, blessings guide and offer methods of making more complex things possible.

Mage dreams in the real, mana distils from Anvil to desire and is guided to effect.

Magical circles focus might and allow even untalented mages to convert raw willpower to complex spellwork without undue stress.

Iza is not untalented nor untested.

Fortress is a spell circle, made so by one of masters of the art.

Witchfort a deep well of power, concentration of mana.

Potential is there, only asking for will to guide it.

The beast comes from the woods again and finds the Witch not at top of the gatehouse but at the inner castle, sitting exhausted and worn on the stars.

The gates have been raised, there is nothing to prevent the orks from charging.

Beast snorts arrogantly and orders it's cohorts forward to end the Witch and off they come, from forest, screaming and grunting.

The precise centre of the circle is directly in front of Iza and she raises hand to thin air.

Fist closes, the witchfort disappears, men stand unprotected against the horde.

Mana has to go somewhere and that something is Iza of Featherhome.

Gravitic magic has limitations, severe ones.

But its might is uncontested, undeniable.

Even raw unfiltered mana from such a complex thing as Withfort cannot escape.

Above the spell circle something strange forms, first a dot of blackness and as the mana flows in it grows in size.

This is not a witch's spell, nor some obscure enchantment.

Rapidly it grows to the size of a man's head.

Gravity applied to mana.

When orcs reach the gatehouse the orb hovering in air has reached considerable size, an entire cart could be lost in the light eating, black surface of it.

Silver foxes are waiting at the walls of the battlement for a countercharge, out of the way whatever Iza has dreamed.

Weave refused to leave her side and now regrets it as pitch black orb starts to coruscate purple lightning and she can feel it eat mana from her body.

Extremely unpleasant, she looks at the elf and worries more.

It is far too late to do anything about any of this. Iza was extremely precise; she cannot step between her and the orcs until the spell is cast.

Dumb, idiotic but undeniable will of Tyrant of Winter makes the orcish horde charge in more or less formation as wide as the gate.

They get within ten feet of the elf and Weave has closed her eyes and is praying the elf has not been lost to the psychedelia of mana.

Single pulse, a string of impossible stops the time.

Or everyone's perception of it.

Drawn directly from the orb to the neck of a beast.

Then orcs are jarred backwards, then forwards.

Black Sun shines negation of light in the courtyard and a hideous blinding light of pure power burns across it from castle to gate and beyond.

Everyone feels it, the blizzard has stopped, there is no more winter, the beast is dead and surely slain.

Another pulse.

Sweep of a timeless string from the orb across the line formation.

The unlight and a blinding beam follows.

Ground erupts under the orcs and they are thrown haphazardly from it, more than few have had the misfortune of crossing the beam itself and stumble without limbs or their body halved.

Black Sun has dissipated and Iza collapses on the spot.

Silver Foxes might be stunned but they are consummate professionals, the enemy is surprised, wounded and surrounded.

Multiple officers order charge and ripped from the commanding will of a tyrant, hit by the magic, wounded and disorganised they have not even a prayer.

Silver Foxes might have less men, unprotected by magics and worn by the winter but they know how to abuse an advantage.

And certainly have a reason to do so.

Orcs die an inglorious death in short order.

Weave of Thunderway keeps her charge safe from the few remaining monsters for the brief moment it takes and before she manages to find the tie to check on the elf she can feel the weight of her on her belt.

One glance tells her all she needs to know, Iza will get to the beast if she has to drag herself along the ground to do it.

Iza herself is breathing freely for the first time in months and ragged gasps of air are more from liberty to do so than any real exhaustion.

Kiteshield towards the mass of dead and dying she makes her way across and next to the killing field towards the gatehouse.

Men make way for the mismatched pair as Weave keeps her step steady and stable, Iza stumbles along hanging on to the Paladin.

One of the men finds his axe liberated and dragged along the ground as they go.

Past the gatehouse Iza can only vaguely hear the cheers, what little energy she has now is focused on one task alone and with every step the exhaustion and psychedelic strain from mana and magic lessens its grip.

