

THE PATH TO ENDLESS NIGHT

“ Even the brightest light can only ever create more shadow.”
Unknown.

PROLOGUE.

Darkness.

Thick.

Heavy.

Suffocating.

Lying there, imprisoned, it was the only thing the boy could think about. Choking him, it wrapped around tight, refusing to let go. As well as being his only companion, over time, the darkness became his nemesis. Laying over him like the thickest of blankets, it weighed him down, stifling his senses. He could neither see, hear or feel anything beyond the devastating, endless black.

Despite his best efforts it was difficult to keep his mind sharp and in the emptiness of his prison his thoughts ran wild. Chained to the floor and unable to see, he could do nothing to learn his surroundings or check himself for injuries, he could only sit and think. The boy did not know where he was, who had brought him here or how long he had been chained. And, as the hours, minutes or days passed, time began to blur, offsetting a deep, building panic in him that encouraged his paranoid mind to wander...

Sometimes, he would see dark shapes in the blackness before him, or it would be something he heard; sounds that echoed through the room. Quiet splashes of water or the slow scraping of stone on stone. It took him some time to realise that these could be the products of his own paranoid, drugged state. His mind, which he had thought to be his only asset could actually be his greatest enemy.

He had no way of knowing.

Alone in the darkness, his sanity fractured, every doubt and fear causing another break in his fragile state of mind. The boy lost faith in his own ability to think, he doubted every thought and feeling, swaying in and out of a drug induced sleep, unable to discern between nightmare and reality.

It was then that he began to scream.

CHAPTER 1.

The winds twisted in a dance of salt and smoke from the bonfires along the coast. Below, on the beach, the people revelled and danced as they likely would until the early hours of the morning, and in the distance, the sun was slowly sinking towards the horizon, being chased down by the moon with its endless army of stars.

Fires burned bright along the beach and the smell of magic was heavy in the air, it was like this every year, and she would always come to this exact spot to watch the glowing sun disappear, only to be replaced by the fire.

Az stood. Her cloak hung heavy around her lithe body.

With the festivities roaring around her and night slowly creeping up on the tourists and drunks that crowded the streets of Andar, the capital city; Az dropped from her perch on the roof of The Old Mill to the streets below. Soundlessly, she slid from the shadows into the crowd to adopt the same drunken swagger as the rest of the festival goers. With her faked clumsiness and downcast eyes she blended with the sea of people, letting them move her in the intended direction without being detected.

Noting the disinterested eyes of the sentries posted all around the Den, her nimble fingers were able to dip in and out of pockets and swipe at watches and wallets unnoticed. Another glance at the guards revealed them transfixed by a female dancer clad in what could have passed for underwear. Hypnotically, she writhed and turned and with each move she drew more attention – a priestess or druid perhaps? Come out to offer a dance to the gods on a holy day, she assumed. Unease flickered through Az, the glazed eyes and crazed look of these worshippers did not sit well with her, and undoubtedly, there would be many more of them around.

As for the guards – amateurs. They wouldn't last a minute on a job if they couldn't concentrate on a few hours of security detail. For some reason, this display of behaviour irritated Az more than she was willing to admit. If it were her in their position, she would not be so lax with her duties. The ease with which she stole from people right under their noses both disgusted and amused her, she couldn't decide which feeling was stronger.

“Careless fools.” Shaking her head she moved on.

Following the trail of spark-charmed lights strung up along the coast in celebration, she began to close in on the hub of activity created by the gathering crowds. Ember-glow and bonfires cast a warm aura around the city, the center of which was the ceremonial pyre. It was a mages' festival. An annual event that began on the seventh day of the seventh month, lasting seven days.

Celebrated all throughout the continent, it was definitely a notable event - which would explain the huge crowds.

It was an important time of year as it allowed the people to give back magic and mana to the fire wights in Vallis, the spirit world.

Continuing her slow walk through the throng of people, she reached the gambling district and swerved left, stumbling into a well dressed man smoking Vietum outside one of the more reputable betting halls this far into the Den. Fumbling, she politely muttered her apologies as he blew a breath of black smoke in her direction, accompanied with a string of curses so vile they made any regret for stealing his wallet fly straight out of her mind.

Az attempted to follow the banks of the Favell river, but almost unintentionally found herself straying towards Westdell; a more distasteful part of the city.

Unfortunately, she could not find the energy within herself to venture into the commerce town to sell her wares, at least not tonight.

She walked for several long minutes until the fancy stone pathways that ran through the main part of town became uneven cobbled nightmares that could be considered downright dangerous to walk on. Luckily her surefootedness meant she did not have to suffer the embarrassment of stumbling around in the dark like some drunken old man.

Eventually the sounds of clinking bottles, crackling fires and raucous laughter, faded into the background and as she ventured deeper into the winding streets, an eerie stillness settled over the abandoned area. She ended up standing in an empty street in the industrial district; a few short minutes away from the slums.

Few people bothered to walk down this side of town and so even fewer knew of this particular location. Az stepped out of the shadows and shrugged off her silence like a coat as she made her way to a large building on the other side of the street.

Weighing heavy in her hand, she took out the gold plated watch she had stolen earlier that day. A fine prize, she thought.

Far nicer than her usual findings. Gently turning it over, she grazed her hand over the elegant engravings on the case back.

“Must've been expensive” she thought.

Sliding the watch back into her jacket pocket to examine later, she then removed another, less luxurious item from her “inventory of stolen things”.

A crystal necklace from a wealthy woman, most likely a plantation owner. Not as fancy or expensive as the watch but regardless, it would do.

Approaching the towering, stone, warehouse-like structure before her, she was mindful of the half constructed scaffolding that hung precariously around the building. After successfully not being crushed, Az slipped through the front door with only the smallest of glances back to the darkness outside.

Sighing, and squinting to adjust to the dim light, she approached the desk blocking her entry. It was a giant mahogany monstrosity that stretched through half of the lobby followed by a door on the far right that could only be unlocked by the admin. Unless the tariff was paid, then, she would be free to roam the guild. This was the same for all inhabitants and members, a law of sorts. Of course, members took care of their own and rarely was anyone kicked out for lack of pay. There was always someone to help out. Being dismissed from a guild required a much flashier disregard for its laws, anything really that put it or its members at risk or a violation of the moral code- not that many guilds had moral codes these days.

Wordlessly, she dropped the crystal necklace right on top of the admin's paperwork with a satisfying clunk. Her head shot up in surprise, signifying that she hadn't noticed Az's entry, which was a testament to her skills as the admin was given her position not only to collect pay but also to ward off intruders.

As their eyes met a flicker of irritation crossed her features. Sighing long and hard she weighed the necklace and tested it with various other procedures that Az couldn't identify. In her boredom, Az's eyes wandered the room, as they had done countless times before. The plain, sparsely decorated walls revealed none of the wealth displayed by the decor past the admin's door. Should someone unwanted come through the doors, they would be unable to guess at what lay inside.

Finally, once she was done, she tagged the piece and placed it in a box with the month and year carefully inscribed on the side. Once everything for this month was collected it would be sent to the head of the guild to fund whatever it was they needed funding. Weapons, food and servers; that kind of thing.

"You can go through" she added after writing a large number next to Az's name on one of her many forms.

The door unlocked itself and she slipped through without any further delay.

CHAPTER 2.

