

I hadn't expected Calien to contact me specifically, shortly after the alarms went off. Though in return, I doubt she expected me to bring Annah, Lilita, and Melanue with me when I reported in. But, given the situation, Realmsguard had mobilized. Kyry was already scouting the entire perimeter of the palace, but given what I was looking at now, I kind of doubted she'd find anything.

The absolutely torn apart body of Lady Otria, head of the Male Traditionalists Movement, was on 'display' in the center of her royal suite. Her own spinal column and tailbone had been 'shaped' into a stand of sorts for her that she'd been impaled on, with bits sticking out of her chest like a spike. A look of absolute agony and horror was frozen on her expression, upside down as she hung there.

While absolutely horrible, this alone probably wouldn't have caused Realmsguard specifically to take heed. No, there was also demonic written in blood in a circle around the large pool of it under her, and most of her body appeared to be... I didn't really even know how to describe it. Her fur had started to fall out, and the skin under it was blackened and bulbous with growths and hanging strings of flesh. Worse yet, luminous red veins of some sort expanded out from her core where she was impaled, actually glowing with inner light. Some sort of hyper-aggressive infection or fungus of some sorts?

The room was locked down, and I'd already sealed it off with magic and alchemical adhesives. Now Annah, Mela, and I were in biohazard outfits and taking a look around the room, while Lilita sat with Calien in her office, on video comm. "Realmsguard...? And you recruited Exes?"

"Yes. It's a fifteen-year-old initiative now. We operate in secret under primarily Queen Morrigan's jurisdiction. The Cult of the Shattering is our current focus, as the biggest threat to Aion." Lilita sat with her, watching us instead. Calien looked floored for the most part, though probably the shock of this happening had something to do with it.

I knelt down in front of the blood smear instead, writing in a notepad as I slowly rotated around the circle that was made, eyes glowing from behind my protective screen. "Completed it." That drew Annah's attention, with her turning to face me from where she'd been scanning magically.

"Translated? It's not active, is it?"

I shook my head at that. "No. There's Aether residue all over this area and Lady Otria, but there's no active True Alchemy here. None of these words are power words either. Just normal Demonic."

She sagged at that, looking relieved, then nodded to me as I stood. I looked over the translation I'd written down before nodding back. "All hail! Shatterer looks on from beyond and spreads dominion over Aion. Retribution in the name of the Shatterer, and beloved King Exes, first of his name." Well, that was fucked.

Calien only scrunched her muzzle up further at that, before sagging in her seat and resting her head in her paws. "Why? Why this? Why now? Why me? This isn't... If this gets out, it's going to explode..." Lilita turned back to Calien with that, clearly trying to dissuade her from her nervous breakdown, while Mela gave a low whistle behind me. I glanced back, looking to her where she sat in her augury circle.

"The Shatterer, huh? The One who Spreads Dominion. We've definitely encountered that one before. As far as we've figured out, they worship this... entity, like it's a god. Never had them name drop someone before, though. Exes definitely has their attention for some reason. Retribution? Could this have something to do with the assassination attempt?" That was... great. Just great. Lady Otria had

never gotten mind scanned though. We didn't... technically know if she was telling the truth on not having anything to do with what happened at the coronation.

Lilita perked a moment later, then nodded on the comm. "Ah, she's here." We all turned to the comm on the wall next to the door. Annah had linked it to Calien's office and widened the illusion screen to almost the full size of the wall. Now though, it split, and the other side was filled with Morrigan instead. She seemed to be in her nightwear, and was in that location I'd first seen her in again, in the amazingly nondescript room. Her first action was a restrained look of disgust towards the impaled body, before sighing and directing her attention to us instead.

"The cult? What information do we have so far?" Annah sent the images of the circle, body, and their symbol in blood that we'd found so far, pinning them to the side of the comm screen. I read the translation for the circle again after that. Annah had noted there wasn't any magical residue in the room and no active spells, and I'd shown them the Aether residue overlay, splashed over the body and area like paint.