That doesn't mean she isn't tired and would rather fall to the ground and just give up for a few hours.

Eyes sting from lack of sleep and legs burn but when Weave stops a few respectful steps from the collapsed Tyrant of Winter Iza has found her feet again, enough to see it done.

Spring is in the air now, the magical blizzard of deepest winter has dissipated abruptly and the wasteland of frozen ground is rapidly turning into mud and slush.

There's a clear hole in the neck of the beast, burned straight through it and dead eyes staring blankly mirror nothing.

From it still radiates cold in mana and magic, even dead, the locus of it remains and Weave is wary of the monstrosity laying splayed on its side.

Iza has no such compunctions or inhibitions.

Axe meets the neck and bounces from the scaled skin.

Grunt of effort, she corrects her footing, steadies her grip and two handed swing impregnated with gravitic entropy smoothly slashes deep into the beast, blue liquid gushes from the wound and paints the elf.

Weave is taken back by the brutality but shakes her head at that, Iza isn't a stranger and these few months have more than familiarised her to the soulscape of her priestess from psychedelic ramblings occasionally slipped loose in here and there.

Reliable Avril, Iza of Featherhome is just insane on some level, that's a given.

But she isn't swinging the axe for herself, she's swinging it because she promised to the men and women in the fortress to do so.

The beast isn't abhorrent to the elf because it came for the elf, it is subjected to such brutality because it involved Silver Foxes.

Iza would have killed the beast, hunted it to exhaustion and laughed, made light of it.

The Priestess separates the head far past the point of exhaustion for the Men of Anvil.

The head rolls free with another grunt, axe still buried in the ground and twisted for leverage.

Iza grabs the antler and pulls it upright and stares Tyrant directly in its dead eyes.

Swift, kick, and another.

She stops, takes support from her legs, steadies her exhaustion, breathing and a series of swift kicks to the side breaks skin and punctures an eye.

That's for Iza.

She grabs it by the antler again and begins to pull, to little effect, eyes locked back at the fortress and the men waiting.

Weave almost moves to help but is stopped by the feeling of sunlight at her back and for a moment she thinks it's just a break in the cloud cover, but only for a moment.

Sun is coming from the easterly road, behind her is west and in the presence of Godhead she kneels out of reaction, eyes downwards.

"Don't... Do that."

Melodic voice tells her and warmth of the hand radiates thru the chainmail covered shoulder. Weave is unsure how to react at first but the tone of the voice lets her in on one of the bigger secrets of Triumvirate.

Solar absolutely detests formalities and pointless glorification.

She raises from the slush and warily eyes the Divinity, correcting her stance and shifts the weight of the shield and armament.

Iza has collapsed at the separated head and is breathing heavily, leaning bloodied, hand splayed possessively over it.

Something passes between the Godhead biting her lip and Iza staring back levelly and Weave hopes that the shiteating grin isn't actually there.

"Oookay Iza, point well made and taken."

Gold stare turns and Weave is pushed back by intensity of the smile and laughter in the eyes.

"And oh my me it has been so long since someone actually walked the path of the Paladin. Nice to meet you!"

Weaves suppositions about the Divinity on Anvil drop a few steps as the bearhug lands. Or raises.

"You'll meet the rest of the family sooner or later, I'm sure."

Muffled voice buried in the chainmail says.

"Now, housekeeping."

She takes a step back and smooths the simple white dress.

"Weave of Thunderway, for your service and outstanding patience in this matter, Armament Divine from my coffers."

She faces a palm towards Weave and says a few unintelligible words echoing under her breath.

Beam of sunlight pierces the forest and the roadway.

In it something impacts ground and twinblade nearly as tall as Weave impacts ground without noise in the ray of light, sparkles gold and myth, settling to reality.

"Demonsplitter."

She nods invitingly to Weave who hesitates only a moment, grasps the handhold and feels the blade marr her soul with gold.