To say the guild hall resembled a tavern would be an understatement. Occupying two whole floors of the multi story warehouse, it was a massive mismatched drinking house. Crowded with three different serving areas and almost endless seating was the lower area; forming the main part of the tavern. Within this lower section stood a circular raised stage where bards of all different races and backgrounds performed for the people of the guild. Then, there was the upper level. Which was not actually a different floor, but a sort of balcony wrapping around the entire room. It contained mostly booths for those wanting privacy and then other seating towards the edge to overlook the downstairs. Each different corner, nook, bar or table had a different colour scheme and theme, creating a colourfully chaotic explosion where the mercenaries, thieves and whores could relax in the company of fellow guild mates.

On top of relaxing and socialising they had a tendency to get rip-roaring drunk whenever they could. As you can imagine, this resulted in a lot of brawls. Brawls that could get serious when trained soldiers and assassins were involved.

One such brawl greeted her upon entering, in the form of a chair smashing into the wall above her head.

The room froze.

Blinking back her surprise, Az slowly turned to stare at the piece of wood that had lodged itself mere inches away from her head. Wrapping her hand around it she wrenched it free from the wall and turned to face her guild mates. Those nearest to her stilled while others carried on bashing each other halfway to death, oblivious to the near disaster that would be striking the guildmaster's protegee. The few groups around her who had noticed the chair smash against the wall, stilled in anticipation of her reaction, some with makeshift weapons still clenched in their fists and others swaying in their stupors.

To their relief, Az found this situation rather hilarious and the tension dissipated when she let out a loud laugh that shocked everyone including herself.

Soon the rest of the people in the hall were laughing and joking and carrying on as normal, while some continued their playful fighting. For the most part however, the tavern settled down, clearly content with having thrashed each other for the time being. The bards resumed their playing after recovering their equipment from wherever it had been thrown, filling the room with cheerful song.

Az smiled to herself as she made her way to the bar closest to her, dodging overturned tables and stray glasses as she went. Upon reaching the counter she sat herself down on a raised stool and

offered a wide grin to the barman who set aside the mugs he was cleaning and made his way to her from behind the massive bar.

Intimidating was one of many words Az would use to describe the barman, this she supposed was due to his massive size and broad build. Clothed in his wait staff attire; black trousers and shirt with a white bow tie and apron, he looked particularly imposing. Another strange feature was his indiscernible age; despite his grey/black beard and shaved head, his face remained clear of any signs of age bar a few deep lines around his mouth from that relentless smile he always seemed to wear. On the other hand, he had clear tan skin, bright eyes and a constant energy that affected all those around him. Knowing his true age was something she suspected very few people could claim. A mystery. That's what he was.

“Zaz !” he exclaimed with a wide smile.

“Arthur.” she returned affectionately. His smile broadened as he prepared her a glass of her favourite brandy. Taking it from him she took a sip to wash down the lingering aftertaste of smoke from her time at the beach.

“Where've you been? Everybody's missed you down here.” he tried. Az snorted. This she doubted very much. Arthur was one of the few people she bothered to talk to around here. To be truthful, she doubted anyone had even realised she'd been absent. Being the patron of the tavern meant Arthur was friendly with pretty much everyone, but Az had been here one of the longest and she couldn't remember the place without him. One could say they were close. He regarded her, apprehensive, as she took another sip. Setting down the glass she met his gaze.

“ I haven't had a job in almost a month.” she admitted wearily. Staring intently at a sharp groove in the wooden counter, she thought back to the past few weeks; petty theft had gotten her by, but barely. And more than that, she was bored, she needed something good, something wild to get her adrenaline pumping. But first, she'd have to concentrate on paying her rent. Running a hand through her wind blown hair she once again raised the glass to her lips. Arthur sighed in sympathy.

“ I'm sure he'll give you something soon” he comforted.

“ Or he'll just raise my rent again and I'll be stuck picking pockets for the rest of my days.”

Taking a slow breath, she bit back the rest of her response, it would do no good to speak badly of him here. She lowered her voice.

“ I'm supposed to be his Qatal. You'd assume I'd at least be well paid, and yet, here I sit, drowning in debt.”

Arthur picked up another glass and began cleaning it with an old cloth. He looked thoughtful. A tall heavily armoured man approached the bar to interrupt their conversation by ordering something just as Arthur was about to speak, Az lowered her gaze back to her drink. After purchasing three pitchers of rum, he returned to a table in the far corner and proceeded to drink them by himself. Shaking her head in wonder she turned her gaze back to Arthur.

“You could always find a job yourself.” he suggested hopefully. “ You rely on him too much, you’re beyond capable.”

Az quickly dismissed the idea and told Arthur not to be ridiculous. In truth she was scared of the consequences. Stepping out of the Guildmaster’s command was not something people generally risked. Everything went through him. With an exasperated sigh Arthur told her to consider it seriously and that he would always be around to help her should she need it.

“I mean it zaz” he emphasized. The use of her nickname elicited a sigh and she reluctantly agreed to at least consider it. Satisfied, Arthur turned back to his work and was once again busy with customers.

Turning on her stool she surveyed the giant hall. Around the room sat some of the city’s most dangerous criminals and outlaws, as relaxed and harmless as they appeared now, she had no doubt that given the proper motivation they'd all be capable of monstrous things. Walking into this room was like stepping into a snake pit, and every individual here had their own brand of venom, but they were all equally deadly.

At first glance it was the typical tavern scene, card games, darts and billiards among other things... However, by looking a little closer, a few key details revealed the truth about the type of people frequenting this place.

The young boy playing cards with the older men in the corner ? Of course, he looked innocent and inexperienced; you’d be sure the older men would take advantage of this and trick him out of his money.

Az knew this young boy.

An experienced thief, skilled in sleight of hand... and counting cards. He would take these men for all they were worth. Very good at using his small size and innocent look to his advantage.

Az smiled in satisfaction and turned to look towards the far end of the room. Rather boldly, a short, barely dressed girl had challenged some of the soldats to a game of darts. All of them laughed and teased, assuming the girl was nothing but a common consort. Large wagers were made in their overconfidence as they began to showcase their (underwhelming) skills. What those men did not know, was that the girl earned her living as an assassin, not as a whore.

Flying from her hand, the dart hit the red target in the centre of the board with a dull thud followed by silence from the men who had teased her previously. This dart was followed by another that thudded into place next to the first one. The final dart sank into the board on the other side of the original one, forming a clustered but straight line in the very centre of the target. Wordlessly, the men took out their money and stared at her, bewildered as she came past to collect. Reluctant to part with their hard earned coin, they glared at her resentfully; some looked outright angry while others appeared embarrassed. Meanwhile the girl took her money and happily made her way over to her friends. Clapping her on the back and laughing, they handed her a drink.

Lazily, Az's eyes traveled around the room in search of yet another interesting group to observe. Her gaze had caught on a particularly rowdy bunch who she watched place bets on an arm wrestle, when suddenly, she found herself staring into a pair of dark brown eyes filled with hostility. Inwardly, she groaned; she was glaring at the very last person she wanted to interact with today, she didn't have the energy for this.

Breaking the eye contact she quickly finished her drink in a single gulp, slamming the glass down on the counter in her haste. With faked calm, she swung her legs off the stool and began a casual walk towards the staircase at the back of the hall. Swerving to avoid tables, chairs and wandering people, Az prayed that Zahra had been too far away to catch up, however she so desperately wanted to avoid facing her so she couldn't risk looking back to check.

Relief fluttered through her as the stairs came within reach, hurrying her last few steps she thrust out a hand towards the wooden banister. Just as she was about to place her foot on the first step a strong hand gripped her from behind, forcing her to stumble back a step and end up landing face to face with Zahra's ugly sneer.