Mela at least had a bit more to go on with her magic, showing active if distorted images using an illusion screen, of Lady Otria... clearly moving to about where she was now, *talking* to someone. That someone she was interacting with was completely invisible, however. Further, she looked... reasonably stress free until the very end, suddenly widening her eyes and shaking her head, paws raised up defensively, before screaming as her chest exploded into gore and she was lifted into the air, spasming and getting torn apart by unknown forces. Fuck...

Calien looked horrified, but Morrigan tempered her expression. "Invisible. Just like the figure was with Exes. But we don't have Lady Otria's memory to scan to see what she saw, unfortunately. But... she didn't look surprised in the slightest by just the figure. Was the cultist someone she knew? Or maybe just appearing to be someone she knew. Or was she working *with* them?"

Slowly, Mela nodded, eyes still glowing as she looked over slow motion clips of the image. "Yes, she was... talking peacefully with the figure. It feels like someone she knew, or at least thought she knew. I've almost got the audio too. It's hard though. Something's distorted the event." The fact that she could get even this much was amazing. Divination normally aimed for something highly specific to find out about in the past, or at a distance. Finding an object, or an image from the past. Or speaking to the spirits of the dead, in the case of Necromancers. An active video stream was something I'd only heard of the most talented of augurs doing. Now she was aiming for sound too?

Still, I sighed and nodded. "It might have been the True Alchemy used. Even if they didn't do something intentionally to sabotage it somehow, I've found it screws with scanning magic quite a bit."

Morrigan nodded. "And there's nothing active in the area?" That I could shake my head to.

"I can try tracing the effects used on her, but I don't think it would give us any further information on who used it beyond where they stood in the room at the time." I didn't offer to *rewind* said effects. She'd still be dead, and all it would serve to do is clean up the mess a bit. And destroy a lot of evidence.

Mela nodded to me, however. "Any little thing would help, Exes." Well, okay then. I switched to scanning the Aether residue instead after, and quite easily picked up the trail of the effect from that.

Directing her attention to Calien instead, Morrigan gave her a softer smile. "Relax, Calien. We've been dealing with the cult for years, and we can handle this much. Also, under joint law, section five, article seven, I'm going to flag this as a high security, multi-nation case. Larid's news media will only be given the most minimal of information. Especially considering how... inflammatory they can be sometimes." Wise!

Calien exhaled, then slowly nodded. "I was hoping to avoid an international incident, but I guess that's already here at this point. If they're interested in Exes, we need to get him out of here as soon as possible. The palace isn't as safe as I'd hoped it was, clearly..."

Sighing, Annah shook her head to that. "I don't think it's even a matter of security, physically. They're using True Alchemy to get inside. It's not even about Exes being not experienced enough yet. If the book is any indication, there's a lot about things that we don't know."

I looked over to her at that, frowning. *Someone* had to ask. "What... are the odds that they have someone with a Keyhole too, then?"

Everyone went silent at that. Slowly, Morrigan sighed, then nodded. "I have to admit, not zero. There used to be three Keyholes that we ourselves knew about. We also used to have a... device that could *store* them without them needing to be hosted on anyone. There used to be two out at a time, until a very foolish accident killed one of the Grandmasters, and we realized the Keys were destroyed on death." Ah. Then there was a way to maintain the Keys outside of someone after all. Suddenly, it existing outside of anyone when it attacked me during its transfer didn't seem that farfetched.

Calien sighed at that. "That was upwards of a thousand years ago or so. Before we had a lot of the safety regulations in place for mana generation and transfer. A mana tree surge, without any breakers in the way, overloaded the mana capacitor backups we had in the vault and they exploded. The device, and the Keyhole that was being stored on it, were destroyed." Fuck... "Ever since, we've had to sacrifice a person to the Key every twenty-five years, just to keep it in existence and cling to the only link we have remaining to True Alchemy."

