

Slowly, I wrote in my notebook, reclining back in the library's chair. I don't know why, but I did my best studying in the palace library. Maybe it was the atmosphere? I was on lesson fifteen now. The first one where he posed an actual challenge to me. But I knew almost two dozen words of True Alchemy now, and he'd given me everything I needed to succeed.

The target section of the syntax was remarkably versatile. I didn't have to look at something so much as simply be aware that it existed. As far as I knew, there wasn't any range requirements, and the energy costs stayed the same no matter how far away my target was. But it did require that I know it was there, and be able to use its name in Demonic. Everything else seemed to rely on me simply focusing on the target I wanted specifically. If there were two identical targets available, it would jump first and foremost to the one I was focusing on. I'd done some... experimentation. I figured that when you were messing with an art that literally altered reality, the less surprises you encountered, the better.

But there were also words to target *myself* with True Alchemy. Chronak had put forth the obligatory warnings before revealing those particular words. Turns out, there was a *slight* hiccup with written Demonic, which is what I'd been using to learn the words from. The written variant only transferred the writer's understanding of the word in question, at the time of the writing. It was... oddly specific. That meant that a lot of the words were entirely untested, and had unknown effects when it came to targeting myself with them. Some could be guessed indirectly, by how they affected other people. But I guess that not a lot of Grandmasters wanted to experiment using themselves.

Even better, I could technically target any part of myself with True Alchemy. Things inside me included. There was a whole subset of understood word uses when you used them on your own mind. The speed up one, for example. I tossed my bouncy ball into the air once more, then slowly, *slowly* smiled as I watched every centimeter of it rotate as it drifted upwards. It sped things up. When used on your mind, it sped up your thoughts. ...which actually had the indirect effect of slowing everything else down. Of course, the rest of me wasn't faster. Just my thoughts.

But it was probably one of the most useful of mental effects. Not only could it be stacked to slow down things even further, but the biggest drawback to True Alchemy, other than the obvious eating of your life force, was how quickly you could form sentences and push them into the Keyhole. I... never anticipated a situation coming up where I had to do True Alchemy quickly, but that didn't mean I didn't value having the means to do so, just in case.

I caught the ball, then let my thoughts return to normal again, exhaling softly. Of course, the other affect was still up. Everywhere I looked, I started to... see things in my mind. Whatever I focused on, I picked up the 'basic' name of it in Demonic. Unlike the 'power' words, they were effortless to learn, but really, they could only be used for targeting purposes. I'd wondered how we went about getting the names of mundane objects. I'd assumed if we had a dictionary somewhere for Demonic, that would be a... big book.

It also gave other mundane information, like how far away something was, temperatures, and the likes. Now though... I was learning the more advanced variant of it. A bit more costly, but I looked at my rubber ball again, and started picking up the alchemical properties of it. Ooooh, yes. I smiled, piecing together the formula I already knew on how to make alchemical rubber, but just by glancing at the ball. Apparently, this could also pick up medical information about organic things, too. I might not even need to use my medical scanning magic anymore!

I paused after, and frowned, doing a reality check. Leave it to me to get excited over something that lets me analyze stuff better. Oy. I chuckled to myself, then turned off the effects and wrote down more notes. Master wanted me to learn first how to analyze something using the advanced scan wording, and then how to change simple attributes of things afterwards using the scanned information. In this case, a simple regenerative potion and changing the color of the fluid inside.

There wasn't a huge amount of challenge to it. The way that the True Alchemy scanner gave me information was a little differently formatted than the spells I was used to, but otherwise functioned almost identically. Just faster and cheaper. I yawned, then sighed, lifting my right paw and looking at my comm. Ugh. Fuck. Twenty-three, ten. No wonder I was getting tired.

No, the actual experiment could wait till tomorrow. Yimir and Exia would be upset if I stayed out past midnight again. I rolled forward and sat up in the chair again before gathering my notes and stashing them and the journal in the front portion of Chronak's suitcase. Well, I guess it was *my* suitcase now. My ears lowered a little and I sighed. I still couldn't believe he was gone, sometimes. It was... It felt like he should be here teaching me these things himself, instead of me reading his words from a book.

I grabbed the case, sliding it off the table and hoisting it with my right arm, before slowly padding towards the exit of the library, Faefire orbs drifting about me as I walked. Like lanterns, but I could be lazy and not bother carrying them. The library was on the third floor of the palace, and conveniently close to my room. Another reason to like studying here. It was empty now, of course, at this time of day. Everything in the palace seemed different at night. Lonelier, I guess. Or maybe I just missed Chronak. Never thought I'd say that, but... The orange light lit up the wood of the walls as I went, and I opened the door up quietly, just to make sure I wouldn't wake anyone nearby.

The lights were always on in the halls, and there were always at least a few guards patrolling at all hours. I was used to hearing pawsteps, but as I turned and closed the library door, the nearest pawsteps halted. My ears flicked, and I frowned before slowly turning to my left, looking in the direction of the halted sound towards the end of the corridor.