"Listen-" she began, but Zahra cut her off before she could even begin to explain with a right hook that made her head spin. Immediately, her jaw exploded with pain and the impact of the punch set her ears ringing so loud she had to shake her head a few times to get rid of it. Fighting the urge to rub the side of her face, she turned back to face the other girl. Soon, a crowd would gather to see the Guildmaster's favourite fight. Az did not want that to happen, in fact, she would avoid it all costs. Contrary to the beliefs of most people in this guild, sometimes violence was not the answer.

"Okay I deserved that." she admitted. "I promise I'll get you what I owe as soon as a job becomes available."

Zahra didn't look like she was buying it.

“No more promises thief!” She took a step forward and Az took one back, closer to the stairs. Wracking her brain for any sort of distraction or bluff she could use to wrangle her way out of this situation, she came up disappointingly blank. Unfortunately, this was one person on whom she had exhausted every evasive tactic she knew. Which left facing the problem head on.

Zahra was a spark. A mage with the ability to conjure fire. Often, in more formal occasions, these types of mana manipulators were referred to as Firecharmers, but, the rest of the time they were more commonly known as sparks. Luckily for Az, her opponent wasn't particularly powerful; she had just enough mana to add a little extra sting to her blows.

In an attempt at intimidation, the girl cracked her knuckles, releasing a few scintillating embers, her fists would burn Az on impact. The need for a solution that didn't involve getting her face burned off increased dramatically when Zahra threw a punch that she avoided by swerving quickly to the side with unnatural speed. This put considerable distance between herself and the stairs. Instinctively, her hand strayed to the knife strapped at her belt before stopping inches away from the hilt.

She hesitated.

Despite disliking the girl, she didn't really want to injure her if it could be avoided. Or, at least she tried to convince herself she didn't. Truth be told she just wanted an easy solution to get out of this confrontation, no one would benefit if they both lost control right now. Especially since Zahra's entourage were now pressing in from all sides. How they had gotten there, she did not know.

Az did not want to risk the wrath of the guildmaster, she couldn't afford to get in trouble. Not now. Knowing she would if it came to a fight did not comfort her, it would not be pretty.

Her thoughts jumped to the watch she still had tucked away in her jacket pocket, it was possible she could offer it as compensation. At least until she could pay off her debt.

One look at the angry mercenary told her that more tricks and empty promises weren't going to cut it.

Right as Zahra took a step towards Az, a large figure came to stand in front of her.

Arthur placed a hand on the spark's shoulder and offered her a small smile that wasn't exactly comforting. The girl stopped moving. Like Az said, he could be pretty scary when he wanted to.

Leaning in close to her ear he whispered a few choice words, quiet enough that no one else could hear.

“Come now Zahra” he drew out both syllables of her name in a way that could be mistaken for affection, pronouncing it slow with threatening undertone.

“Wouldn’t want me to have to report you to the boss again now would you.” Tightening his grip on her shoulder, Arthur leaned away to meet her eyes with his own.

“You know the rules.” He was referring to the rule that kept what little order this place had. Inside the tavern, there was a strict no magic policy. After all, you couldn’t have drunken magi wandering around looking for fights or excuses to show off their magic.

With a dirty glare thrown in Az’s direction, Zahra relented, turning away to rejoin her group. Switching his attention to his friend, Arthur gave her a stern look followed by a pointed glance at the stairs before he returned to his bar. He didn’t want her involved in a fight either, he knew how unwise it would be for her to lose control right now. Catching his meaning easily, Az hurriedly climbed the endless steps to her floor near the top of the building, eager to flee the scene.

Irritatingly, the floorboards creaked all the way along the corridor as she made her way to her living quarters. Stopping at the very last door situated at the end of the hallway, she removed a small key from her pocket and once the door was unlocked she practically threw herself inside, grateful at last to be home.

Consisting of nothing more than a bathing room, small kitchenette, and bedroom, she knew her apartment wasn’t much, but it was one of the only places left where she could feel safe.

Darkness greeted her as she entered and she spent a few embarrassing moments stumbling in the dark in her attempt to light a lantern, when finally, light filled the room, leaving only a few dark shadows in the corners of the kitchen. Carefully, she made her way towards the bedroom, avoiding the discarded clothes and weapons littering the floor she then set the lantern down on her small dresser and moved to take off her coat. First she had to empty its pockets, she did this by chucking everything into a cluttered drawer that was already half filled with an assortment of random objects. Oddities she had collected from her jobs and other such ventures. After she hung her coat on the back of the bedroom door, she set about taking off the rest of her clothes. The knives strapped to her thighs were first to go, followed by her loose shirt and thick black trousers, leaving only her undergarments.

Quickly to avoid the chill, she slid under the toasty covers and snuggled as deep as she could get into a heap of blankets, resting her head on a thin pillow. Soon, the physical aches and pains from a day climbing roofs and wandering tourist crowds (with their jabby elbows), had melted away along with her worries and troubles. Az was unconscious within moments, sleep claiming her before she had time to cling to a dream.

CHAPTER 3.

Everything was black.

No amount of pupil dilation could force her eyes to see something that wasn't there.
And it wasn't there.

Weirdly, it didn't feel like it usually did when lights are extinguished. To Az, it felt like the brightness and joy had been sucked out of the world, leaving nothing but cold emptiness. More than that, it felt as if the earth had vanished, along with the stars and planets, moons and suns.

All of it.
Just gone.

Leaving her in the dark, empty space. Floating there, feeling or thinking nothing beyond the vast blackness surrounding her. Time confused itself and chronology lost its importance. Seconds stretched on for hours where hours could pass in a blink. At least, that's how it felt ?

Slowly, ever so slowly, the echo of a sound rattled through the endless emptiness, where she lay, straining to hear or see anything.

Pitter, patter, pitter, patter.

The sound faded in and out until it snapped into place at full volume, Az recognised it as the sound of rain.

Sometimes, she would hear a cacophony of raindrops crashing onto a nonexistent surface. And then, at other times, she would only hear one single drop, somehow echoing louder than the rest. The sound of rain soothed the part of her that had been disturbed at floating in the darkness, and she found herself being lulled into a sleepy state that washed over her gently, she couldn't seem to shake it off. Almost against her own will, her eyes began to close. Fighting hard, she tried to keep them open, straining again to hear or see anything. The rain grew louder as the urge to shut her eyes grew stronger...

Az did not realise she had closed her eyes until reality slammed into her full force as she suddenly plummeting from her suspended position in the darkness. Colliding with an annoyingly solid floor, the impact making her bones shudder, Az became aware of the downpour now coming from the grey sky. She breathed in deeply. The rain tasted heavy on her tongue.

A look around revealed nothing. Which was strange. There was definitely a landscape, but she just couldn't identify what the shapes were.

They meant nothing to her mind, almost as if they weren't important. Strangely, the only thing she could focus on was a tall tree shrouded in darkness and an inestimable amount of leaves. It had no beginning or end, its roots seeming to become the cobbled stones on which she stood and the branches reaching into the darkened sky. Infinite in its enormity.

Above her, the sky was heavy with darkness, it lingered just above the grey, as if it was waiting to fall and once again envelop her in nothingness. Light was minimal and the only thing she was able to see clearly was the few feet of ground in front of her and the looming tree. Not only this, but Az had also observed that the distant blurred landscape was collapsing in on itself. Slowly, but gradually, it was falling apart. This small pocket of light in the darkness was being consumed by the emptiness, like a black hole had come to devour any signs of life.