It would always be with her and inure her to old age and protect from ravages of combat.

It is simple, nondescript and only a slight script of gold across the blunt edge in the steel upon mirrored blades marks any sort of magic in it.

Eternally sharp, unbreaking.

Someone wanted Weave dead; they would have to kill with a single strike.

Or suffer swift vengeance in the form of the Divine blade.

She hefts it and steps back, swings it, and feels it find its place in her hand, offering familiarity and skill at arms, magical might and some echo of Arc Gold, Solars bow.

"It will grow as you do, break ranks, split Demon, you heft my contempt in your hand, Paladin."

As by instinct, she lets go of the blade and it finds its place on her back with no strap or holster required, settles comfortably to be drawn at will.

She faces Iza and her face is blank, unreadable.

"You overdid yourself, and by no small margin, Iza of Featherhome."

She takes a deep breath.

"Yours was a Trial to endure against the unwinnable, to cultivate patience and show you cared."

Her shoulders slump and a perfectly sculpted hand corrects a golden lock under a furrowed brow.

"Instead you just went and proved you are above concerns of rationality, absolutely have no patience for any enemy and just... raged at the injustice until it stopped breathing."

She extends her hands and stares with intent.

"What the literal *hell* is wrong with you Iza?"

The witch is still staring back unabashedly amused from the ground.

"What are..."

She coughs and collects herself from the blood and slush and unsteadily takes support from one massive antler.

"What are friends for if not to prove friends wrong?"

Weave has never seen Iza bow in front of anything, even in principle. Yet now she does.

Kneels in the slush, bow her head and places hand on knee.

"I serve, Triumvirate of the Seat of Sun. I am yours, in combat, at peace, for Anvil, for Triumvirate. For the common man and the defenceless."

Solar is taken back as well.

"I am your collared rage and the unhinged blade against the Demonic. Command me, expend this useless sack of mortal meat at your will."

Worry flashes in the golden eyes and she shakes her head at that.

"Iza..."

She rises from the dirt and slush, covered in blue blood and grins at Solar.

"Yes, being theatrical, I know you hate standing at ceremony. I think I owe a few barbs at you after this whole winter."

Solar lets out a long sigh and waves her hand towards the elf.

Clothes mend, blood disappears and Iza can feel exhaustion be replaced by vitality and desire for sleep puncturing her eyes wane.

"Fine, you absolutely abhorrent girl. You are my Priestess."

Solar stands there for a moment and blinks and Iza blinks back.

"Sooooo, was something supposed to happen?"

Solar furrows her brow and clears her throat.

"Iza of Featherhome is my priestess." She says and stops to wait.

Nothing happens, Iza looks around her as Solar massages her temples.

Weave cannot help but laugh at the duo and their absurdity.

"Oh, the book!"

Iza suddenly rings out pointing at the Divine.

"Oh gosh!"

Divine Godhead rings in response and slaps her forehead.

"Well dang it there was supposed to be this heavenly choir and everything..."

Solar wanders off clearly disappointed but then gets a smirk on her face.

"Oh I know. Give me a second." And disappears into thin air.

Weave shakes her head at the scene that just unfolded.

"Is she always like that?"

"Abashedly happy and unrepentantly childlike? Yes. Now stop standing around, I need these antlers, give me a hand."

Rest of the beast is slowly dissipating in sunlight and vapours of scaled skin turning into wisps of mana that fall towards the clearing skies.

She recovers the axe from the ground and measures the skull with her eyes.

"Let's see, I will cut here and there, keep the skull tilted to..."

The Priestess and the Paladin return to the fortress to warcries and applause as Weave presents the antlers to the Silver Foxes.
Still attached to the top of the skull and dripping blue blood.
Quickly returning spring and clear defeat of the monstrous has raised the spirits to soar.
Trophy only adds to the joy of the mercenary company.
Iza of Featherhome keeps her word, she does indeed sit at the end of the table with antlers still oozing cold tied to the largest chair in the fortress.
Last of the wine is brought to table and despite protestations of the Priestess, Silver Foxes raise a drink to her.
And then a few more.
Not soon after scouts return and with them, fresh meat.
Raucous celebration carries long into the night.