For some reason, the lights were dimmed there, to the point of almost being completely off. A figure stood there, completely covered in dark purple robes and with a cowl drawn up over their head. Their face was shadowed out completely, and I frowned, turning to face them fully. What... Who was...? Their left arm extended to the side, gesturing to the small rest area in the hallway they were next to, with the small armchair and side table. The lights flickered once, then suddenly snapped back on to full strength, and the figure was gone.

I blinked once. Then twice more. Nope. No changes. Well, that was fucked. I looked to my right, at my room door, ears lowering a little. I mean, mysterious cowed person in the palace at almost midnight, seemingly trying to get my attention specifically. What were the odds, really, of that being something *good*?

My whiskers twitched as I wiggled my nose, then looked back at the area where the figure had gestured to. My ears shot up instantly after, spotting a large book sitting on the table next to the armchair. A book! ...but ominous and creepy figure. But... a book.

Damn my curiosity. I gave a hesitant sigh, then walked towards the table instead. Seriously, Exes? You could be snuggling in bed with your mates right now! But now I was committed, having moved more

than halfway there. Now it would take me slightly more energy than I originally put forth in order to walk back, so I might as well see what the fuss was about.

The book was black of course, with a pale white spine in ridges, not unlike a literal spine. The pun wasn't lost to me. It was larger than I thought it was at a distance, though not impossible to carry under my arm. It also had a clasp on it of the same off-white material the spine was made up of, with a chain of black metal that rivaled the leather of the cover. There wasn't any title, on either the front or spine. Huh.

I mean, I wasn't obligated to take the book. Or even touch it, really. Of course, it was here, and it was possible to take it and touch it. The figure clearly was showing it to me. Did it belong in the library and they were just too lazy to walk the fifteen some meters to return it? I could respect that. Sighing to myself, I bit the bolt and reached out, touching the front of the book.

If I'd been expecting some grand revelation, I'd have been sorely disappointed. The cover was leather, and black. My touch gave me no further information, nor did anything in particular happen. Meh. I hefted the book instead, though was surprised that it was a bit lighter than anticipated. I almost ended up hurling the damn thing. I looked it over in my paws, but other than the yellowing of the pages, I didn't notice anything else out of the ordinary. So, an *old* book.

Fine. *Fine*. My curiosity wasn't going to be happy until I did, so I undid the clasp of it and opened the front cover up. Maybe it had publishing information? The first page, normally where that would be found, instead had a very artistic rendition of an elaborate warding circle, with constantly shifting runic arrays on the inside.

I slammed the cover closed again and redid the clasp. Fuck! Fuuuuuck! My heart raced for a second as I looked around in the hallway. There was nobody around. No cowed figures staring at me, or lights flickering anywhere. That was... Holy shit. That was the Grandmaster Keyhole. I stared down at the book, curiosity having been sated, then elevated right into paranoia range instead. There's no fucking way a book like this was just left lying around. We knew next to *nothing* about the Keyhole. There's no way someone wouldn't have mentioned there being an instruction manual or something I could read.

I gave a sigh, debating in my head back and forth. No, there's no way I could just put this back and leave it there. Obvious classified information aside, if it *was* an instruction manual, it could, in theory, be indescribably useful to me. Of course, *how* it was delivered to me is what really had me doubting myself.

Fuck it. They'd clearly left it for me. I had no ability to find out who they were or how they got here. But just abandoning the book was probably a bad idea. I could always ask Calien about it tomorrow. Sighing, I tucked the book under my arm and carefully walked back to my room again, on the lookout now for creepy figures.

Of course, being hyper vigilant and on the lookout for ominous, creepy figures, left me far more unaware than usual to opening my door and getting pounced by Exia instead, who hauled me inside to where Yimir was waiting too, both naked. Oh, okay. The normal ambush then... That I could live with.

---

I rested against the wall, right outside the main door and watched Yimir curiously. “You’re sure you want to do this? Nobody’s going to blame you if you don’t want to.” She fixed the front of her tunic, making sure it was neatly resting over her skirt before smiling to me instead.

“I... Yes. I’ll blame me if I don’t. They get transferred to Talgrand for processing soon and... this might be my last chance to see them for a while. But... you two will go in with me, right...?”

Exia smiled and nodded at the same time I did of course. “Well yeah. We’re here to support you the whole way, Silly.” I nodded enthusiastically to that, and Yimir relaxed a little, grinning to both of us in turn.

“Thanks guys. This... It’s something I have to do.” We both nodded again, and she gave a short, curt one back before turning and adding one to the guard as well.

She gave a short bow, then rotated and unlocked the double doors, opening the way into Laridia’s holding cell, wing B. Admittedly, a vast majority of the people here were just overnight holdouts. Usually drunks who got a bit too rowdy, or a dispute that got violent. Some though...

We weren’t given any breathing room in this case. Over half of Yimir’s family had been arrested, and they were right there at the front of the wing, all in individual cells. Some were sleeping. Everyone who wasn’t seemed to have a lukewarm-at-best reaction upon seeing Yimir. Or maybe it was because she walked in with Exia and I next to her?