Morrigan gave a slow nod. "It's... a very unfortunate development, yes. But it also means that we don't know if other Keys survived the Demon War elsewhere. They had devices capable of storing them, and if the cult did happen to find some in a ruin or lab we haven't found yet..." Ah. So, it was possible then. My ears perked though, as my True Alchemy effect finished and alerted me.

The trace slowly worked backwards through the air, showing me the flow of Aether as the changes happened. The True Alchemy had... weaponized her own body against her, causing fatal damage to her chest in an instant by fragmenting her ribs and spine. The effect that made the spike was showy, and separate. Still, I'd cast enough spells myself to recognize the ebb and flow of the *will* through the effect. The effect also didn't follow it directly, instead being uniform and even. That, I'd also seen before.

"What did this was an artifact enchantment. This wasn't someone using True Alchemy themselves... It's even and exact. Abilities being controlled manually by a person don't look like this..." That perked everyone in the room again, especially as I activated some illusion screens and started shaping them alongside the effect.

They hung in the air, giving visual reference of the motions as I stepped backwards, following the flow to a single point of release. Both effects were linked to one spot in the air, about a meter and a half away from Otria's body. Mela perked her ears up at that, then extended her own paw, syncing the images she'd pulled from her augury, and showing a very much alive Otria, just before she got the shocked expression, looking *right* at this point.

"That's definitely where the figure was standing that she was talking to. But whoever it was, they're not showing up in the augury at all." She frowned, looking back to Morrigan at that, who nodded slowly.

I frowned, looking the effects over as I walked around the point hanging in the air. I had to look slightly up to see it, and unless it was coming from the person's forehead, it was probably a taller species. Maybe the same one that gave me the book? I focused right on the point instead, and... discovered an interesting thing a moment later. When my eyes lost focus and instead were locked onto the point I'd created in the air, they switched over to scanning that instead.

That of course gave me information about my own illusion spell, but... the air also lit up with Aether residue! I locked onto that instead, then traced the scan further... My eyes widened as a shape further appeared out of the air. A long rod, maybe thirty-five centimeters in length, and only a couple thick, came into existence. It was featureless except for the fact that the front end of it was... twisted around, forming a screw-like shape morphed into the metal. My True Alchemy Trace effect created it as an object in my mind, which worked in conjunction with my eyes, somehow.

I extended my illusion to it too, showing it hanging in the air, and even putting the name it had overtop of it. The Fleshshaper. Well, that promised to be disturbing. Morrigan's eyes widened as she watched me continue to use Trace on the residue it had created, and I found the path of 'will' linking to it a second later. The one directing it to activate!

Combining my eyes and Trace again, I soon had the illusionary image of a robed figure holding the rod, pointed right at Otria. Their left arm was extended up as well, fingers outstretched and gesturing wildly. That familiar purple robe covered them, and while it was light enough in the room to see them clearly this time, their face under the cowl was covered by a heavy, metal mask, with seemingly no holes or anything for features, or even to see with. Huh...

"Exes! You... You can figure that much out...?" Morrigan looked over the image with intense interest, as did Calien, who sat upright now. Annah rushed over, immediately taking more mana images of the figure, while frowning herself.

I stepped around her and headed over to the wall display instead, nodding before exhaling quietly. That was... Trace could be surprisingly intensive when used with my eyes, it seemed. "Yeah, it's... a bit tiring, but I can use True Alchemy in conjunction with these eyes. They let me... see things I probably shouldn't be able to see." I gestured to them, which drew Morrigan's attention back to them instead with a frown and nod.

Mela was standing by then, and had walked around my illusionary figure to stare at it in surprise. "This is still amazing! You can trace True Alchemy effects as if it were a normal spell! I don't... think any Grandmaster has been able to do this before! Chronak certainly couldn't..." Yeah, they'd probably not decided to break the goggles experimenting on them...

