

The Guild of Chains

Talea Isoldi groaned as she walked through the doors of the Guild, rubbing her sore shoulder with her free hand. The building's front facade stood out in a way that drew attention; although it was no taller than its neighbors, it was done up in grey marble instead of wood, with golden silk banners obscuring its windows and stylized chains carved into the pillars in front of the entrance. Townsfolk whispered about the dark deeds that went on inside, and some delvers preferred to slip in through the back entrance, a quiet, unassuming door in an alley on the opposite way.

Talea was not so timid. The stocky vanguard was used to being stared at; she was wide and muscular, with a long, dark pink braid that curled around her shoulder and well-tanned dusky skin. She wore padding and a functional metal breastplate forged of mithril, light enough to keep her moving, and when she walked, her massive axe's blade came close to sweeping the ground. If someone had a problem with her guild of choice, they could take it up with her, and she would happily punt them through a window.

As the door swung silently shut behind her, she nodded to the guild's receptionist. "Afternoon, Eja. What'd I miss?"

"Talea!" Eja squeaked, looking horrified. "You're a mess!"

"I'm not so bad." Talea glanced down at herself. After her party had left the Havenwrest Mines, they'd broken off to return to their respective guilds, and she hadn't had a chance to clean up. She was covered in soot, with a spattering of dried blood across her armor and hair, some of it hers. "I've been worse," she amended.

The young naga opposite her gave her a look that ignored her complaints, and reared up from the five feet tall that she usually stood to an additional eight inches that let her stare Talea in the eyes; the soft white light of the magelamps behind Talea reflected in her large glasses, rendering her own eyes unreadable. Eja had only been receptionist here for a year, but she had learned to handle the guild's unorthodox residents. Although she was slender, with pale blue skin and delicate black hair, Eja had a fire in her that erupted out when her guildmates acted out of turn. "You," she said sharply, "will take off that armor. And you will go to the pool and soak while I attend to it, and then you will see the Emissary. Is that clear, Talea?"

"Eja," Talea started, "I don't need..."

Eja's eyes narrowed, and her tail cracked like a whip behind the counter. "Strip."

Talea straightened instinctively, looking down at the floor. "Yes, ma'am," she said, cheeks burning. She reached up, undoing the straps on her plate and greaves, letting the

pieces fall to the floor one at a time, and set her axe down next to them. With the naga's eyes still fixed coldly on her, she pulled off her stained and bloodied undershirt, and then her leggings, leaving her naked in the front lobby. Her body was criss-crossed with light scars, and her curvy breasts perked up in the cool air of the lobby.

"There's a good girl. And so powerful. I could just eat you up."

Talea felt her blush spreading from her cheeks down her neck. "Yes, ma'am," she said again, not quite meeting Eja's eyes.

Eja's sternness dissolved back into mousy politeness, and she dipped down, tail tapping the desk as she looked over her client with a cheeky smile. "Now go and soak. I'll make sure that your armor is taken care of."

Talea nodded, hurrying away before she could make more of a fool of herself. She could break the little secretary over one knee, but whenever Eja got that look Talea simply couldn't help herself. She supposed it was why the Emissary had chosen her.

And, of course, Eja had been right. The heated bath, filled with rose petals and some kind of herb Talea didn't know the name of, was heavenly after her adventures. She could feel her muscles relax, the small cuts and scratches that she'd earned first itching and then closing as the healing power of the waters worked its wonders.

Stepping out of her bath, Talea wrapped herself in a fluffy white towel and strode into the adjoining room. There, she found Kian reclining on a couch, idly reading an old leather-bound book of poems. It was the only piece of furniture in the room, although the walls were lined with dozens of thin tapestries depicting various instruments of punishment or pleasure. The floor was stone, and the ceiling was made up of frosted glass, radiating the room in soft shadowless light.

Kian gently snapped the book shut, looking Talea up and down, and his face split into a broad grin. Like all the Emissaries, he was one of the Fae – in his case, a whip-thin elf with pale blue skin and long silver hair, dressed in loose silk robes that looked to have been spun from shadows, greys and blacks and hints of purple. Also like the other Emissaries, he had lived long enough around mortals to imprint their ways on his soul, and he stood and gave Talea a slight bow, ignoring her nudity. "Your soul shines, vanguard Talea," he said in a voice like spiced honey.

"Thank you, Emissary," Talea said, with as much formality as she could manage. "I've killed the Beast of Brocken Valley, and the Wights of Karent. I'd like to request a boon."

Kian slid to his feet, and slowly circled her, his eyes running over every inch of her flesh. She felt the shiver down her spine at his regard. "Yes, I think you're ready," he agreed. "What boon do you seek?"

“I wanna be fireproof,” Talea said. “Plus I was talking with another vanguard out there, he’s called Bernholt the Axe, and he showed me how he can light his weapons on fire. I feel like I should be fireproof before I try that, though.”