Silver Foxes Headquarters, 522aH.
Deep south, Wilds of Farhome.

Iza tells the story somewhat more matter of factly than the mercenaries, but Rat assumes her accounting is the most factual.

"So what was the book thing about?"

"Secrets, young Rat, some aren't meant to be shared."

"And what about the thing Solar promised?"

Iza chuckles at the childlike enthusiasm quietly.

"Stickler for details, aren't you? Good. Not just Solar, Lunar has a say in these things as well."

She extends her hands, shakes her wrists and focuses, mana gathers and shape begins to form and for a moment, Rat can see the outline of a sword and mace.

Iza shakes her head as if confused and the magic dissipates.

"You have an *Armoury*?!"

Tools of Heroines and part of multitude of folklores, Rats eyes light up to be in the same room as a legend.

"I do indeed. Can't really call it out of combat, it is a weapon after all."

Iza frowns at that internally however. *Armoury* manifested as a tattoo across her back and arms as a pair of wings, black raven on left and a white swan on right was very much so real and constantly present.

But to call forth armaments, weapons from them seemingly required a very specific set of circumstances, being a Spymaster and more recently, a trainer for the mercenaries, had not called her to hunt monsters for a while, as impressive and instinctive the *Armoury of the Eclipse* was, training was ultimately required to use it.

Door opens and the starstruck Rat barely notices Melody slink in.

Child and the violin have become inseparable and not long will pass in the encampment before familiar notes echo from some corner of it.

The worried child hands Iza a letter and gets a hug from Rat as the elf delves into the letter. It doesn't take long for her to finish and she hands it to Rat and takes a good look at the two. Rat has a long way to go, so has Melody, but that doesn't mean they aren't part of this now. Rat parses the letter with some stutter but ultimately finishes it before Iza has managed to sort a singular book from the coarsely crafted bookshelves.

"So, you are going then? I have no clue how the crazy psychotic ties into this all, seems more like an afterthought. But she's asking for a priestess and has one of these... tiaras?"

Iza lands a book on the table by dropping it.

"That is my wife, so watch your tongue. But yes, an intact demonic tool of infiltration is very much the reason to start moving."

Rat is taken back by the sharp look Iza gives her over the Untouchable and extremely surprised Iza of Featherhome has a romantic life after all.

"Rat."

There's sternness to the tone she has learned to associate with orders and she almost jumps to attention.

"Yes ma'am?"

"Silver Foxes are yours. Lead them, you have time, give me the most elite fighting force imaginable. You have the contacts I outlined, keep in touch with them and this library?"

She motions her hand to encompass the dozen or so shelves.

Rat nods, thinking of one of the black books filled with names and personages in her night table in officers barracks.

"Read it, all of it. Begin here."

Rat recovers the book with a stretch and reads the title, "*Forms of Warfare, volume XIIIth, nonlinear.*"

"Nonlinear? What does that..."

She is stopped by the knowing stare.

"Right, read it."

She takes a pause and considers her mentor and realises there's at least half a dozen questions that spring to mind already.

"How will I contact you?"

"When the red leaf appears, march to the capital, I will meet you there or on the way. If something critical comes up, spread the word, they are my contacts, after all."

"Melody? Ready for a road trip?"

Small things sighs next to Rat, sounding far older than her age but nods steadily.

"We can travel far faster and unimpeded if it's just us two. I'd like to take reinforcements but knowing those two they have already moved far past what they reported as their goal."

Rat senses the despairing look from Melody and can do little else but shrug at her apologetically.

There's little in the way of preparation to be done, Silver Foxes stock by necessity all that is required for journeys, long and short.

Melody is far too young and short in stature to carry any real weaponry but she genuinely doesn't need a weapon to protect herself on the road, now that lessons are bearing fruit.