Slowly, Morrigan leaned back again against the wall, then chuckled. "Indeed. These eyes are... useful, if worrying. I'd like to get you a full medical assessment when you get to Koramir, Exes. And... maybe add some divination lessons to your skillset. Knowing how to use augury and such, in conjunction with your abilities, would be very useful." That... made sense, yeah.

Of course, Mela perked up and shifted to grinning in an instant, turning to Morrigan and I instead. "Oh! If you need him trained in augury, I can do it myself! Re-assign me! You know I'm the best!"

My ears flattened back at that, somehow defused to the fact that we were investigating a murder scene now as I glared back at her over my shoulder. "I'm sure this has nothing to do with the *other* thing we talked about this morning..." Morrigan lifted an eyebrow to that, but Mela grinned instead. Wait, she was...

"You mean giving you lots and lots of sex and kits for being amazing and saving my life? Well of course, but this just gives me more reason to!" ...really blunt and open. Forgot about that bit. Well, the fertility priestess thing also probably had a lot to do with it, too.

I huffed and turned back to Morrigan, flushed at that, but she looked more amused than anything. "I don't see why not. It'll take a bit of time to reassign you, but I'll get on it tomorrow. Expect maybe a moon turnover..." Ugh. Mela grinned and threw Morrigan a salute. Guess she was coming to Koramir too in the future.

Annah huffed though, halting her image taking to give a pointed stare to Mela. "Damn, Exes. Given how many females want to share a bed with you, I don't see how you can *possibly* think you're not desirable..." My muzzle scrunched at that. Was that... irritation in her voice?

Calien frowned at that, however. "Eh? Why wouldn't Exes think he's desirable? Wait, does that have anything to do with why Exia's and Yimir's comms are showing in Exir's room?" I blanched outright at that, and Morrigan frowned instead.

"...you put trackers on their comms?" She shot Calien a skeptical look, and the queen lifted her paws to the other.

"I bet you would too if you had VIPs like the Grandmaster Alchemist!" Ah, we were being tracked. Well, not that I cared really.

"Actually, I wouldn't... but don't worry. Kyry can remove the trackers once they leave Larid. Oh, speaking of, the three of you are getting recalled on Exes' train as well..." Morrigan looked back to Annah with that, who perked and nodded. Ah, more people coming.

Calien's eye twitched. "...wait, who?"

"Kyry? She's the Bloodstalker captain currently scoping out the palace perimeter."

"What the *fuck*?!"

Morrigan smirked, then gave a shrug. "Well, you did say Exes was a VIP. A little added security never hurt anyone. And clearly is needed..." Wasn't touching this. This felt distinctly like a political jousting match now.

Calien looked... displeased at that answer, but shut up and just shifted to scowling towards the room's feed instead. So not touching that. Queens getting mad at each other seemed like something I should keep my nose as far away from as possible. Morrigan perked a moment later however, then gave another nod. "Oh, right, we're also inducting you officially into the Realmguard. Welcome!"

"Uh, you're what?" Nope! Back to investigating!

"Did anyone look over the body yet?" I asked. Turning, I glanced back over at the... utter mess that the Fleshshaper had made of her.

Annah perked, then shook her head slowly to me. "I gave it a once-over for magic, but I kind of figured the medical analysis itself would have to be your job. Is there anything I can do to help?" Right, I was the medical mage. Not that I hadn't done an autopsy before. Of Inaga or otherwise.

I nodded to her, then gestured to the medical kit as I made my way over to the body instead. Annah grabbed it, then followed me back over, a few steps behind now. "From what I'd seen, there wasn't any magic on her at all. Of course, if it was a True Alchemy artifact that did all this, that made sense. The glow from the veins and bulbous growths appears to be entirely biological in nature, as well as the glow from her eyes. She wasn't a mage, and has no mana pool inside her." Right... Comforting.