As soon as she took a step towards the tree, a wave of disorientation overcame her and the darkness pressed in on her senses. Feeling an inexplicable urgency to reach the presumed safety of the tree, Az stumbled to it in her delirious state. Seeing was difficult. To make her way towards it she had to rely on the blurriness that had become her vision.

Around her, the pocket world became agitated, the darkness coiled, ready and... Angry? At her?

She didn't know. Meanwhile, her urgency had increased tenfold and she became desperate to reach the tree for reasons beyond her own comprehension. No matter how fast she believed she was moving, the distance between herself and her destination remained frustratingly large. Advancing at a torturously slow pace, Az became panicked, regardless she pushed herself towards the tree, throwing all of her willpower and energy into the movement. Alarmingly, the air around her seemed to suck her backwards, trying to drag her away from the dying pocket of land to hold her prisoner once more.

All of a sudden, time jumped forwards. As if it had somehow glitched. Nevertheless, Az rushed to press her hands to the base of the tree.

As soon as her hands made contact, she saw as the air around her turned heavy with a metallic tang. Stumbling back from the massive oak she fell onto her back. The rain poured from the roiling skies, sliding down her face with an odd warmth. And then...

Flipped.

The whole broken sliver of land.

All of it just... Turned upside down.

Taking Az with it.

She landed on her knees in front of the tree, nausea overcame her as well dizziness from the sensation of flipping over. Around her, the landscape had become clear, endless hills and dulled grey sky. Still, she had to squint against the sudden change in lighting.

Despite this, she was able to see very clearly the red rain slamming into the ground as well as the deadened leaves from the tree falling with a disgustingly wet thud. They dropped from its skeletal structure as decomposed mush.

Panic rose in Az. Panic like she had never known. Nausea came over her again when she realised the rain was the wrong texture and the dead leaves too closely resembled a slumped body.

Blood kept falling from the sky and washing down her face, covering her hands and sparsely clad body. Everywhere, the blood fell relentlessly from the heavy skies.

Looming over her, the bony branches of the tree dripped the red rain and Az felt herself succumbing to the panic, fear and confusion. When she felt the deadened limbs of the tree caress her arms...

She cried out.

A long, jagged sound tore through her, loud enough to startle her awake in bed, where she lay wrapped in sweaty blankets, mouth still open in a scream.

CHAPTER 4.

Moonlight crept in through the long window on the right side of her room, it lay in broken shafts along her bed covers, interrupted only by the large metal squares adorning the glass. The night was quiet, tranquil.

Sat up in her bed, Az tried to calm her breathing and collect her scattered thoughts. Running a shaky hand through her hair, she carefully peeled away the sweaty covers and climbed out of bed to stand at the window. She brushed a hand over her face, wiping away tears she hadn't realised had been shed.

Blankly, she stared out at the abandoned streets below, feeling drained and dazed. Rain slid down the glass window, leaving trails of clear water to blur her view of the city outside. Not blood, she reminded herself. Normal rain this time.

Despite her view being slightly compromised she could still see the tendrils of smoke rising up from the dying fires along the beach.

After successfully calming herself and cooling down, Az clambered back into bed where fatigue swept over her. Evidently, she had not slept well.

Regardless, she couldn't get to sleep. For the rest of the night she laid in bed staring at the pale light on her sheets, still tangled in the fragments of her dream.

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Later.

Today was hot. Hot enough that sweat began to form in places sweat should not exist, it was almost too warm to function which meant the streets became an undesirable place to be. Everyone was wrapped up in their own bubbles of sweltering misery, very much not inclined to stop or be stopped; whether it be by spotting friendly faces or having news scrolls shoved at them, no one was in the mood today.

Az especially.

She had left the guild hall early in the morning to avoid any sort of interaction whatsoever - she was most definitely not feeling patient enough for an encounter with Zahra or the Guildmaster after her decidedly shitty evening and even shittier night's sleep. Stomping through the streets in her heat-induced rage, Az made her way to Westdell; her pockets heavy with stolen jewels.

Miraculously, the rain from last night's downpour had evaporated right off the streets; leaving the ground bone dry. A drop of sweat threatened at her temple. Only a few more minutes of walking and she would be there.

If only she didn't have to wear this many knives strapped under her clothes the heat would probably be a lot more bearable. And normally, she would wear her coat despite the warmth. But today was just too much.

Her coat was wrapped up and shoved into the bag that was slung over her shoulder, the hot leather searing her skin. By forsaking her cloak, for once her arms were left bare; meaning her scarred skin was on show. The smooth brown surface was interrupted by a number of thin pale lines, none of which were the same. Some were less obvious where others stood stark against her skin. They ranged from tiny and barely visible to long, rigid, vicious-looking things. In contrast to the pale scars, harsh black lines peeked above her tank in the middle of her back between the twin swords strapped there. They formed a cross on each vertebral lumb before fading into her hairline. Az didn't talk about her tattoos much.

As she rounded a corner further into the commerce quarter - twin braids swinging around her waist - her nerves began to build. It had been a while since she'd seen the particular vendor she was about to meet. For Az, it was important that their friendship remained strong, she supposed they were close, even if she did find the other girl a little scary. Or a lot scary.

However, it seemed to be working for her. After all, Vox did have the best buyers.

The building ahead was like many in Andar. Pretty pathetic. To passers by, it looked decrepit, swarmed with vines and entirely unremarkable.

However, to those who knew - to those who could see beyond the dilapidation - it was teeming with riches, because inside were treasures of all kinds, gathered over the years from across the continent, an invaluable trove.

Opening the door to the Pariah trading post was like stepping into a dream. A hallucinatory, drug-induced dream. It had always been like this; for every customer that walked through here the vision was different. Upon entering during her first visit, Az quickly realised that what she was seeing couldn't be real. Mostly, the hallucination was to ward off city guards who came to investigate or sometimes people who accidentally wandered in. But for those who saw what lay behind the magic - entrance was granted. It was a test of the mind she supposed.

To see through the trick required a certain sharpness, or intelligence. Vox didn't like to waste time with slow customers, especially those who she couldn't trust to keep her shop a secret.

The mute trader was a mirror-mage, an uncommon but coveted manifestation of power enabling the mage to trick the mind. A dangerous set of skills for anyone to possess. But Vox wielded them viciously, smartly, she could indeed be deadly.

White haired and silent, she stood behind a makeshift counter, the shop itself was overflowing with a myriad of rare jewels, maps and weapons and the inside was as swarmed with vines as the outside - if not more so. The only clear space was the flat surface Vox was currently leaning on. Her wide eyes followed Az as she stepped into the building.

The trader inclined her head in greeting and lifted her hands to form a few different signals.

“What business, young thief?” Az had learnt this silent language a long time ago...

“I’ve come to make a deal.” She replied with a grin.

The trader nodded before gesturing to the rooms at the back, where they would look over her loot. Az stepped further into the cave-like building to clasp hands with the wraith-like woman.

“Good to see you Vox.” Smiling she moved towards a private room behind the counter. The room was dark and intimate with long table stretching through the middle. It was covered with maps, papers and a variety of junk. Clearing a space on the table with a sweep of her arm, Az dug into her pockets and dumped the contents in front of the tradeswoman.

An arched eyebrow was the only inclination of her thoughts on the pile in front of her, Az couldn’t quite decide if she was impressed or annoyed. Maybe somewhere in between. Laying on the table in a dejected lump were the most impressive items she had managed to swipe over the last month and a few stranger pieces that she had some questions about. Namely, their place of origin and value. The most notable pieces on the table were relatively unremarkable compared to the pocket watch that lay in the centre, its foreign metal gleaming brighter than the rest.

