

The Runaway Witch

1330 IC

Yelena, the Witch of Sebitti, took a deep breath and smoothed down her plain white dress before stepping out onto the plateau where her mentor kept his research garden. There was a lot riding on the next few hours, and she was terrified that if she made a mistake, she wouldn't get another chance for years. Pushing open the doors, she strode out into the sunlight, plastering a nervous smile on her face.

"Yelena," Marius said without turning around. The Witch of Nergal's face was pinched with annoyance, his grey hair slicked back and his eyes sunken. Although Yelena was larger than him in every way - several inches taller, plump and round compared to his nearly skeletal frame - she always felt small around him. She hunched down, fidgeting with her blonde ponytail. He didn't like it when she did that. He thought that it betrayed distraction, and as his student she was meant to be focused on him at all times. "I have been reviewing your latest formulas. They're disappointing." He turned back to the mossy ground in front of him, in which Yelena could just see the squirming form of a woman's body. The moss had grown over her completely, and Marius was taking the time to water it, drawing frantic but minimal motion as the water soaked over her face and briefly choked her. The moss was meant to fight parasites, but needed to be grown on humans to avoid withering them away when used.

"They're not quite ready," Yelena said quickly, sinking to one knee in front of him and bowing her head. "I was going to show them to you next week, after I have a chance to..."

"They're a waste of time. A dead-end." Marius turned, and Yelena yelped as he grabbed her by her hair and began to walk, effortlessly dragging her across the ground as his grip kept her from rising. Yelena tried not to struggle, fists curling at her sides. "You are *smarter than this*. You should have abandoned that line of research a month ago and *tried something else*."

"Yes, Master. I'm sorry, Master. I can start work on a new project immediately," Yelena said, trying not to whimper.

"There's no need to rush into things," Marius said, stopping in front of a large tree covered in dark green vines. "Take some time. Reflect on what would be appropriate." He released Yelena's hair and snapped his fingers, and she felt invisible hands lifting her into the air, carefully stripping away her dress and leaving her hanging naked before him.

“Master, please!” Marius had taught her many spells, but he had never taught her one that would defend her against him. The heart of Sebitti was in the depths of Marius’s fortress, and Yelena’s magic was unable to affect his.

“I don’t enjoy doing this, Yelena. But you need to learn patience.” Marius gestured, and Yelena floated towards the tree. Vines began to reach out, and she felt her skin prickle as tiny barbs dug into her skin, leaving lines of burning and itching as they pressed her arms tightly against her body and began working their way down her legs. Yelena whimpered as the sensation spread over her body, feeling like a bad sunburn. “And as it happens, I am researching a new source of arcana.”

The vines continued to stretch around Yelena, and she gasped as the vines began to wrap up her face. A bulb grew into her mouth, pressing her protests into a nearly silent moan as another vine tightened around her throat. Within moments, she was completely covered; only her pale grey eyes staring out from within her cocoon, and her large breasts hanging over the vines. Marius stepped forward, running his fingers over her nipples. Yelena groaned into her gag, eyes pleading. “A few days of this should give you time to think,” he said, as more vines circled the base of her breasts. They began to balloon outwards, turning purple, as a criss-cross of tiny stems began to spread over them. Finally, a pair of long flowers lowered from the tree, pressing themselves over her breasts. Tiny vines began to stroke her nipples, and she moaned almost inaudibly as they began to stimulate her. “The tree will extract arcana from you, to empower its fruits. Thank you for volunteering.” He turned, and the last thing that Yelena saw before the final vines wrapped around her eyes was him completely ignoring her as he walked away.

She grunted inside her prison. Every inch of her body was burning, the vines were stimulating her to arousal, and she could barely breathe, nostrils flaring for every tortured breath. The second stage of her plan was going perfectly.

It had been nine years since Yelena had first become Marius’s apprentice. She’d only been nineteen years old when she first met him, awed by his effortless power and the ease with which he had healed her hometown. He had seen potential in her, and had swept her off her feet and whisked her to a life of luxury and power. And at first, he had been gracious, complimentary. He encouraged her studies, celebrated her successes. The change had been gradual. The Witch of Nergal fed off of suffering, a talent that Marius had chosen both so that he could be at his strongest when at the center of the plagues he fought to cure, and as an act of revenge against a god that he believed had forsaken him and his people. Yelena didn’t know if the divine soul within him had changed him, or if he had simply lost the ability to hide his darker edges, but even when she first met him he balanced his healing with terrible punishments against anyone who failed or disappointed him, designed to push his victims to the edge, stopping just short of breaking them for good. He’d unleashed the first of these against her after nine months, when she had tried to research an alchemical formula he had already deemed

worthless. That time, he had simply used the incomplete formula on her, leaving her writhing on the ground as her own muscles sparked lightning against her for hours. Each time that she failed, he found a new torment to inflict on her, a new excuse to hurt her. And when his punishments proved to be too much, he was always at her bedside when she resurrected, stroking her hair and promising her that he only did this to make her her best self.