Mela followed as well, pulling out a more mundane sheet of paper from the gear we'd packed. "Yeah. Here's the rundown. Subject's a dark-fur variant Inaga female, with Larid-based essence patches in her. A hundred and thirty-four centimeters in height, not including ears. Thirty-eight and a quarter kilograms in weight. Age eighty-seven. Laridia noble, trade clan roots from Keldonia. Leader of the Male Traditionalist movement, and outspoken critic of all medical evidence pointing at a shift in male Inaga instincts. She was found dead, here, approximately forty minutes ago when her guards came to check up on her. They immediately reported to Queen Calien instead, expressing extreme horror and shock. They did not approach her, out of fear of the circle around her and suspecting True Alchemy."

That was remarkably astute for city guards, admittedly. At least, from my experiences with them, which had been largely negative. I'd already activated medical scanners, and gotten a basic temperature reading versus the room's. "Rate of cooling places of death at about an hour and twenty minutes ago."

"Confirmed. That syncs up with the augury as well." Mela nodded to me at that, and I moved fully over to the body now, while she continued narrating. "Subject appears to be impaled on her spine, shaped via True Alchemy artifact, approximately seventy-five centimeters off the floor. Black growths cover her skin, with most of her fur having fallen off around the affected areas. Bioluminescent veins and bubbles cover the affected flesh, glowing red in color. Her eyes have been observed to glow the same."

It didn't take long to note quite a lot inside her, too. "Cause of death was abrupt fragmentation of her ribcage, causing damage to her heart, lungs, stomach, upper intestines, left kidney, and liver. Trauma and shock more than likely set in immediately due to multiple organ failure. Her spine was altered *after* her death, noted due to blood patterns or lack thereof." I tried to be professional, but her entire chest and abdomen internal body cavities had been shredded by her own bones. It was... I'd never seen injuries like this before. Then the blood just sort of leaked out after she was impaled on her spine.

“That explains the excessive amount of blood pooling under her. So, whomever did this, did so for the spectacle, more than likely...” Annah looked disgusted at the thought, and I sighed and nodded. Definitely a... very mentally deranged individual.

Instead, I looked over her left arm, it being the closest one to me. Tentatively, I lifted it with my gloved paws, feeling the consistency and being... surprised to find it remarkably solid. For the state her flesh was in, I expected a lot of degradation and flaking. “Her tissue is rough and leathery, which isn’t what I expected. The veins themselves appear to be hot, however, indicating that whatever’s producing the glow is also producing heat. I’ve never seen a disease or infection like this, though. But... from what I can tell, it... It seems to have infected her *after* her death, which doesn’t make any sense at all.” I frowned, feeling over one of the bulbous areas and finding it stiff, yet yielding. Definitely a fluid pocket of some sort.

Annah shook her head. “The symptoms and appearance don’t match any known diseases. For sapient species, anyway.”

My ears perked at that, and I looked back to her. She nodded, however. “A few years back, we encountered a few wild Kargor up closer to Koramir lands that had... remarkably similar issues. They were still alive though. The rangers reporting it kept their distance, and when we moved back in to try to capture them, they couldn’t be located anymore. The tracker darts had ceased functioning.” Well then... That was bad. Especially with a species as... aggressively carnivorous as Kargor.

I looked back to the body, frown deepening. “If this is suddenly becoming zoonotic, this could be cause for major concern. I’m going to have to take samples and analyze them to find out more about exactly what it’s doing to her body, but it appears to be a highly aggressive infection of some sorts. Did she have this before and her death accelerated it? Or was it given to her after her death, though?”

I knew nothing about whatever this was, which scared me. Turning her head gently towards me, I looked into her eyes, noting that red glow there too, as well as highly discolored sclera. Dark brown to almost black in splotches. This was... crazy. Annah sighed and nodded to that. “Figuring out what’s causing the glow, as well as what it’s doing to her tissue, is number one priority...”