Kian nodded thoughtfully, still circling her. “I’m afraid that there’s an intermediate step. You’ll need to develop general elemental resistance before you can push one facet towards immunity, or else you’ll unbalance. Fire, ice, and thunder.” He ran his fingers lightly over his shoulder. “There are... fringe benefits. Protection from exposure. If you’re interested.”

“Yeah, okay. I can do resistance.” Talea gave the Emissary an eager smile as he stopped in front of her. “What’s the price?”

There was always a price. In addition to the soulstuff that delvers collected from their travels, every Emissary demanded a bargain or trial for their services. Fafnir of the Guild of Dragons demanded gold, and only the wealthiest scions joined his guild. Lugh demanded trials of combat. But Kian was unique, even among the Emissaries. Kian’s price was the reason that the Guild of Chains was the smallest of the major delvers’ guilds.

Kian demanded both pleasure and pain, and as such his guild attracted adventurers who lusted after both.

“A turn on the wheel,” Kian said now, his arm outstretched. One of the tapestries on the wall came unwoven, threads flying through the air to the centre of the room, where they reformed into the shape of the device it had borne – a massive wooden wheel, wide enough to hold Talea, with a small wooden platform in front of it for her to stand on. “You will be bound to it, and you will endure it. Do you accept?”

Talea looked up at the wheel, and felt a savage grin forming. “Oh, yeah,” she said, mesmerized. She hadn’t gotten this one before. “I want to give it a spin. What do I do?” Kian gestured, and Talea saw that the wheel had shackles on its sides, two above, and two at its base. “Present yourself. Back to the wheel, facing me.”

Talea stepped onto the platform, and leaned back against the wheel. She stretched up on her toes to reach the shackles, muscles flexing as she extended to her limit. As each wrist settled into place, the shackles clicked shut automatically, leaving her arms stretched well above her head. She looked down at Kian with a defiant grin. “This’ll be easy.”

“Oh, we’ll see,” Kian said with a mysterious smile. He stepped onto the platform, kneeling by Talea’s feet and running his fingers over her calves. “You work so hard,” he murmured, gently moving her ankles into the second pair of shackles. “The result is truly wondrous.” As the shackles locked into place, Kian flicked a finger, and Talea felt the

shackles at her wrists ratchet up an inch, pulling her body taut. She grunted, and squirmed slightly to test her bonds. A moment later, her grunt became a soft groan as the wrist shackles ratcheted another inch away, feeling the burn in her muscles as she was stretched out to her limit, bent backwards on the wheel. Her toes were just brushing the wooden platform, and her body was straining against its bonds, but she couldn't move even an inch.

Kian stepped up, running his hands freely over her toned muscles. "So powerful," he whispered, caressing her stomach, fingers running up to just below her breasts, jutting out from the rack due to the position of her back. "So vulnerable," he added, lightly running one finger over her nipple. She could feel her body shiver at his touch, knew that despite the impassive look she was giving him, he'd felt the shiver too. "If this is the best you've got, I don't think this is going to take long," she said with her best snark, meeting his eyes.

He smirked, stepping backwards off the platform. As he hopped down to the stone, the platform slid to one side, and the entire wheel settled downwards. Talea craned her neck, but she couldn't see below her waist; she could barely even see Kian's head. "Hold onto that fire, my beautiful vanguard," Kian said silkily. "In fact, let me hold onto it for you."

The wheel began to turn. Talea had expected that; why have a wheel if it wasn't going to turn, after all? She rose up into the air, muscles straining as she was lifted up, curving towards the top of the room. There was a long metal bar above her, parallel with the wheel and red with heat. She could feel it radiating as she came closer and closer, and she pressed back against the wheel to avoid the touch of the brass. Then the wheel curved; the bars were less than an inch from her skin, and she could feel sweat gathering on her breasts, running down her body in rivulets. She imagined the sight that she must be, stretched to her limit, bombarded with warmth, muscles glistening. Then, as her head crested the top of the wheel, she realized that her body was sticking out quite a bit past that.

The bar pressed between her breasts, and Talea groaned at the feeling of burning metal against her sensitive skin. It wasn't hot enough to burn, but it stung, and as she continued to turn her body was pressed up against it. She was tied too tightly to do more than struggle uselessly as the pain spread down her belly; the bar was dropping now, following the contours of her body and sliding inexorably towards her cunt. As it touched, Talea's eyes bugged out and she bit her lip. The pain was exquisitely overwhelming.

And then the bar was past her, she looked down, and she was staring at a pool of icy water. She could literally see tiny fragments of ice drifting on its surface, and her eyes went wide as the wheel slowly and inexorably carried her down towards it. She could feel her body tensing in anticipation, nipples stiffening as she instinctively tried to pull

away, braid falling past her head to dip into the pool before her. As she dropped towards the water, she took a huge breath, clenched her jaw, and closed her eyes.

Her face plunged under the water. After the overwhelming heat of the brass, the shock of cold was overwhelming, and a stream of bubbles hissed past her as she instinctively tried to gasp. As the wheel pulled her down, she could feel the rest of her body being swallowed by the chill; first her breasts, then her straining stomach, inching up towards her pussy and legs. She struggled to hold her breath, feeling the desperate pressure to replace what little air remained to her and the relentless assault of the cold on every part of her. She had no idea how long she'd been under. Twenty seconds? Thirty? Her lungs were burning, her eyes had flown open, but the water was dark and there was no sign of release.