Well, she was done with that. Marius had forty years of experience over her, but he couldn't *feel* the mountain that he had tricked her into binding herself to. The last time that Marius had killed her, she'd been ready. She had extracted a sliver of Sebitti from the geode in the depths below his fortress, hiding it within her own heart. For months now, she had been sending tiny flickers of energy through the earth, preparing another location to receive that sliver. Now all that she had to do was reach it, and the key to that was for her to be somewhere that Marius wouldn't look for her for a couple of days. Deliberately pursuing useless research when she knew he was in the process of developing this plant had done the trick. All that she needed now was...

"Oh, Princess. Again?"

Yelena smirked as she heard the familiar voice of Marius's assistant, Kelyth. Like Yelena, Kelyth was a mage who had come to him as an apprentice, but she lacked the balance of invocation and evocation needed to become a witch, and she resented anyone who gained her master's attention. Marius encouraged her rivalry with Yelena, believing that the harms they inflicted on each other made them both stronger - and more dependent on him as a mentor.

"Don't mind me," Kelyth said now. Yelena could hear the rustle of a cloth sack. "Marius sent me to feed the plants. Just keep doing what you're doing." She chuckled cruelly.

Yelena made a show of struggling, waited to make sure that Kelyth wasn't speaking to anyone, and then activated the spell that she had spent three months perfecting, and had woven around the other mage while she was sleeping a few nights ago.

There was a flare of light. When it cleared, Yelena was standing free in front of the tree, wearing a loose, flowing blue dress that was much too tight. She sagged with relief, rubbing her reddened skin to brush away the residual itching sensation, and snapped her fingers to adjust the dress to her size, then looked over at the garbled, heavily muffled screams of pain and rage coming from the cocoon beside her. "Just keep doing what you're doing, Kelyth," she cooed, leaning in to make sure that the other woman could hear her through the vines covering her ears. "Not that you have a choice. I'm sure you looked up everything that this plant will do to you. Do you need me to do anything?"

The faint screams grew both angrier and more frightened, the entire cocoon quivering as Kelyth tried to break free. Her breasts, bulging and red, swayed in the breeze as Yelena

looked her over. Kelyth was almost her height, but was quite a bit thinner, something Kelyth considered worth snidely superior comments. “Really?” Yelena said with mock surprise. “You know that spell makes your skin much more sensitive, and I know how much you crow about your bony figure. But if you insist...”

Kelyth’s screams reached a fever pitch as Yelena placed a hand on her breast, and began to cast her spell. The cocoon bulged and shifted as her body added about fifty pounds to match Yelena’s frame, and her breasts pressed against the vines strapping them down, flesh bulging around their verdant prison. The vines were much too tight for Kelyth to do more than wriggle helplessly, and even now her screams couldn’t be heard more than a foot away. “You know, that might have been a good call.” Yelena said thoughtfully. “With that much more sensitivity, those flowers massaging your breasts might be enough to make you climax. And we can’t have Marius realize that something is wrong, so...”

She reached down, fingers groping into the vines around Kelyth’s crotch, and cast a final spell. The woman bucked as the sensations assaulted her lower half became even more powerful, twisting and moaning. “Just a minor paralytic,” Yelena assured her. “No matter how much sensation you receive, you won’t be in danger of shaming yourself while climaxing. Now remember! Marius is expecting a lot of arcana out of me, so please struggle. He should let you out in a few days, as long as he hasn’t decided to let the plant finish devouring me. If so... well, I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

She laughed, turning away as her hated rival’s struggles continued fruitlessly behind her. The spells that she had cast didn’t just swap her body with Kelyth’s, they swapped their magical auras. As far as Marius could tell, Yelena was still struggling and suffering immensely, and Kelyth was walking away to her duties. Despite what she’d said, she was fairly sure that he would figure out the switch long before the vines drained her dry, but he was not tolerant of failure. It was even odds whether he would bother to let her go. As she exited the garden, Yelena quickly covered herself in a glamor; her skin darkened three shades, her hair turned black, and her body grew skinny as she imitated Kelyth’s appearance. She strode down the halls, giving sharp nods to the servants that she passed but refusing to otherwise acknowledge their existence, and giving a wide berth to Marius’s labs. Her escape route was through the lower levels, and she needed one more patsy for the trip.

“You,” she said, pointing to a guard who was lounging against the wall, sizing up pilgrims. They came from miles around, looking for cures for themselves, for their families, for their loved ones. Marius put them through ‘trials’ designed to make them suffer, and gave out healing to those that impressed or amused him, and it was well known that the guards humiliated and bullied the pilgrims further to winnow down their numbers. This one was fond of demanding sexual favors from pilgrims looking to save their romantic partners, considering it a poetic cruelty. “Come with me. The Master has a task for us, and asked for you personally.”

“Uh, yes, mistress!” The guard straightened quickly, saluting and following Yelena. “Anything you say!” She marched behind her, chest puffed out with pride, which proved that she didn’t know Marius well yet. The veterans knew to be afraid when he remembered them.