Now that Az was looking at it in a different light she noticed the strange engravings that curled over the watch. Entirely foreign in their style.

Lifting her gaze to Vox, she watched her hands fly through several different symbols.

“Those carvings have meaning, they are in a different tongue and the metal is beyond anything I’ve seen” Her slim fingers traced the marks gently, as she tried to discern their message. Harsh

swirls that had no significance to Az whatsoever, yet, the trader seemed to recognise them. Perhaps she'd be able to translate.

Az asked her if she could.

"With time, maybe, but I can't promise you anything my friend." An apologetic smile curved her lips.

"But the rest" - she gestured to the table - *"Those I can get you a price for."*

Without waiting for a reply, she began to move around the room, haphazardly pulling a number of large tomes from random shelves and stacking them around her workspace. A clear dismissal. Once she had enough books gathered around her, she sat and began to flick through them, occasionally studying the watch before trying to find a similar scripture.

Vox waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the front of the shop. Az assumed that meant she was to leave and come back later, once everything had been priced up. But, she wanted to take a look around first. After all, it had been a while since the last time she'd been here.

Stepping back out into the shop front, Az took her time looking at everything on her way past. Her eyes caught on a number of impressive objects; wicked looking blades of foreign origin, skillfully crafted jewels and books containing invaluable knowledge. A well established trove, she thought. Vox reminded her of a dragon, viciously guarding her treasure. She snorted at the mental image. It was too accurate, she smiled as she walked on.

Further into the trade shop, the items began to get older and dustier and the lighting conditions considerably worsened making it difficult to read any of the titles on the books. However one in particular still managed to catch her eye.

It's cover was old and worn; the title illegible due to the extent of the damage to its golden lettering. This book stood facing forwards in a bookshelf, its position at odds with the ones around it. Somehow, it almost seemed as if it was calling to Az, her curiosity had been piqued and so she reached towards it to lift it off the shelf.

Making her way to a nearby chair, she flicked through the book until she landed on a page she recognised. It was the story of the Nahi. The Forgotten.

This tale, it was the birth of their planet.

The birth of her people.

In the beginning, there were six.

When our world was nothing but dust in the abyss, they came together to forge their home. The Nahi.

The first was Tair. Wherever he stepped, life bloomed at his feet. Grasses grew tall and trees took root, while the flowers emerged from the ground in every shade imaginable.

The second was Ignati, she was a passionate one, her emotions always burning at their brightest. With her, she brought the warmth of the suns, and she poured her lifeblood into the veins of the earth so that it should never grow cold.

Agawa, the third, was a gentle soul. It wept at the beauty of its companions creations and gave its tears to the land where they created endless oceans and calm pools. They kept the plants and soil alive and made sure the land never became too hot.

Fourth, was Elaer who brought with him a gentle breeze to set his companions creations in motion. The grasses stirred and leaves fluttered, waves rose in the oceans and the pools rippled. The burning intensity of the sun calmed until all was perfect.

The final two were rivals. They fought to decide who would bestow their gift on the earth but eventually, they chose to share.

Nuare would cover the planet in cool darkness until Lumere washed it away with brilliant light, and so it would be from then to the end.

Once all was complete, and their home had been built, the six were lonely. Their homeland was devoid of any life save from their own. They had made such a beautiful landscape, but had no one to share it with; and so, using their combined power, they created people to inhabit their land. The first of them became more powerful than the others. These were the Usul; the first gods. With never-ending life and gifts of their own that they contributed to the earth. Usul were different to the other inhabitants, their power drove them insane, they could not live within the constraints of society that had arisen. Could not obey the laws. And so, they rebelled.

War broke out between the Nahi and the Usul, the innocent and ordinary people were caught in-between the two raging forces. It brought destruction to the beautiful home that had been created.

Trees, flowers and crops died while Agawa's pools darkened with the blood of the dead. All across the world, fires were dying and ash drifted through Elaer's breeze. Above, in the sky, all was grey and flat, the absence of Nuare and Lumere making time impossible to keep.

The world was in ruin.

Or it would be soon enough.

In the end, the victims of the war, the innocents caught in-between the two raging forces; came together to banish the Usul and the Nahi. They were desperate. Magic and non magic folk alike lent their strength to create a force strong enough to pull the corruption away from their planet.

Our world was torn in two.

Ripped apart right through the middle. The Nahi and the Usul became trapped in the ghost of their world, forever stuck in their ruined version of the planet that had been destroyed by their own war. It was named Vallis.

The others were left with a healed land they called Vale, free from the force of the first gods and thriving like it had been before.

From the creation of Vale and Vallis was born the Void.

An unfathomable emptiness made of shadow and darkness that devoured anything that tried to cross it. The Void separated the two worlds. An indomitable force that no one could control.

To the misfortune of the people of Vale, creating the Void came with a price–

Az snapped the book shut when she heard the rhythmic thumping of Vox’s footsteps rounding the corner. Quickly, she tucked the book back into its slot on the dusty shelf and tried her hardest not to look suspicious or guilty, even though she’d done nothing wrong. Leaning casually against a glass case full of weaponry was the best she could do.

Vox was clearly not buying it but also didn’t seem to care enough to ask what she was doing. Instead, she informed Az that it would take her a day or two to find the right books to properly translate the script.

“In the meantime my friend, find yourself some work”

Az attempted to interject.

“Real work” Vox gave her a knowing look that made Az feel slightly sheepish.

“Come back the day after tomorrow, I will have answers for you then.” With that, she moved to turn back to her worktable in the other room.

“Wait!” Vox stopped and looked behind her.

Az moved her dominant hand to press lightly to her lips before moving it down in Vox's direction:

"Thank you" Followed by a quick wink.

The white haired woman gave a small smile and a nod before returning to her workspace in the back room.

Az left Pariah trading post with the intention of wandering around Andar in attempt of finding something to occupy her for the next few days to try and stave off her boredom.

Before she had left, Vox had given Az a small sum of money for the other items she had taken in with her. She decided that she would use it to treat herself for once. How exactly, she wasn't sure, so, she headed towards the centre of the commerce quarter, towards the market.

—

Unsurprisingly, the market was busy. The festival atmosphere clearly making everyone more eager to spend their money. To her annoyance, the crowd was difficult to wade through, meaning it was hard to see the stalls spreading through the streets.

Overhead, large swathes of fabric hung across the gaps between houses and makeshift shopfronts to block out the intensity of the sun; deep blues and dusty yellows with occasional flashes of red. Despite the attempt to hide the market from the sun, it still managed to peek through the gaps and tears in the material.

Az peered through the hordes of onlookers to get a look at what the stalls held, she glimpsed shining crystals meant for healing and caged animals staring at the crowds through metal bars. Rare and expensive jewels and the finest pashminas and tunics anyone could buy. Further down the market, vendors sold more heavy duty gear such as baldrics for the mercenaries or assassins and reinforced leather coats such as the one Az wore. She had in fact purchased it from around here a long long time ago.

Although Az did love to walk down to the darker parts of the market to look at the weapons and gear, her favourite section to walk through was the forever-busy food sector.

Why?

Simple. The smell.

Heavenly wafts of fresh pastry and smoking meat mixed with the outlandish aroma of foreign spices.

Arranged in tall mountains of warm colour, they stood out among the rest of the foods around here. Because the market was so close to Andar's port, vendors were able to immediately collect their stock directly from the ships. Meaning it was the freshest you could get.