Just as suddenly as the water had hit her, she felt air on her forehead, and she breached the surface. She took in a huge gasp of air, chest heaving as much as the wheel would allow. As she rose, she spotted Kian reclining in a chair, watching her. He gave her a tiny finger-wiggling wave, and she responded with a scowl. "Is that the best you got?" She'd intended it to be a roar, but she was still short on breath, and it came out as more of a wheeze. "A little heat and a bit of dampness."

"Save your energy," Kian said in a sing-song voice.

Talea opened her mouth to respond, and then yelped as something brushed against her inner arm, delivering an electric jolt. She looked up to see that a field of copper wires were now hanging over this part of the wheel, having descended when she was otherwise occupied. "Oh, fuck!"

The wires were dancing in a magical wind, whipping back and forth across her body. When each one struck home, it zapped her with more electrical magic, combining the feel of a whip with a painful jolt that sent her muscles spasming. Talea tensed involuntarily, her muscles contracting as jolt after jolt hammered her, feeling the shocks across her arms, her legs, her stomach and breasts. Her body twitched despite her best efforts to keep still, and her eyes narrowed as she fought not to yelp like a child.

And then she was past the wires, and she let out a slow breath as she felt the wind whisper over her welts. It had been a rough experience, but far from the sort she usually dealt with. The warm air was smoothing away the chills of the water, letting it soak into the faint red marks from the electrical whips, as she slowly rose...

Talea's eyes snapped open and she cursed internally as she saw the brass pipe above her and felt the heat radiating off of it.

On some level, she had expected that another rotation would be easier to endure. After all, she'd done it all once. But the cold and the shocks had softened her up, left her

shivering and quivering, and the heat soaking into her bones put her off her guard despite her best efforts. The searing heat sank into her, and she moaned in a mixture of pain and pleasure, her resistance melting away with the last flecks of ice dotting her skin. As she continued to turn, bringing more and more of her in contact with the hot metal, she found herself pressing forwards, trying to hold every moment of rapturous agony in preparation for what was coming. And then she was past it, falling down towards the water, and she barely had the energy to take a breath before her head hit the water. The shock woke her up, cooled her skin. She thrashed against her bonds, fighting for breath as she passed an interminable few moments under the frigid waters. By the time her head crested, emerging into the warm air, she was almost grateful for the shocks that she knew were coming, ready to torment her numb flesh back to warmth.

It went on like that, the warmth of the pipes, the chill of the water, the jolting pain of the whips. She lost count of the rotations, forgot what was coming next. Every stratagem and tactic to resist was stripped away, leaving her lost in a haze of constantly-shifting torments that stripped her bare. She was reduced to a whimpering thing, all of her muscles useless against her beloved tormenter, wishing desperately for him to stop and just as desperately for this march of misery to never end. She was floating outside herself, all of the feelings and sensations blending into a single glorious moment. She didn't feel when the wheel stopped moving. She only felt the fingers running over her, the soft cloth wiping away water and easing out welts. Lips touched her skin, and every touch was like explosions going off within her. She sagged against him, let him bring her to completion, felt the last fragments of thought dissolve.

Some time later, cradling her in his arms, Kian said, "The contract is now complete." "Can you believe," Talea whispered sleepily, "that someone people would rather pay gold than do that?"

"That is the wondrous thing about the kinfolk," Kian whispered back, leaning down and kissing her forehead. "You have such beautifully unique outlooks on life."

"If I was getting *resistant* to all that stuff," Talea said thoughtfully, "shouldn't it have gotten easier?"

"Well, of course I was increasing the power as we went," Kian said. "If you want to have a similar experience again, you will need more than most others would." His finger lit with a soft flame, and he drew it down over her skin. Instead of burning, she felt a soft warmth that teased her strained muscles. "You're not immune, of course, so don't go overboard. I would hate to lose you."

"You're never going to lose me, Emissary," Talea murmured. "I'm yours for life."

“Oh, I know. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Kian helped her to her feet. “Come. We must get you to a bed. You need your rest, and Eja would dismember me if I let you sit here on the cold stone.”

“Pssh,” Talea said, smiling as though every muscle in her body wasn’t aching. “I’ve slept on the stone plenty of times.”

“And yet,” Kian said, hand still outstretched.

Talea smiled, taking his hand. The willowy arm didn’t seem to be capable of supporting her weight, but Kian pulled her effortlessly to her feet, putting an arm around her waist and holding her gently. “Well,” she said, leaning into him, “we wouldn’t want Eja upset at us.”

“Indeed we would not,” Kian said. “And having paid your price, I feel that it is only meet that I offer you a personal reward.”

“Lead the way, Emissary,” Talea said with a smile, letting him take her down the corridor to his bedchambers. She smiled, feeling her legs quiver. This was a fucking great guild.