My scan shifted to her arm instead, as I turned it, paw pad up. “The... infection, we’ll call it, goes deep into her tissue. Right to the bone here in the arms. It’s changed everything. As far as I can tell, it appears to be changing the nature of the tissue itself. The outer skin seems to be tougher and more leathery, but the muscles are... the muscle fibers themselves appear to have been compounded more densely. But I’m not... seeing a dramatic increase in weight like there should be.”

I gestured to the right, and Annah lifted the medical kit to me. If she were still alive, I probably would have used a medium or large width needle and carefully draw samples from her. But the odds of not getting the right samples with that method was always a concern. Thanks to her most definitely *not* being alive to complain, however, I jumped right to the incision biopsy option instead, and selected a scalpel and several retractors.

The tissue was surprisingly difficult to get an incision into, being resistant to cutting. But I managed to get one carefully made on her shoulder, about six centimeters long, then open it wider with the retractors. Annah held them after, and I switched to surgical scissors and graspers. It didn’t take long to get samples, placed in several sample jars, including an entirely extracted bulbous pocket of the glowing

fluid. My eyes widened as I did, and slight spillage from one of the veins oozed out and onto the floor. Wait, what...? It was still red in color, but where it spilled, that painted shade of pink and purple spread too!

“Wait, what? The fluid is charged with Aether!” Annah stepped back, widening her eyes as the fluid ignited as it contacted the floor, warping the air around it as the energy burned off and evaporated. It was a prismatic sort of flame, and I frowned. This infection was Aether in nature?!

Mela swallowed uneasily at that. “Aether...? As in, the energy from... outside our realm? That powers True Alchemy?”

I started to nod, when Otria’s eyes suddenly moved. I froze, widening my own as hers locked onto me. ...what? But... she was dead. How? Her arm moved an instant later, reaching forward with a surprising burst of speed and latching onto my left shoulder! Her paw had... shifted, though, changing as she lashed out, and each dull claw extended into an almost scythe-like blade, slick with the glowing red fluids.

Points of hot pain stabbed right through my environmental suit and into my left shoulder in an instant, and I let out a shrill scream, trying to pull away from her sudden steel-like grip! “Exes!” Annah shouted next to me, eyes widen in shock for a split second, before everything suddenly... went hazy. I gave a jerk, feeling like burning heat was rushing into my body from where she grabbed me! My vision flickered a moment later. Cracks over the moon, leaking glowing red blood, and the feeling of worms crawling under my skin.

The air had grown... cold. Really cold, an instant later. I’d never seen a mage able to form and release magic so quickly, as Annah’s right paw snapped up in a sudden surge of blue mana. Otria’s arm snap froze, skin blackening in the same instant as it frosted over, then fragmented and shattered apart with the force of the blast. Her magic blew the arm right off Otria’s body!

I fell backwards, landing with a dull thud, and her arm falling away from me and onto the floor, even as Mela rushed to crouch next to me instead. She kicked the still twitching and grabbing arm away from me, and suddenly it just... exploded! Bits of flesh and bone scattered in about a half a meter radius, igniting in sudden, searing heat. Annah grabbed both of us and dove away from the body with surprising strength, even as the entire thing broke down and *popped* in a series of small detonations. Flames lapsed over the entire thing, quickly igniting the floor around it and bringing everything to a blaze within seconds!

Annah turned with us, barrier of mana around us as she lifted her right paw up, blasting the flames back with ice magic. The room shifted rapidly between hot and cold, the air turning into a haze as bursts of steam came off the corpse bits, moisture from inside the body rapidly evaporating into the air. But Annah’s magic won out the tug of war, and soon there was just sizzling bits of meat and bone all over the floor, blackened now to almost unrecognizability. Fuck! I stared in shock at the mess as the steam momentarily turned to snow, with surfaces in the bedroom now frosting over instead.