There was a chorus of hissing and boos, but the two guards ahead of us were extremely fast to react, moving quickly into the hallway and slamming their spears down in both directions. A blast of green energy went up to both sides of the cells, and everything was silent instantly. I felt Yimir’s paw clench against mine, but I squeezed it back and nodded to her.

The only ones not hit by the silence field were the first two cells. Elith was already standing when we walked up, and lunged almost immediately, slamming into the magic barrier that sealed off the front opening of his cell with his paws and giving a snarl towards me specifically. I just watched him, feeling... more sad than anything. He hated me so much that he’d hauled his sister into it too.

“Demon! This is all *your* fault, you-“ He gave a start, widening his eyes a little as Yimir suddenly kicked the front of the barrier, right where his face was. The ferality of her snarl, as well as the suddenness, caused me to give a sharp jump! He stepped back for a moment, staring at her looking as shocked as I did, but she just glared with narrowed eyes back.

“No! It’s your fault, Elith. *You’re* the one that destroyed our family, forced us to run away, and economically crippled the tribe! You threw away everything! ...I should have said that to your face long ago. Maybe you would have pulled your muzzle out of your ass long enough to see what you were doing...” Ouch. Okay, and she needed *us* here?

Maybe... she did. Despite her anger, I felt her push back into my chest, and her paw was trembling against my own. I gave her another squeeze, rubbing her paw pad, which let her give a little exhale and shake her head. Elith kept his ears lowered now, looking like she’d kicked him in the head while he was down, but Matriarch Irikis slowly stood in the cell over.

“Enough, Elith. You know well enough that we were in the wrong. I... was in the wrong. I didn’t even think before accidentally stirring up so much hatred.” She exhaled, slowly walking to the front of her barrier and placing her paw against it, the surface rippling where she touched. Elith sagged, then sunk to a sitting position, just glaring towards me in particular as I walked just behind his sister, to his mother instead.

Yimir touched her paw over where Irikis’ kept hers, then sighed again. “Mother. Are you well, at least?” I noticed she was wearing the same two-piece tunic she had been the day we made our escape over two moons ago, albeit missing all of her accessories. At least it looked clean, and I guessed they’d let them wash their own clothing.

I... didn’t know what to expect from Irikis. Elith had always hated me, and always would until the day he died. There was nothing I could do about that. Irikis though... She was smiling rather gently as she looked over the three of us. “I’m fine, Dear. And I see that both Exes and Exia are here to support you. I’m glad.”

Yimir relaxed at that and nodded, getting a little smile herself finally. “They are. The three of us are mates now. They helped me through everything.”

Her mother nodded twice to that, then gave a little sniff after. A little heat drifted to my cheeks, but she only gave a soft chuckle. “So I can tell. Both of their scents are strong on you. I’m glad they’re here for you. You have... great things ahead of you, Yimir. I can feel it. And not just being the mate to the Grandmaster Alchemist.” My ears flicked upwards at that, and she smirked over at me.

“You... heard about that...?” I didn’t know exactly how much information they were given.

Irikis relaxed and crossed her arms before nodding, losing a bit of her smile. “They treat us well here. Three times a day in the yard for fresh air and washing. Good meals. Also, daily access to the papers and news videos.” Oh! She gestured past me, and I glanced over my shoulder, noting the central column of the four-way split. It had crystal image panels on it, though they were currently off. “They show news every morning.”

She sighed after, looking a bit more pensive however. “We heard of course about Exes’ promotion to Grandmaster Alchemist, and the passing of Grandmaster Chronak. I... got along well with him in the village. May his soul find the peace he never could in Aion.” I hoped... that was the case too.

She seemed to snap out of it after, and recovered her smile as she looked down at the three of us. “Though, now look at the three of you. Shooting upwards like stars into the night. That... will allow me to rest easier. Have you taken your magic ritual yet, Yimir?”

Yimir flushed at that, then coughed. “Actually, we were going to do that today. Uh, we kinda wanted to wait until after Estrus was over...” Irikis gave a rolling chuckle to that, and Elith suddenly looked like he was about to vomit.

“Now that I can understand. The curse of almost every Aion female. Though... Am I to be expecting young ones in the future?” And crimson! Both of us. Instantly.

“M-Mother! I’m not even old enough yet to form a pack! N-No! Maybe next year, when we can... finalize it. We’re only thirteen now, sheesh.” Only, she says. Didn’t stop anyone from making me pick up the mantle of Grandmaster...

Of course, Irikis grinned to that, then nodded. “Well, you must promise me, wherever I’m indentured at, please at least drop by when you do produce a little one! Even if for a short time.” Exia snickered as she watched both of us squirm, but Yimir managed a nod anyway.

“Of course, Mother. Do you know where that will be, yet?”

That, Irikis shook her head to. “Not yet. They decide that in Talgrand. It’s unlikely our family will be kept together after this. But I do know that my indentured contract runs ten years, and I do keep some rights during it. Such as occasional use of communications and mail. So, I’ll keep in touch with as many of the family as I can.”

Yimir nodded to that, then looked to the right, frowning again down at Elith, who pointedly refused to look at any of us now. “What of... my brother?” His ears lifted at that, but he didn’t look up.