Even less so under the watchful eye of Iza, veteran of the Wilds.

Two days into the wilds Melody feels at home under the trees as *Chant of the Dead Marshes* reinforces the simple lessons and elven magic swiftens her step.

A week into the journey they are approaching a small village and Melody for the first time in her life sees Iza hesitate.

But ultimately they are walking across cobblestones on the main road and Iza nods at things like they were familiar and shakes her head at others in disbelief.

It is surrounded by a low stone wall and militiamen patrol the streets, a sign that is old for a Farhome colony.

Melody is taken further off sorts as Iza corrects her course past the gates and heads west; she has been heading north with every step since the encampment.

She stops at a covered signage for those on Path of the Quest for a good while and clears weeds threatening to overtake it.

Melody is about to ask for the reason for this distraction but thinks better of it as her Mentor stops in front of a well kept and old house, biting her lip and takes a deep breath before opening the wooden gate to approach the front door.

Few knocks on the door and Iza lets out a deep sigh and seemingly relaxes.

Weave of Featherhome opens the door and nearly passes out, for the second time in her life.

There is more wear and lines on the face but no sign of old age.

"ATOR! IZA IS BACK!"

Iza has barely time to react to the bearhug that doesn't let go, reinforcing the youth still in the matriarch of Featherhome.

"I knew you'd be back before long."

Ator opens the rear door and Iza's father greets the youngest daughter with a warm smirk and a shake of a head.

"And who might this young lady be?"

Weave asks as she spots Melody trying her best to disappear behind the post of the patio.

Concept of *Mother Featherhome* is terrifying for her as she realised someone had taught Iza to act as she did and her mind conjures images of a terrifying old witch in a hut.

"My... adopted daughter. Melody of Featherhome."

And that exact moment Melody just gives up trying to understand Iza entirely.

In truth Iza had been measuring her relationship to the young ball of worry for a good while and ultimately had decided that Melody's fate and life mattered to her a great deal, save, perhaps, one crazy person.

Or at the minimum, deserved a good childhood with the little time they all had left.

And to safeguard that, she had family to rely on, however distant.

Melody is enthusiastically grabbed to a hug and then held aloft and cradled by firm hands of her grandmother.

But here, as her father hugged her, she realised it wasn't distant at all, only separated by time. Another new acquaintance, purple eyes as if a mirror of Iza's curiously stare behind Ator.

"This is Ira, your sister."

"You didn't come here to stay, did you?"

Her mothers tone is matter of factly, resigned.

Her parents have calmed, dinner is eaten and now they sit at the opposite ends of Iza's ancestral home, there would be many questions to answer.

Iza shakes and gathers her thoughts, staring into a cup of familiar but distant tea and breathes in nostalgia.

Her eyes land on the pile of fur in front of the fireplace, Ira has fallen asleep on top of the wolf hands around its neck, Melody has similarly given up the conscious world for now in Weave's lap.

She sighs.

"When I left I was a broken, ignorant child driven by barely contained hatred against, I don't know, the entire world."

Finger feels the edge of the clay cup and avoids the gaze of her parents.

"Now it matters, I am in love with an Untouchable, who's right now, out there risking it all in this. And... That's breaking me up inside something fierce. Melody doesn't deserve this fate. Nobody on Anvil does."

She swallows the rest of the warm tea. Look in her eyes is steady and hand gently pats Melody's head.

"Demonic comes for my family and this entire world I fell in love with in the end."

Hand corrects a wisp of hair, stiffness sets into her features.

"I'm a Priestess of Solar and the Grand Witch of Lunar. Prodigy of Featherhome, and as long as I have breath, it's going to have to go through me."

She blinks a few times as her thoughts are interrupted by sudden realisation.

"Oh, uh, right, I may have taken some liberties with the family name, turns out we are now unlanded nobles of the Empire."

She breathes through her teeth and apologises with her eyes.

"Sorry?"