Wincing, I turned and looked at my shoulder, noticing the biohazard material shredded there, and blood leaking down my arm. *Fuck!*

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I'd been brought to the medical ward almost immediately, of course, after getting sprayed down with a whole lot of alchemical antiseptics. The same medical mage from before was on, now in his own biohazard suit and looking like he was getting kind of really tired of my shit. I felt bad for not being able to remember his name until I saw the nameplate floating over his head. Right, Yinkar!

There was just... nothing though. The wounds on my shoulder turned out to be almost superficial. Barely a centimeter deep, and not nearly as bad as I thought they were. I did my own medical scans on top of his, but neither of us could find a single abnormality in me. Not even True Alchemy picked up anything out of the ordinary. Was that infection... not contagious in the slightest, then? I'd gone through almost a dozen scans now and literally, there was just... nothing.

Now, I was released again with just a simple bandage on my shoulder. I leaned against the wall in Calien's office, listening to her and Lilita talk. She'd accepted becoming a member of Realmsguard easily enough, and had been getting caught up to speed with our information the entire time I was in the medical ward, it seemed. But... we'd lost everything.

That fire had been extremely localized, yet insanely hot. The body had been almost charred to ash, and there wasn't a single spec of that weird infection left. Further, Otria had been very, very dead. Most of her internal organs were practically liquid. But she'd very clearly looked at me, then attacked me. How? Why? She didn't have a reason to attack me at all, but... was that really even her? There weren't any answers, however. With everything destroyed, it looked like whomever had done this had covered their tracks entirely. What was the point of any of it? Given the infection was Aether-powered however, I had the extreme urge to try to investigate myself even further with True Alchemy, later.

Calien sighed, then slowly nodded to Lilita. "I can only assume this is more manipulation by the Cult of the Shattering, involving Exes. It's all the more important that he leave Larid tomorrow."

"Yeah, it's starting to look that way. Though their motives remain unknown. This is the most active they've ever been. But Exes should be far safer in Kaldar." Lilita gave a soft smile at that, seemingly quite certain of the fact. I'd thought the palace was safe too, but... Was Kaldar really that much safer for me?

I looked down at my comm, with both ongoing conversations to Kada and Exir. They were both worried after the lockdown, but I made sure to let them know I was okay and that it was being handled. I assumed that Exir would tell Exia, Yimir, and Niva anyway. Mom had also been kept in the loop once the lockdown hit. But I'd already assumed that, given there weren't any new holes in the palace.

Annah sighed, leaning against the wall next to me. "It's just frustrating that we don't know how they're getting in and out of places. It seems to be entirely True Alchemy based. Or it could be just this individual. It seems to have been the same one that Exes saw before." If true, that was quite the broad spectrum of responses. Giving me the book in one paw, and violently murdering someone in the other. Of course, I couldn't probably count the book as an act of generosity, more than likely. They wanted me to have it for a *reason*, I assumed.

Relaxing next to Lilita on the couch, Kyry shook her head. "Your perimeter is clean. Other than the city guards being a pretty substantial security hole, I didn't find much. A couple undercover reporters, three vantage points with people watching the palace from a distance, and one of your maids having a tendency to listen at doors and gossip too much. The report's already in and available in your comm."

Calien chuckled at that, then slowly nodded. “Admittedly, I’d started with my doubts about Realmsguard, but now I just wish you’d brought me into it earlier. Ruling in the dark as I have been hasn’t been pleasant.”

Lilita gave a slow nod to that. “Yes. We’re sorry about that, but we do have to do some significant vetting of anyone we move to recruit, for obvious reasons. It took us a while to do that in this political climate.” Calien smirked at that, then nodded.

“You mean the government having so many information leaks that the gossip may as well have its own news outlet? Yes, I can agree with that assessment. We’re unfortunately in the middle of a lot of social changes, and I consider it a good day when nothing gets bombed or set on fire...” I would have laughed, but I was pretty sure that wasn’t her being facetious.

Annah gave a nod to that. “Well hopefully more peacekeepers and a stronger international presence will help calm things down. Though, it’s late now and we should all probably turn in, if we’re leaving early tomorrow morning.”