That, Irikis looked sad to again. “I know what... I did was wrong in trying to prevent him from being punished. But it was all for naught. He’s taken the brunt of the charges now, including inciting discord and a riot, attacking a civilian who yielded, and conspiring to commit great bodily harm.” Conspiring...? Wait, that meant... Oh.

Yimir’s paw tightened in mine again, and I rubbed it some more. “He... was one of the ones conspiring to hurt Exes? To take me from him by force? To *purge* me?”

We’d found out a lot via the official reports. The plan had been to put me on ‘trial’ of their own. It probably would have ended in my death. Then they were going to use an ancient ritual over the shrine of the Sky Father to ‘cleansing’ Yimir of my corruption. What they thought was a cleansing ritual, however...

Elith gave a whine to that, snapping his head up again. “I didn’t know they were going to do anything to you, Sis! I didn’t!”

“But you were fine with them killing Exes just because he uses magic?! Exes, who healed you time and time again from your guard training? Exes, who put your leg back together after you fell down the gorge?!” He winced away from Yimir’s voice, immediately looking down again as if burned. The ritual they were going to use, they didn’t understand. She wasn’t a mage. There was no mana in her to ‘purge’. It would have just set her vita on fire and killed her almost instantly. That was an... ancient ritual we used to use if we had to collar a mage. Before we had mana suppression studs for slave collars, anyway.

Irikis sighed, however, and slowly shook her head. “It doesn’t matter, however. He, like a third of our family, has been convicted of conspiracy to murder. That’s automatically a black collar sentence.” Oh. That was... permanent enslavement, unless they got very, very lucky on good behavior.

Yimir looked shocked for a moment, before her expression softened. Her mouth opened once, but she hesitated, eyes dancing for a moment while looking at her paws as she struggled with her words. “I... see. Do you know who he’s going to yet? Is he going to be a private slave, or given to a clan, or...?”

Public, private, clan... It didn't really matter. There was a good chance that we might never see him again. *Maybe* if he was public. Then the government would own him and probably give him at least some basic rights.

Irikis shook her head at that. "We know not yet, and probably won't until Talgrand. But I'll tell you in message as soon as I can."

Relaxing at that, Yimir nodded, then gave a softer smile to her mother again. "Thank you, Mother. I'm sorry all of this happened."

Shaking her head, Irikis slowly rubbed the barrier, right at cheek level with Yimir. "No, I'm sorry this happened to us. To you. But you're amazingly strong, Yimir. You followed your heart and fought to get what you wanted. I... honestly couldn't be prouder of you. We won't be apart forever, but you're with people who love you, and that's far more important."

Yimir gave a shiver, looking up at Irikis with a smile, despite her eyes getting a little watery. "Mom... I... thank you. I'm not sure if I'm as strong as you think but... I just had to come and see you before you left. I'll be sick for a while myself after this and, well..."

Irikis gave a warmer smile to that, then nodded. "You are, Yimir. Very strong. And I wouldn't worry about that. You've got possibly the best medical mage in Aion as a mate, after all." And here I was thinking I was going to get out of here without feeling my face sizzling any further...

She looked to me after however, and gave another nod. "I'm not even going to say anything. I already know you'll take good care of my daughter. You've already proven that, unwaveringly. ...I saw you pull her up onto the wagon as well with your magic." Ah! That was... Right, Chronak's mana was orange. "You wanted her to be with you. I've found... situations where you have to make an instant decision are often the most telling of what you truly want. I'm glad you're with my daughter. Exia as well..."

Sis of course just grinned, taking it in stride. The guard standing to the left of us shifted however, then tapped her wrist comm a few times while glancing our way. Right. They had to get them all cleaned up and ready for the transfer. I gave a nudge to Yimir, who nodded to me, then looked back to her mother. But Irikis held her paw up instead. "Relax, Yimir. This isn't goodbye. Just an... I'll see you later. You're strong, and don't let anyone else tell you otherwise."

A tear really did slide down Yimir's cheek this time, and her paw was practically crushing mine now. I just kept rubbing hers though, and she relaxed again, nodding to her mother. But Irikis looked to the guard after, then nodded. Hmm? One of the guards nearest the door turned and went the other direction into the storage area instead, and Irikis smiled back to us.

"Remember, Yimir. I believe in your strength. You might think our family is destroyed, but it's not. It's right here..." She tapped the barrier over Yimir's chest as she did. Yimir looked down, touching her right paw to her chest herself for a moment, but her mother simply nodded as the guard came back in. "This is yours, now, Yimir. Wear it in good health and strength. You're our matriarch now, and I know you'll do the family proud." My eyes widened, as did Yimir's, who snapped her head up to look at her mother again.

"W-What?! No, Mother, I can't! You're the matriarch of our family!" She was silenced with an upraised paw, even as the guard walked over to us and opened up a metallic box, revealing the amethyst

gemstone pendant I'd seen Irikis wearing hundreds of times before. It was on a bright silver chain of metal, and capped with an engraved amethyst crescent moon, as large as my thumb. Their family heirloom.