Ator has been listening intently, steadily and now breaks into laughter, first to a warm genuine one but soon cannot contain himself and nearly falls off his chair by the intensity.

Her mothers look is unreadable as Melody wakes from her nap to the noise.

Ira is utterly unbothered by all of this and just tightens her grip on the wolf's neck.

Weave of Featherhome moves to steady her husband and in that Melody finds the opportunity to escape the deathgrip of her grandmother and uses her training to slide under the table next to Iza.

Unsure hand grasps the witches sleeve and Melody finds herself having escaped her fate only to be met by arguably far worse one.

Iza wouldn't get distracted enough for her to escape.

Realm Demonic

Fortress Spine

Here is where the invasion would launch.

It had once been a pole of the planet, machinery over aeons and energies had made such distinction irrelevant.

What remained was the Invasion Engine.

Four chains unfathomably large tied to a pillar of black metal and muscle forged and mutated from core and mountains of this realm, anchored to the spine of this world, mechanism and sinew buried deep underground strained.

They reach far beyond the horizon, each link like a hill to their own right first shudders, then pull taut against each other.

They are attached to the Teeth, siege engines for breaching realms.

Previous attempts still lie abandoned, aborted and rusting on Anvil's north pole, fabrications of metal and demonic magic, reaching barely hundred feet into air reduced to rubble and slag in freezing cold.

These are not the weak attempts of yesteryear and previous wars.

Highest peaks of these Teeth nearly reach cloud cover in the corroding air.

They need power, energy of this realm to function and an unfathomable amount of it.

Chain pulls with immeasurable might and the Teeth screams in response, deafening anything with ears to hear it for miles.

Each a claw, a mouth to burrow deep into realm demonic to scrape entropy, death and matter from the corrupted, dead soil to mile high furnace at the heart of it.

Unalive overseers of steel, sinew and screaming mouths whip things meant for labour and suffering of endless work inside the towers direct mindlessly to shovel and beat metal.

Refuse from the process of gathering energy will be forged into weapons for demonic armies.

Smoke billows and then strikes lightning and fire at the peak of Teeth.

Slowly, ever so tortuously they start their long, arduous, scraping journey to the Engine.

The will responsible for this sits on a throne of rusted metal at the edge of the atmosphere at the peak of Fortress Spine.

Demon King can hear the energies gather and coruscate far below his seat of authority and smiles at his might so manifest.

He is no longer alone, multitude of muscular demons and seemingly haphazard collections of bones, crudely implanted metal and rotting meat bow with their head to the floor slick with oil and things best left undescribed.

Mechanisms, bubbling vats and psychotic vivisection engines of Realm Demonic have provided meat, constructs and slaves to the grinder of war and the demon king has seen it fit to test each example personally in combat to find one's suitable for his needs, multitudes lie broken, abandoned, dying or twitching in unlife around the throne.

These beings in reverence will be his generals, empty, broken survivors he will mould personally to serve purpose.

He is taken by his reverence of commencement as Teeth resonate entropy and might to the Invasion Engine far below along the chain as it dies down to merely intolerable grind of metal against metal and observes his generals to be.

Soon the chains will be escorted by armies pouring from underground, from glass mothers, laboratories and dissection tables to the Fortress.

These armies needed something exceptional to instil superiority of demonic to the lesser beings of Anvil and this is his favoured example provided by the masterful hands of his most veteran vivisectionists and flashcrafters.

Unsaid will resonates across the air and the creature is pulled to its feet like a puppet without strings before it settles standing.

Demon King appreciates it for what it is before making his will known.

It could have at some stage been a human, elf, something humanoid.

That was before it was subjected to scalpel and saw, before from it was pulled the concept of mercy by hooked instruments and practised harm.

Before corruption was pumped to heart and hatred was installed to mind.

It is a gaunt, horrifying mockery of Men of Anvil, grimacing sharpened metal teeth that pierce the remains of deathly pale skin on the right side of its face.