The spices were Az's favourite, she loved the smell and taste and the bright colours, however, she also had a sweet tooth. Naturally, her absolute favourite things to eat were small sugar-spice cubes from the isles of Exos. Spotting the merchant she usually bought them from, she pushed her way through the crowd to make her way to his counter.

"Az!" He exclaimed happily.

"Is good to see you here" His accent was thick with an Exon twang, personally, she though it made him sound friendlier.

"Maxim! Long time no see." She smiled up at him kindly.

"The usual huh?" He began scooping a few different flavoured cubes into a paper bag for her until it was three quarters full. When he was done he handed it to her over the small counter while she placed a few coins on its surface before greedily grabbing at the bag and thanking him. Turning away she clutched at her bag of treats and headed towards the port to sit near the water.

While she walked towards the docks she shoved one of the cubes into her mouth and nearly cried at the divine taste of it. Gods it had been a while since she'd eaten one of these. Humming happily she sat on the edge of a nearby wooden pier, her legs swung down over the edge, barely skimming the blue water's surface. Her mouth tingled with the sugary spice and her skin warmed under the bright sun. All around her cheerful chatter filled the air as yesterday's partying crowd warmed up for the ceremonies this evening.

CHAPTER 5.

He woke with a gasp that filled his lungs with freezing cold air. Gulping it down in great breaths he tried to calm himself and take in his surroundings.

Hard stone caged him into a cell where the only light source came from a tiny crack in the ceiling on the other side of the hallway. Water trickled down the far wall, occasionally dripping to the floor in quiet splashes.

Everything was silent save for his loud, erratic breathing.

Beneath him, the floor was covered in a thin layer of straw; a pitiful attempt at protecting him from the chilled rock.

Picking himself up, he walked over to the wall on shaky legs. Assessing his condition, he realised he wasn't quite with it yet, still not completely out of the dream. Part of him was still there. He didn't have much time until they put him under again.

What could he do? Wracking his brains he tried not to panic, not to let it all in.

Breathe.

In and out. It's easy.

But he could feel it already, creeping in around the edges. The roughness of the stone started to feel sharp enough to cut him and the cold was beginning to squeeze at his insides. He shivered. Hard.

Think! Think!

The walls began to blur and the smallest noises around him amplified to unbearable levels.

Slipping... Slipping...

He was falling again. Being dragged back down into unconsciousness.

What could he do, how could he let anyone know where he was when he didn't even know himself? Laying back down on the floor, he tried to think of a way. Maybe his family could reach him, but he wasn't sure how he could send them a message. While he may have power, it was a pretty useless when it came to escaping prisons. Yes. Useless. That's what it was. Apparently though, it wasn't useless to the people holding him here.

There was one thing he could try.

One thing that could save him from himself. But it was a long shot. A really, really long shot. Based on nothing but myths and stories passed down through the generations. He didn't even know how to do it really. If it worked, it would stay with him for the rest of his life.

Footsteps echoed around the cell, loud enough to him that he clutched his ears in pain. His time was almost up.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his mind to Vallis. And it flooded in.
In and in and in.

Glittering and broken it invaded his head until he was dizzy with it. Vallis looked ghostly white; only a few washed out colours that clung to their shapes. As if the colour itself had been scratched out. It was superimposed over the darkness of the cell, the harsh contrast made his head spin. Reality and dream collided in his mind and he let it settle until both were sharp and clear.

Shaking with the force of it, he tried to take in as much as possible. Which was a change from his usual aversion to anything related to Vallis, his preferred method was usually to block it out by ignoring it. However, for this, he would need to be completely lost in his power. Vulnerable.

Already, he was beginning to slip away from reality and into a dangerous state where he would be defenseless. A place where he could completely access his power in its raw, unfiltered form. Risky? Definitely.

Worth it?

Maybe...

Once he was fully enveloped in the maelstrom of mana, he began to draw it all back. Pulling it in towards himself in great heaves and tugs, coiling it tighter and tighter inside his mind until he could barely hold it. It was difficult to restrain as it became heavier and hungrier; it wanted to devour everything around it.

All he wanted to do was let it consume him. To relax into its comforting warmth.

But he held strong. As if he were holding a massive breath of air in his lungs, just waiting to release it.

Filling him, it travelled all through his body and mind. Searching.

From the wide expanse of his chest to the very tips of his fingers, it snaked along him until he was shaking with its energy.

His vision clouded so that he was blind to the outside world, however, his mind was opened to Vallis and it exploded before him in a flash of brilliant colours and lights. Like billions of galaxies stretching out before him.

He felt the pull then, as he always did. To lose himself its enormity. Or to walk through it for all eternity, until he would fade to dust among the stars.

But he resisted. Because this could work. This had to work.

Thoughts of his home and his people kept him grounded – helped him to pull his focus from the temptation of the spirit realm.

The energy within him shuddered. Once. Twice.

And *release*.

-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

He fell backwards, his spine connecting with the rough stone floor, but he couldn't feel a thing. It was as though he was floating.

For the first time in his life, he was filled with a calming darkness.

Inside, he was quiet.

Around him, everything slowed and froze until all he could hear was the sound of his own breathing, gentle and barely audible as it was. No longer was he plagued by every little sound and sight, his senses were dulled with a heavy blanket of blackness. Numb.

Breathing slowly, he lay still; suspended in liquid shadow.

It was then that he felt her.

In flashes he glimpsed her razor sharp smile, her honey-like laugh, the smell of rain, spice and salt from the sea. All around him it echoed in the infinite void of her soul. In the darkness that was Her.

Slowly he felt himself splinter, pieces drifted in the shadows, gently wading through the inkyness and embedding themselves. Anchored.

He was safe. He was home.

And then, he slammed back to reality, shouting filled his ears and blood dripped from his nose as he tried to comprehend what he had just done.

CHAPTER 6.

One second, she was furiously trying to stop her eyes from watering as a result of an overestimation of her capacity for spicy food, especially after such a long period without her favourite snack, (It may have been a bad move to shove several in her mouth at once) the next, she was in the water.

The moment her body breached the surface, the cold shocked her awake.

Inside she was electrified, that quiet, dull space was shot through with lightning. Noises muffled by the water loudened to a low thrum that pulsed inside her and cold, silky water stroked at her skin. Sunlight broke through the ocean in shafts of illuminated turquoise which gave way to deeper blues.

Floating in limbo, she watched as silver-scaled fish wove their way past her, the light glinting off of them with every twitch and turn.

Above, laughter and lights from the market trickled through the water to dance around her until she was gloriously full of life and energy.

For once.

Alive.

All around, sounds and colours tangled in her hair.

Snippets danced past.

The feeling of sun on bare skin.

A gentle caress down her arm.

Eyes the colour of the greenest grass, like endless hills rolling out before her.

She felt their laughter like the echoes of broken glass. Bouncing around in her eardrums. The sounds playing together in a melody that felt familiar and new all at once.

She felt the softness of his hair between her fingers, her hands catching on tiny tangles.

Smelt smoke and honey on an imaginary breeze.

...

Breathe.

...

She was pulled up.

“Spirits save you girl, can’t you swim !” Maxim exclaimed while dragging a soggy Az up from portside.

Coughing and spluttering, Az found she could not yet find the words to thank him after her weird episode in the water so she simply gave Maxim a grateful pat on the back and continued to spit out seawater.

Luckily, she had somehow avoided dragging her bag of sweets with her into the ocean.

Snatching it up along with her bag, she hurriedly moved away from the treacherous pier she had been sitting on and retreated to a corner untouched by the harsh light of the sun; wet braids dripping down her back.