Irikis smiled again and shook her head. "No, Yimir. Even if I weren't sentenced to indentured servitude. I've done our family a great dishonor with my lack of wisdom. Over something you saw so plainly. You've made me so proud, and I know that you carry our family wherever you go. You'll make a new family, and hopefully one day, reunite with the old. We'll be stronger than we ever were under my leadership."

Turning and looking at the amethyst pendant, Yimir shivered, then swallowed tightly. "Mother... this..."

"It originally was your great, great, great grandmother's. She carved it herself, from a fallen piece of the Wanderer, our third moon. All the way back when we were druid hunters, and performed the tribe's magic instead." Elith jerked at that, then looked up at Irikis in shock, but she just kept smiling to Yimir instead. "That pendant there... It's said that it's enchanted with the old ways. Long forgotten. I of course could never bring out any power from it. But... I think things will be different for you. Please, Yimir. Wear it with pride, and bring our family honor again."

Yimir shivered, then nodded slowly, openly crying now as she took the pendant out of the metal case and held it to her chest. There was... I could definitely feel *something* from the pendant. I don't think what her mother said was purely fanciful. Why hadn't I noticed it before, though? I'd seen the pendant dozens of times in the past, and I've been a mage for years.

"Mother..." Yimir touched the barrier again, but Irikis just smiled and backed up now.

"Stay healthy and strong, Yimir. Show Aion what you can do. I'll keep in touch, and I wish all three of you the best of luck. Don't worry about us. We'll be there to support you too, in the future. Trust me." That was a tall order, given the opinions of the rest of the family... But I relaxed and nodded to her, even as Yimir pushed into my side.

"I will, Mom. You too!"

We were out of time, however. The guards led us back out of the holding cells, to where the entourage of honor guards were still waiting, and Yimir turned around and collapsed against my chest, immediately starting to cry. Exia rubbed her back gently, and all I could do was wrap my arms around both of them. She didn't have to worry about me looking out for her daughter; that much I could promise.

---

In retrospect, I probably should have held off on that promise to look out for her daughter until *after* I was done setting her on fire, twisting her soul into something unnatural, and then leaving her wishing she was dead for a few weeks. But eh, she'd given me permission far ahead of time to do exactly this, so I guess she couldn't complain.

The palace had several ritual rooms. I was quite pleased to find this out. They were also amazingly fancy. The incense smoke drifted gently into the air in the well-lit room, as I sat within the focusing circle in the massive channeling array I'd drawn on the smooth, polished floor. This was amazing.

Master and I had to use sand for this back when I got my mage ritual done. He had to redraw parts of the circle three times because of curious kits. One being Exia...

Yimir sat cross-legged and entirely nude in front of me, in the very center of the array. All five points of the focusing array were aimed right at her, and she rested there, watching me as I worked with the alchemy compressor on the extension tray. They even had fancy sliding trays hooked to metal rods that you could hold your ingredients on, without having to make your circle *extra* large, so there were gaps in the lines where you could set things!

"Um... just double checking. I had to be naked for this, right...?"

I lifted an eyebrow to her with a smirk. "What, don't you trust me to give you each and every accurate, absolutely necessary step with complete professionalism?"

Her whiskers flicked, and she frowned. "Well when you say it like that... no. Not really..."

I chuckled at that, then moved my head back a bit as the compressor released a little puff of steam. "Well, I'd like to think that if I really, really wanted to see you naked, I'd just have to ask. Or start pulling your clothes off." *That* got a flush out of her! I snickered after, then shook my head however.

"But I'd like to think I'd hold off on any randy efforts for when you're *not* covered in highly flammable jellified raw mana extract." She pouted at that, and I winked back over to her. Her entire upper chest was covered in patterned runic lines drawn in the stuff. In its raw form, it was a dark blue color, straight from the mana bulb. A fun, naturally-occurring flower that generates mana all on its own. Well, technically the flower just processed energy *into* mana. The root bulb under the ground was where it stored it all.

"Truly, you inspire confidence..."

The compressor puffed again, then dinged, sliding its lower drawer open and revealing another large clump of the material. "Eh, my paws aren't shaking, I'm not checking my notes every ten seconds, and I haven't started sobbing yet, so I'd say I'm confident in what I'm doing..."

She snickered this time. "Well I'm not on fire yet, so I'd say that's-"

"Don't even joke about that!" I hissed it out, eye twitching to her as I pressed my finger into her nose. Her eyes widened and ears lowered, surprise shifting into a wince.

"Should I even ask?"

I huffed at that, stirring the gel up while pouting. "One of the things we're capable of countering in such a lovely establishment as this is a mana flare. They're stupidly rare, and happen when the mana really, *really* likes your insides." Her muzzle scrunched at that, and I dipped the brush into the gel before turning to face her again.

"We can counter the inner reaction really easily. Already have that safeguard in place. But I *lucked out*. The mana *loved* me for some reason. Very eager to turn me into a mage. Chronak stopped the inner flare easily enough, then slipped in the sand and fucking *vented* it all over me. Cue a lot of screaming and being lit on fire. *Actually. On fire.*"

She stared, horrified at me, and I huffed, bringing the brush back down her stomach as I continued painting downwards. She blinked a couple of times, then frowned instead. "I... can't imagine the ritual continued after that." I shook my head.