Yelena led the guard down a stairwell and into an old, rough-hewn tunnel in the lower levels of Marius’s keep. “I’ve been tasked with acquiring silk for the Master,” she explained as the pair of them walked. “It’s not a complicated job, but it requires someone strong and steady. The silk isn’t fully spun yet, and the slightest stumble could cost weeks of work.” She smiled, falling back to walk beside the guard and running a hand over her buff arm. “You stood out to him. He saw your strength, and he was impressed.”

She’d thought the soldier looked proud before, but now she was practically radiating pride. “Thank you, mistress! I won’t let you down.”

Yelena felt the pair of them pass through the wards over the tunnel, and heard the faint sound of skittering on the stone. “No,” she said thoughtfully, “I think you’ll be perfect.”

She took two steps back and masked her aura. For all his faults, Marius was very effective at using his resources. This was his back passage out of the fortress, which meant that it needed a proper guard. And what better guard than the spiders that spun his silk?

“Mistress! Help me!” The guard screamed as the small creatures swarmed over her, crawling through the gaps in her armor and chewing at the leather straps. They were very well-trained, and very numerous, but they worked by sensing arcana, and Yelena’s was shrouded. If she’d been alone, they would probably still have sensed her, but as it was, she was unmolested by the creatures as they began to spin webs over their victim, who was desperately trying to swat them away.

“I don’t think so,” Yelena said, still affecting Kelyth’s haughty tones. “I told you that the silk needed to be prepared properly, and that means that the spiders need to eat. And you, as I said, will be perfect.”

“No! Oh, spirits preserve me, please, no!” The guard turned to run as her breastplate clattered to the ground, but the spiders were webbing her legs together, and she fell flat on her face. Hundreds more tiny creatures swarmed over her, binding her arms behind her and slowly dragging her towards the wall, stripping away her clothing to replace it with thick webbing. Yelena slipped past as the guard’s screams slowly became muffled, the creatures covering her face and filling her mouth with webbing to mute her cries. As Yelena passed by, she saw the spiders beginning to hoist the guard upside-down into the air, her struggles slowing as dozens of them injected her muscles with paralytic venom at key places, preventing her from struggling free.

Leaving the guard to her fate, Yelena continued down the passageway. This *would* draw Marius's attention, but that was going to happen no matter what. The problem was that once he got down here and interrogated the guard, he would be able to start magically tracking 'Kelyth', even with her aura dampened. Which meant that she needed to finish her escape without casting any more spells, and that meant that she needed the final, and by far the most dangerous, piece of her plan to be ready.

She stepped out of the cave into a quiet, rocky meadow, letting the spell altering her appearance fall away. "I really hope you're here," she called out, "or else I am about to have a very bad year."

There was a bark of laughter, and Genma of Arihelm melted out of the bushes, holding a leash with a very large and suspicious-looking wyvern on the other end. The Witch of Asag was large today, their skin dark and their hair hanging low around their shoulders, but Yelena would recognize their piercing green eyes anywhere. "Almost thought you'd been caught," Genma said. "Climb on."

Yelena crossed the clearing quickly, and within moments the two were airborne. As she watched the home she had grown to know fall into the background, Yelena waited for the sounds of pursuit, but there was nothing. "That was anticlimactic," she said.

"What, you thought the geezer would chase us?" Genma snorted. "Marius doesn't leave his tower any more. You know that as well as anyone. And he doesn't have anything that could keep up with my pets, even if he wanted to. You're safe, songbird. Leave a trail of destruction in your wake?"

"Just a couple small acts of revenge. Destruction will have to wait."

"Ah, well. I expect when he realizes you're gone I'll be able to hear him shrieking clear across the continent."

"Genma... why are you helping me?" Genma had reached out privately, a few months ago, and their assistance had put the rest of Yelena's plan into action, but she still didn't know why. She only knew that the reward was worth the risk.

The larger witch looked back at her with a savage grin. "Marius has more territory than anyone but Zhel, and more power than anyone but Carena. I really don't like him having a whole-ass other witch under his thumb. Besides, he's the only witch left with an apprentice, probably because he was the only one stupid enough to think he could *control* one. Figured you'd get out soon enough, and I'd rather you do it a bit sooner and owe me one than do it a bit later and not."

"Well, you're right. I do owe you one. And I'll find a way to pay you back one day."

“You got a plan?”

“Yes.”

Genma waited a moment, and when Yelena didn't elaborate, laughed. “So you don't trust me just because I helped you out. Very smart. Well, you let me know where to drop you off, and once you're set up proper I might call on that favor to mess up an old friend.”

“Oh, really?”

“Let's just say that I owe Alys a world of hurt, and I think you can help me give her a bad year or two.”

Yelena nodded, staring off into the distance. She had the perfect mountain lined up; far enough away to be safe, shielded from Marius's spells, and ready for her to implant her shard. Her first order of business would be to fortify it - if any other witch came for her, she wanted them as powerless as possible. After that, there was knowledge to be learned, debts to be paid... and a little bit of revenge on the side sounded like a nice bargain. “You've got yourself a deal.”

She was never going to be anyone's puppet again.