One empty socket glares with energies of Realm Demonic above that manufactured grin and its left side of its face is like finest porcelain, gentle, empty frozen smile of a lover and dead stare of a corpse.

Inside the remains of the skull ticks clockwork and pulses of malevolent red covered by demonic tiara.

Robes of stitched leather cover the empty ribcage of bone and interconnected metal mechanisms.

Shoulders formed of mechanical shapes end into finely crafted hands ending in curved claws of a predator. It stands on bones, metal plates and sharpened heels of razor thin spikes.

Realms of the dead are forbidden, unreachable to Godheads of Anvil, not so for Demon King.

What the foolish Sun Goddess abandoned to the pit and void, dead and lifeless, was salvaged and put to use.

A form, a mould of a thing.

Twisted and poured full of corrupting might of entropy until it moved.

There was no soul in it, a useless thing for Demon King in a servant, a puppet, imitation but it pleases King greatly that his general wears that face, that tormenting vision of aeons of denial.

Demon King clenches his fist and focuses his might and opens it, blowing a spark of unlife, an order to the mannequin from it.

Dead eye twitches and focuses, sparks green, engine pulses in the chest and pumps bile to motion.

Harbinger of the Invasion, Iza of Demonrealm bows her head gracefully to the Demon King.

"You are marvellous, my dear."

Smooth, well measured and calm. The voice of a seducer rumbles in the thin air.

"You will certainly break their will, if not more."

Merest hint of a gesture signs the gauntly apparition closer and another makes it kneel in front of the throne.

Demon King places his hand on top of the head and caresses the features gently.

"Exquisite."

Swift motion of a closing clawed hand destroys the head and with a twitch it expires on the floor in a pile of meat, metal and various liquids.

Demon King laughs rapaciously at that.

His will and realm manufactured such horrors in an assembly line.

Anvil's greatest heroes would return as undead mockeries to gnaw the will of the defenders at the front of armies of Demons directing the will of horrifying engines of war.

And then he would finally put an end to the real Iza of Featherhome.

Capital of the Empire, 522aH.

Manor Yeken.

Third daughter of Count Yeken had never really questioned why she had different hair colour to her sisters and never had it been called into question, even in hushed whispers, as such she had passed the thought with a question and nonchalant answer ever since childhood. Her friends and other young nobles of course had questioned it, but it was in the end, just one of the things that were so.

Red hair was unique, but a curiosity in a black haired household.

Mirabel Selemsis Yeken lived a protected life, and rarely even left the house, she had always been of poor health, despite the best efforts of mages, healers and priestesses.

Coughs that took all her energy in winter, headaches in summer. Muscle pains and cramps every now and then.

She was enjoying a lovely afternoon with her friends and sisters in a gazebo, laughing the long afternoon away, one of her suitors had managed to lure her away to a shadowed copse of maple trees and the clumsy attempts of young courtship in equal measure entertained her and made her blush.

Eventually his keeper, Ser Marrymont, one of the Druids of the Grove on retainer for her family to keep after her health found them and shouted the young man away as to stay within good manners.

"I swear Lady Mirabel, you are sometimes doing this on purpose, just to make my life harder."

He said under his traditional mask as he kept eye on the running suitor for any shenanigans. Not that he genuinely minded this easy life and looking after the mild mannered and easily laughing young woman.

He is surprised as there is no instant response in laughter or a snappy retorts Mirabel was so known for and turns to face her on the bench, hands on hips.

He is stopped instantly as something has dramatically changed in the young woman.

No longer does a smile spark in the corners of her mouth, no longer eyes look curiously at the world.

Piercing stare of the blue eyes and pursed lips pike him to the spot.

"Harken, Child of Triumvirate, Druid of the Grove."

There is thunder in the voice and steel in the posture.

He freezes and swallows hard as he feels the Divinity present.

"I am an Angel of Triumvirate."

She raises her hand and in it is a red maple leaf, a deep colour of blood, waxy, held firmly.

"The Prophet of War."

The End

(Yes i am writing a sequel mhmmh)