"No, that was try two, and we canceled it again, then waited for my fur to grow back." Her frown didn't dissipate, and I waved my paw to her dismissively. "The odds of a mana burst are sub-percentile. There's no need to worry. I was just apparently a really difficult person to turn into a mage. He kept finding hiccups and rarities in me. I'm lucky like that..."

Yimir smiled, relaxing again as I painted down to her navel, watching me work. "I mean, I'm not actually concerned, just so you're aware. Obviously, I trust you." I paused at that, looking up at her again as she smiled down at me. Okay, I couldn't help it when she looked like *that*. I leaned up and gently kissed her on the muzzle, causing her to shiver and nuzzle into the kiss, tail starting to swish behind her. I capped it with a little nose bump and smiled back to her, causing her to giggle. "Plus, I'd like to think I'm sexier with fur, so you'll be extra careful."

I snorted, then winked to her. "Just be lucky I'm not an *Alpha*. I might give you vita 'injections' after this to help you get through the illness in that case." Her eyes widened a little, and she flushed.

"W-Wait, is that a thing Vulkus actually... do...? Oh, right, you grabbed that book from the library..."

I nodded at that, going back to painting runes on her. "Yeah. Their Alphas are so charged with vita that it leaks into their bodily fluids. All fluids really, but the sexual ones and blood have the highest concentrations, for obvious reasons..." Really obvious for the blood bit. That would be unfortunate, otherwise.

"And uh... 'injecting' it into others really... works...?" I nodded absently to that.

"It depends on the hole used, but yeah. Vaginal is actually the least effective, and anal the most. Oral is in the middle. You're literally digesting the vita... Oh, and a lot of really powerful hormones. I think they extract it into tinctures in modern times..." Well known fact. Body fluids from an Alpha Vulkus of either gender was addictive. Extremely addictive. They actually suffered not insignificant amounts of segregation far back in ancient history for it. It was kind of... a sad time. Of course, it was also a potent fertility and virility booster, so they were immensely useful at the same time. Honored, even, while forced to live kilometers outside of the village. Talk about mixed messages!

She pondered it for a moment, then nodded. "That makes sense. I suppose anal would be the most... direct. Hmm..." Her navel array was almost concluded, and came just a few centimeters shy of the top of her spade by the time I'd finished the bottom rune. It was actually a bit interesting to see her unaroused spade, in its much smaller form. Purely for my own personal interest of course. That's how I usually saw spades in female patients. Turns out, when people visit the hospital, they're usually not feeling very sexy at the time.

"Have you... considered anal?" And pause. My paw froze, midway through completing the lower circle, and I lifted an eyebrow up to her.

"Uh... in what regard? Oh Gods, did Exia go through with purchasing that strap-on she was looking at?!"

Yimir snorted, then covered her muzzle with both paws as she burst into snickering. “Hah! Uh, no, she didn’t actually. And hey! We sometimes need attention of a stiff sort when you’re not around you know! Or, you know, something fun to try on Kada maybe, one day...” I just *stared* at her, trying to *will* the conversation past this part, until she burst into giggles again. “No, okay? Butt stuff. Like, my butt. With your cock.”

Slowly, I frowned. “Uh... well... okay. I wasn’t expecting this conversation but... I believe that is indeed a thing people do on occasion. Statistically, it’s not as likely with males of Vulkus or Inaga penile shape. The combination of knot and baculum tend to make it a little trickier, with extra precautions in place...” I went back to painting as I spoke, as her ears perked up, head tilting.

“Extra precautions?” Really?

I sighed. “Okay, so for one, your anal muscles, species dependent of course, can get really, really strong. Illan, for example. Did you know that, because they needed to test to see if they *could*, an Illan with a professional career in using their leg muscles is capable of *crushing* low-hardness stone with their butts?” I risked a glance up, noting she looked absolutely horrified, and nodded sagely. Good.

“We have a bone inside of our penis. That makes it quite a bit not as flexible along the shaft as say, an Akeerta penis. That bone is capable of being fractured and broken. I’ll stop there, for both our sakes.” And more horrified looking. Excellent! “Oh, on top of that, our knots are roughly eighty percent thicker than the rest of our shaft, which can be... quite a painful fit at the best of times. Worse if you overdo it with the lube and end up *accidentally* taking it when not prepared. Anal tears are... unfortunately something I’ve treated before.”

She looked close to sobbing, so I nodded after. “Oh, and of course bacterial infections. Our colons contain approximately two hundred billion bacteria per milliliter of moist fluid inside. Getting that near your partner’s sexual organs can be problematic without proper cleaning ahead of time, such as-“

“Aaaaah! Stop! Stop! I’m sorry I asked!” She flattened her ears down and covered them with her paws, and I started snickering. I think she understood now at least. She growled, then whacked me on the shoulder, and I laughed harder. “Ass! Ah, no, not ass! Aaahh.”

I had to stop and put the paintbrush down long enough to stop laughing now, even as she flailed at me. “Fine! See if I treat you to it! Hmph! I just heard... things... about it being tighter and stuff... and well...”