What in the ancients’ names had happened to her down there ?

Putting a hand to her chest, she felt her heartbeat still thudding away in a frenzy.

She must have hit her head, although it was unlike her to be so clumsy. Az decided to shake it off and be thankful that she was no longer melting quite so horribly from the heat, but she swore she could still hear the broken laughter playing on the breeze...

-

Later

For the next few days, Az could not shake the feeling she had experienced in the water. Maybe for the first time in many, many years, she had felt something other than empty. It was something she’d want to feel again. Needed to feel again.

In fact, she was so focused on figuring out what had happened to her that Vox had to sign the same thing several times for Az to realise the severity of the situation.

“ They came looking for this?” A slightly annoyed Vox nodded her confirmation to what she had been trying to explain for the past ten minutes.

“But, why in the world would they want this ?” The watch sat innocently in her palm.

Turning it over in her hand, she tried for the thousandth time to find a hidden detail that would explain its mystery. Unsuccessfully of course.

Considering her options, she weighed how badly she needed to find out what this was and why a suspicious group of people came looking for it. Really, it was of no importance to her whatsoever, she had only wanted to make a little extra money. But now, she was curious.

“What happened?”

Vox launched into a silent but agitated retelling of their visit yesterday.

According to the other woman, a small group of darkly clothed individuals came to Pariah, stormed through the door and proceeded to march into the shop rifling through merchandise and carelessly handling valuables as they went. Something that by the furious look in her eye, Vox did not take kindly to.

They were dressed in what the trader had likened to religious or ceremonial garb and spoke only in barked orders in a tongue unrecognised by the white haired woman. Their clothing was described as lengthy hooded robes with a green and black colouring, the only discernible feature being a small tattoo of two circles on the inner wrist of one of Vox’s harassers. After failing to find what they were looking for themselves, they came to Vox, attempting to grab her and question her rather unkindly. Another thing that she did not take kindly to Az assumed by the near violent way she was now signing.

Vox of course gave them no information, she offered Az only one explanation for how she got them to leave the trading post.

“Silence is useful when one knows how to use it.” Followed by a sly smile.

What a confusing woman.

The two women were sat in the back room once again, each cradling a glass of cooling mint and lemon water to try and lessen the effects of the seasonal heat. Between them, in the middle of the table, lay the watch. They stared in silence.

“I couldn’t open it” Admitted the mute. *“There’s some sort of mana based seal. Simple but effective.”* She shrugged.

“Did you learn anything from the markings?” Az sat up straighter, her eyes tracing the patterns.

“An old language not of this continent, I could try to translate it but I’d need more time.”

“Take all the time you need my friend.” Az patted her on the back gratefully.

“I’ll come back in a week ?”

Vox nodded her agreement and moved to clear the empty glasses from the table. The watch lay there, its cool metal catching the light, making the carvings stand out, as if to highlight their importance. Az knew she would have to get them translated soon. Her curiosity demanded she do so.

Lifting herself out of the chair, she gathered her things and moved to go. Stopping only to sign a brief *“see you soon”* to her friend.

Outside, the heat swallowed her and she was once again miserably warm. The weapons she had tucked away in various places on her body seemed to add to the effect, and not for the first time she debated simply throwing them in a river if it meant she could be slightly cooler. Of course this was impossible as she loved her knives too much to discard them so carelessly. Plus, she might need them for later.

CHAPTER 7.

The air had cooled, the night was still. And so was she.

Her hair was, for once, unbound and hung loosely down her back to her waist. Normally, she would be concerned that it would hinder her during an outing like this one, but today she would leave it. Tiny as the breeze was, it still managed to pick up little wisps of hair; playfully throwing them around.

As of now, she was armed with a single dagger, despite the possible risk ahead of her tonight she had chosen to leave behind the bulk of her weapons. They were mostly for show anyway.

Az was sat on a rooftop (a common perch for her) that overlooked the courtyard of the acolyte village on the outskirts of the city. It had taken her a few hours to find it, but when Vox had mentioned the interlocking circle tattoo it had pricked at her subconscious until she'd remembered the dancers she had seen in the streets over the past few days - some of them had possessed similar markings. Surprisingly, only a few of her guildmates knew of the existence of this particular location. Likely it was their dealings with the dancers that had led them to know of this place.

She shuddered to think of it.

When she had first been told how to get here she had thought it unnecessary but the curiosity had built in her slowly over the day and she found she could not resist at least having a look inside. The reasoning behind this was that she owed it to her friend to figure out why they had stormed into her shop in such a way and pushed past her magical trickery with such ease. Yes. She was definitely doing this for Vox's sake.

Or at least this was what she told herself.

Within the compound, orange coloured lights glowed dully from several small windows, alerting Az to who was awake and who had already called it a night. They would be helpful in deciding which windows to avoid and which ones she could climb through. She surveyed the lay-out of the surrounding buildings and decided that her best shot at gathering any information whatsoever would be to venture towards the circular main hall in the centre of the cluster of house-like structures. It was connected to other buildings through corridors that joined both the main hall and living quarters or working areas. Cracks ran through the walls of each building, revealing age and a serious lack of care, Az noticed this as her eyes roamed the compound, looking for an in.

Spotting a slightly open window, Az took her opportunity without hesitation and leapt silently from her perch before creeping towards the small opening. The window was open but still

latched to keep it from blowing in the wind that had risen earlier in the day. Likely, someone had forgotten to close this one, fortunately for Az.

Easing it open as far as it would go, she managed to squeeze her thin frame through the gap and tumble not-so-graciously into the room beyond. Darkness greeted her.

Eyes adjusting easily, Az was able to move confidently through the winding corridors, her fingers scraping the cold stone walls as she went.

Room after room passed her by, some with doors locked and some without. With some brief glances around to check if it was clear, Az opened one of the doors and moved inside. It was dark, as expected. Not many acolytes seemed to be wandering around at night, which was unsurprising considering the harsh rules many of them lived by. She couldn't understand it herself, no drinking, no eating whatever you wanted and no romantic partners. No matter how dedicated one was to the Usul, as this group was, Az could not picture herself living a life so dull. Not that she would ever worship the first gods or any other gods for that matter. Staring around the room, Az could tell that this compound was meant devotees of the Usul. The walls were covered with paintings depicting the endless battles between Nahi and their creations. Beyond those, blueprints lay scattered on the tables. After a few calculated turns and some nosing around she found herself crouching in the shadows of what appeared to be a main hall, just as she'd hoped. Earlier she had seen the faint glow from the candles through one of the rooms' many windows. Common sense told her this was the most likely place to glean information without getting caught. She had poked her head round a few corners and tried a few doors on her way down but nothing seemed as promising as the lit room ahead of her. Shuffling a bit she tucked herself into an alcove in the wall, trying to keep as quiet as possible, for in the centre of the room a group of robed acolytes sat around a large stone table. Az settled in her position and tuned in to their hushed conversation.

“We have been instructed to retrieve the device as soon as possible. I've been told that should it be opened, our plans will be put at serious risk.”

A response came from across the table.

“What kind of risk, we need to know the severity of the situation before we take action!”

Murmurs of agreement shuddered through the hall.

The robed figure at the head of the table hesitated.

“Whisperings among the higher ups claim that if the device is opened-” He lowered his voice. “It could be possible for the beholder to be led to the Weapon”

Silence in the hall.

“That shouldn’t be possible.” Someone uttered quietly.

“Only a few people know that location” Said another.

“Even fewer actually know what it is” Everyone was silent once again.