I managed to catch my breath finally, then wipe at my eyes before glancing up and seeing her flushing again and wiggling there. Oy. “Yimir... you’re just fine the way you are. You know I’m *very* happy with every part of you, right?” Her eyes widened a little, and the flush deepened a bit, though I imagine for a different reason given her tail started to wag again. We bumped noses again, and she gave mine a lick before relaxing.

“I mean, I know, and I’m glad. I’m happy with every part of you too. I’m just... adventurous, and I like to experiment.”

“You’ll definitely make a good mage. Just uh, bring a fire extinguisher.” That got a snort out of her as I finished the lower circle finally. This probably would have been done twenty minutes ago if we’d stop distracting each other.

I put the brush down again, and gestured her backwards, looking her over. She leaned back on cue, resting her arms behind her and showing me her entire front. I looked the diagram over in the book, just to make sure I was remembering it properly, but it looked completely accurate and intact. Well, there was one way to find out. "Everything seems to be in order. I think we're about ready to begin. Let me set a test charge in it to find out though."

Yimir gave a nod to that, then watched her entire front as I reached up and fired a little burst of mana into the top node of the array, right above her collarbone. The flickering mana danced all the way down her chest, stomach, and then her naval in about half a second, causing her to give a little jump. "Oh! Tingly..."

My ears perked. "How so? Stinging, tingly, or static electricity shock tingly?"

"Like that time I tried on those ceremonial socks, fresh, tingly. Not painful..." Ah, good! Also, mmm. Thigh socks. One of those mysterious sexy articles of clothing for unknown reasons.

I nodded, then flipped two pages, looking over my checklist. "Alright. Double checking everything. The wards are in place. Emergency triggers A through G are set. The rune array has been test fired and connectivity is solid. Soon-to-be-mage is without clothing or any other accessories that could potentially contain a static charge..."

Yimir double checked her ears, feeling the thin holes there before relaxing again. Jewelry was a definite no! "Out of curiosity, why is static charge bad?"

"It can discharge mana residue built up around you in the middle of the ritual. An accidental discharge, as I mentioned prior, can accidentally set things on fire. Including your clothes, and your fur." I didn't look up from the book, but I could tell in my peripheral vision that she winced.

"I should really stop asking questions."

"You should. But no, questions are good. It means you're prepared..." I smiled back to her, and she relaxed again, grinning.

That was... everything then. I nodded to her, then slid the book aside before grabbing the tray and shifting it out of the circle. "That's everything, then. We're set to begin. Are you okay with proceeding?"

She took a deep breath, then slowly nodded to me. I nodded back, rotating to face her fully inside the focal point. "Good. Just so you're absolutely made aware, this ritual will turn you into a mage. This is an artificial state for your soul to exist in, and once done, cannot be safely or reasonably undone. Once the ritual is completed, you'll be a mage, with the positives and negatives that brings." She nodded again at that, and I smiled to her. There *were* ways to undo this, but they were far more unpleasant than *becoming* a mage.

"Very well. This ritual will be done with another mage as a focal point. It's considered optional, but allows for better control, a gentler and safer experience, and most find it quite a bit less scary."

She nodded rapidly to that one. "Yeah, don't make me do this solo, please..." I chuckled again and shook my head.

“No worries. Last bit before. This uh, *will* suck. It’s unavoidable. This is considered an unnatural state for your soul to exist in. There’s no medicine in existence that can numb your soul, both fortunately and unfortunately. But it will be as fast as I can safely make it, and I’ll be controlling the side effects as best I’m able. Also, you’re gonna be sick afterwards for at least two weeks.”

Rather than being dissuaded, she grinned, however. “Alpha will take care of me though. I have no doubts!” Brat! I flushed a little and rolled my eyes.

“Don’t distract me in the middle of the ritual. Brat. Remember, we both like your sexy fur where it’s at...” A grin at that, but she nodded.

“Right! So double checking... I sit here as I am right now, making sure not to touch the smelly goo you smeared all over me, especially while it’s glowing. And I try not to pass out. Or vomit. Or sob too obstructively.” I nodded, that all sounding accurate so far.

“Right. No contact with the gel once its energized. That will make it suck more. Try not to move around too much. Don’t pass out or it ruins the ritual and we get to do all this over again.” My right paw tapped at the series of syringes I had right next to me, and she exhaled softly and nodded. More safeguards, including a fun cocktail to make sure she *couldn’t* pass out. But better to avoid using that one if possible.

“Got it! Alright, do your worst!” She saluted, and I chuckled again before nodding to her. Well, here we go then. I handed her the bite piece, and she swallowed before sliding it into her muzzle.

Of course, doing my *worst* wasn’t going to happen. Instead, I extended my paw to the upper injection node again, this time with my entire pad facing her, and then activated my own mana supply. Blue light danced off my paw a moment later, and gently, I touched it to the top of the array. Her eyes widened as her entire torso flickered for a moment, with the lines of gel starting to glow their natural dark blue as they filled with mana. The external circle we were sitting in reacted at the same time, starting to glow a lighter blue with my own colors, its protective magics sliding up into Yimir’s body.

My left paw slid forward and under her own, and she gently grabbed onto it. There was another pulse, and the circle I drew on her right wrist started to glow. Slowly, I pushed forward, connection tingling between our paws, and felt... excitement. Anticipation. Nervousness. I sent calmness in return, and her ears perked up, tail starting to wag as she smiled. Empathy link established. I steadied myself, practiced willpower pushing forward as I projected calm throughout her. She relaxed, breathing slowing as her eyes closed. Maybe there were... perks... to having the mage doing this be your lover.

My mana flared again at my command, pushing more into the array as I lowered my paw. Down two circles, half twist at her sternum, then connecting the fourth node to the fifth just above her stomach. I sent the urging to brace, and she did, stomach tightening just as I made the connection.

Her brace was perfectly timed, just as the center mana rune fired off, and punched the first mana coring directly into her life force. She jerked afterwards, almost doubling over until I sent another calmness burst into her, and rubbed her paw. She was shaking now, and her teeth clenched hard on the foam bite piece. I remember having to use a stick. Was more than a little sore after that...

My eyes pulsed with my mana as I watched and monitored her carefully. There was a ‘bulb’ of foreign mana now sinking into her central vita pool, sending swollen cracks of seething energy out from it in all

directions. She shivered, eyes slammed closed, as I pushed more and more soothing pulses into her mind. I knew what it felt like. Like someone just stabbed you in the stomach with a lit torch.

Her vita reacted, pulsing angrily as it swirled around the intruder. But the connection to the outside mana array was still present, and it couldn't just crush and dissolve the bulb. There was too much 'pressure'. It didn't stop it from trying though, and the edges of the bulb became indistinct as her vita started to energize itself.

Another warning sent to her, and she braced again as I connected the third node to the second. She wasn't quite as steady for this one, and actually screamed out into the bite piece, her entire torso writhing as the second coring blast pushed into her soul right above the first. Tears slid down her cheeks, and I leaned forward, gently kissing the bridge of her nose. The nails on her right paw dug into my skin, but I just pushed the pain aside and gave her gentle nuzzles to the side of her muzzle. Halfway through.

The second bulb impacted the first, and they connected together, suddenly flaring with reactive energy. The blistering doubled around the edges of both bulbs, with her vita forced to be pressed outwards away from the two blocks of mana. It was like an angry stomach ache, but where it felt like your stomach was swelling until close to rupture. She shivered, panting now, but managed to sit upright again. I let her rest as long as I could while watching the process.

Her body was entering panic mode now. The foreign entity was too large to dissolve, and connected in two spots, forming a mana current. It switched to its last resort now, and violently attacked the sides of the mana balls inside of her. I watched seething white cracks form between vita and mana, and she shuddered, screaming again into the bite piece. Calm!

Her eyes opened, pupils constricted tightly as she shuddered there, staring right into my eyes. The rune array over her chest flickered, and I saw sparks and flames dancing off the edges of it, even as I nuzzled her again. Almost... She exhaled, eyes softening before suddenly leaning her head over and pushing her muzzle up against me, shivering and burying her face in my neck. I just rested my head on top of hers, watching the two orbs of mana push together by her vita, into one large pool, with the edges blistered and white inside her soul. It was a 'film' that separated her mana from her vita now. Well, currently *my* mana from her vita, but she'd eventually make her own, with her own color, once she flushed mine. That was the body's last resort. Seal off the intruding energy until it could be dealt with later. Over the next few weeks, the film would become spongy, and allow access in and out at her own design, thanks to the rune array imprinting into the surface of it. Her body was going to *not* like this, and be very, very grumpy, but...

Last brace. I warned her ahead of time, and she pushed her face into my chest, tensing again. My paw released the mana connection with that, and she gave a powerful jerk as it snapped like a rubber band into her chest. The link to the outside was severed, with the orbs inside of her pulling fully within and isolating. The last searing of energy from the rune array hit, and the film rippled, forming the access array at the top pristinely. She gasped, shivering against my chest as her paw shook against my own. That one was hard to describe. Like trying to swallow an air bubble so big that it was painful, and ached the entire way down your throat as it sunk into you.

My right paw moved fast, snapping to the side and causing her to give a little jolt of surprise as I suddenly vented the mana out of the array. It was still sparking and flaming up in spots, and the sudden removal of all the mana caused it to instead chill itself, literally crystalizing into solids and powders against her fur, thanks to the speed I removed the mana with. The array around us flickered, absorbing the shock instantly, and all the candles in the room shifted their flames blue instead. And release...

She sagged, collapsing against my chest and just shaking there. My arms went around her back, ignoring the blood coming from my left paw, and I just held her to me as she cried. Little residual flickers still danced between us, and I felt... affection from her mind before the link closed again. I smiled and just rubbed her back with my right paw, nuzzling her neck and getting a little shiver.

She caught her breath slowly, then I felt her spit out the bite piece behind me before nuzzling my neck back. "...I love you, Exes."

A smile, and I pulled her into my lap instead. "I love you too, Yimir."