“I hope you all understand how serious this is and how fast we have to act to rectify the situation before we start seeing the consequences of this slip up. Interference in the work of the Church of the Lost will be detrimental to our end goal.” Said what Az now supposed was the leader of the group.

“Where did the device even come from?”

“How did it get out?”

“What is it?”

A series of questions erupted around the table, none of which seemed to be answered. Az began to wonder if she had encountered something much bigger than she had intended to and whether she should turn around now and leave before it was too late. Her moment of madness passed and she, quite predictably, chose to stay. Ever the eavesdropper. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back, she reminded herself. Az decided she could not leave without hearing the rest of this conversation. Besides, the Church of the Lost sounded too ominous to ignore.

A final question was voiced from a meek looking man on the other end of the table.

“How is it opened?”

Heavy silence. Candles flickered across the table as the wind trickled in.

“Blood” Whispered the leader. He spoke as if it pained him, as if he knew he shouldn’t be whispering of such things.

“It needs the blood of a certain magic user. To match that of its maker.”

Az went still.

With just those few words, she understood. Shadow Steel.

She had to get the hells out of here.

If what they were saying was true, she had stumbled upon a much bigger situation than she could have imagined. She wasn't safe here. Az unfolded her limbs and moved backwards towards the safety provided by the shadows wincing as her boots scuffed against the rough stone. She hoped they hadn’t heard. Silently, she crept back through the corridors to find the window she had crawled through, her heart pounded for fear of being found. For a second, she worried she

wouldn't be able to find it, a glance back towards the corridor revealed that the candles in the main hall were no longer lit. No warm glow emanated from the room and Az could no longer hear the whispering acolytes. She was suddenly in a lot more danger than she had realised. Having found the window, she pulled herself through, skin scraping on the rough stone.

Grass crunched underfoot as she crept towards the gates of the compound, her heart had not ceased its thudding and she was afraid that this sound alone would cause her to get caught. Once she returned she would head straight to Vox, tell her to pack up her things and leave, both of them were in trouble now, all thanks to the darned watch. Although, she supposed she couldn't call it that anymore. She should have known.

Az was closing in on the gate, a few steps before she would be able to squeeze through the small gaps in the bars. For a split second, she turned to look back at the compound. A row of eyes stared back as the hooded figures stood several hundred yards away, making no attempt to stop her. They just stared. Az felt sick. In a panicked and ungraceful moment she shoved her body through the bars and stumbled off into the night.

Still shaking by the time she got home Az tried to calm down by making herself a lemon and spice tea. Another Exon specialty, it seems she had a taste for their food. Probably a result of her travels there as a youngling, although she only remembered it vaguely. Sitting by the window with cold tea clenched in her hands Az ran through her options. Telling someone what she knew was out of the question, she didn't want the question of **how** she knew, to come up. Luckily, she doubted Vox would question her. Tomorrow she would head down there and tell the trader to give up her research and simply hand the watch back over. It seemed like the most reasonable course of action to follow. They would either throw the damned contraption into the sea. She sighed. There wasn't a whole lot of options really. Vox might be able to help. She could always confide in Arthur...

No. Best to involve as few people as possible.

If only she hadn't swiped the watch. Az realised then, that she didn't remember taking it.

Pariah Trading Outpost. 07:19 am the next day...

Silence.

Az had no words for the equally shocked blonde woman across from her.

"Get rid of it?" "You're sure?" Her signs were gentle. Warily, Vox looked over at her, the table an ocean between them. *"You don't want to open it?"*

"I'm sure." Az left no room for argument in her tone. Looking the other woman in the eye, she silently pleaded with her to not ask any more questions.

Both women stared at the object in the centre of the table between them. Neither wanting to be the first to say anything.

“As you wish my friend”

Before Az could attempt to formulate a reply, a jagged sliver of metal sank into the wall next to Vox’s head. Immediately, the two were on their feet, weapons in hand. Portals had opened up inside Vox’s shop and armed fighters emerged one by one. An impossibility unless-

Void magic.

Az’s blood ran cold.

Someone had been up to something they shouldn't be. Void magic had been banned for centuries, users with access to the skill killed for it. She had most definitely stumbled into something big. Those who had emerged from the portal were dressed in black leather protective gear, similar to what Az herself wore. Hoods concealed their faces and daggers and swords shone in their hands as well as several other weapons strapped to them. A tattoo of interlocking circles stood starkly on each wrist. Either her encounter with the acolytes last night or Vox’s refusal to cooperate had warranted a visit. Az pulled her swords from their sheaths across her back and smiled. This was going to be messy.

Seven intruders advanced on Az and Vox, the latter who shook her head in an almost pitying gesture before allowing her eyes to glaze over with their tell-tale mirror mage glimmer, she palmed two daggers from her belt and took a step towards the men who had broken into to her shop. For the second time this week.

“There it is” One shouted. His finger extended in the direction of the watch.

“We’re only after the device ladies, no need for this to get violent.” A smugness laced his tone. He looked pointedly towards Az’s twin blades.

Az twirled her weapons and adjusted her stance in reply. Giving them the watch was not an option. If these guys had been meddling with Void magic, they must be up to something seriously bad. None of this felt right.

The intruders pounced, both women held their ground. Az swung a sword upwards to meet the blade of her first attacker with her other moving to parry with a man to her left. She struck hard and fast, spinning under each attempted blow while her partner on the other side of the room

had her opponents struggling to defend themselves against several copies of herself. Her muscles thrummed as a blow connected, without relenting, Az pushed on to disarm the man in front of her, her blood singing with adrenaline. Their blades glinted in the yellow light of the shop, the two women pushed the intruders further back forcing them to retreat to darker corners of the cave-like trading post. Az swept her leg low enough to catch one of the men in front of her, causing him to crash to his knees. A kick in the stomach made him curl forwards, but she stopped him before he could crumble to the ground. She held her blade to his throat, watching his eyes widen in fear. In her hesitation, another attacker had managed to come up behind her. The hair on the back of her neck rose in a shiver. Az barely had time to turn around before the girl's weapon began to lower.

A white blade whistled past and knocked the offending sword away from Az and straight to the floor. Vox. Thank the gods for that woman.

Reacting quickly, Az shoved the hilt of her sword into the side of her opponents head, causing him to collapse unconsciously to the floor in a heap. A look around the room revealed an ugly scene of twitching bodies and bloody trails. Vox stood casually with blood dripping from her dagger, her eyes surveying the damage to her shop in annoyance. Switching her attention to the girl who almost dismembered her, Az saw that she had recovered her weapon and was once again raising it in her direction. With a roll of her eyes, Az heabuted her so hard she lost consciousness where she was standing.

In the silence that followed they looked at each other and then surveyed their surroundings. The shop was a mess, Vox had a smear of blood on her pale cheek and there was a large pile of bodies in need of moving. They started by tying up the unconscious in the dark store room towards the back of the store. They would deal with her later. Maybe she would be useful in untangling this mess.

Thirty minutes later the pair had chucked all of the unconscious and dead into a nearby waste dump and returned to the shop to clear up any debris or unwanted stains. While cleaning up a broken vase, an awkward silence fell between the two and Az hesitated before opening her mouth to speak.

“I think I need to take the item out of the city, far away from here at least.” Another hesitation. “I want to know why they want it so much, and who *they* are.”

Vox met her gaze steadily, before replying.

“ Whoever they are, they’re playing a dangerous game using magic like that out in the open, it’s been over a decade since Void magic was banned.” Az knew this.

“I can’t really explain it, but, I just need to know.”