Calien smiled and nodded. “Yes, of course. Exes especially after all the excitement.”

I gave a chuckle to that, then leaned off the wall again, standing fully. “Excitement is one word for it. Still, True Alchemy is tiring, so yeah, I could definitely use some sleep.” My right paw touched my chest, and I sealed my Key again, feeling my eyes tingle as the rush of information receded. I was getting all new appreciation for my eye upgrade every time I used it. Was that the reason they gave me the book? That seemed like a stretch. They had no way of knowing I’d do all of that, did they?

She grinned. “Indeed. Though I’m quite pleased, admittedly. You’re growing into your position in record speed, Exes. I think Chronak would be proud of you.” I paused at that, meeting her eyes for a moment but finding only soft warmth to her expression. No, I think she was right there. She knew him quite a bit too. The real Chronak; not just the grumpy façade he frequently wore.

“I hope so. But I think I’m going to need to learn a whole lot more if we’re going to get ahead of this cult.”

Annah’s paw touched gently against my shoulder, careful of the bandage there. “There’s time for that still, don’t worry. For now, though, you need rest.” Right...

We said our goodnights anyway, and I followed the three back out into the hallway, heading for the elevator again. Admittedly, I was indeed tired now. Maybe I should have taken a page from Mela and turned in early an hour ago. Augury apparently took a lot out of you, too. “Well, admittedly, this was exciting at least. In a sucky sort of way, but still...” Kyry gave a shrug as we slipped into the elevator, and Annah chuckled.

“I suppose so, yeah. Still, I think I’d rather have just spent the night playing cards, like we’d originally planned.” Oh?

Kyry grinned at my ear perk, then winked my way. “Just Twenty-One. Strip, of course.” I raised a skeptical eyebrow to her, and her grin widened. “We’d invite you, but with True Alchemy, you basically automatically cheat. No offense.” Hey!

Lilita rolled her eyes at that, and Annah huffed instead. “Where’s the fun with stripping games if there’s no boys?”

The Jakatar narrowed her eyes a little at that, grin shifting to an impish smirk instead. “One of these days I’ll get you to try girls too. Besides, how can you call yourself a true Vulkus bitch if you won’t hunt other females for your alpha?”

Lilita, at least, remembered to hit the button for the third floor on the elevator. “Do you really have to be romantically interested in females in order to proposition them for your mate, though?” That *was* a good question.

Kyry scoffed at that. “If you want to seduce them, probably. But eh, Annah won’t have to worry about that if she goes after Exes anyway. He’s basically full up on females already. Er, and Kada.” Annah flushed at that and shot her a glare, but I just chuckled.

“I wonder what he’d think if I told him everyone kept forgetting he was a male?” I was at least getting used to their banter, now, it felt like.

To my surprise, though, it was Lilita that giggled softly. “I’m not sure there. Has he ever considered crossdressing? He might look extra adorable in a skirt.” Well, not *entirely* used to their banter. I felt my cheeks flush a bit at that, and Kyry grinned again.

Mercifully, the elevator door opened once more, and the three of us exited again, on my wing of the building. They’d insisted on escorting me to my room, just in case. “Well, I’m sure we’ll have a chance to talk to him ourselves during the train ride. I’m sure he’d give it a try though if Exes asked him to.” I gave Kyry a pointed stare at that one, and she burst into snickering.

Annah shook her head, then turned more fully to me instead. “Anyway, get some rest, Exes. It’s an early start tomorrow heading out for Talgrand. Kyry’s right there and we can all at least talk more on the train ride.” She shot me a warmer smile, and I relaxed again, returning it to her. I think she’d been right in her earlier comm message. It felt... better to clear the air with them a bit now.

“Yeah. I think I will. Thanks for the escort, and I’ll see all three of you tomorrow morning.” Of course, it was late enough to almost be ‘later today’ instead.

They all gave nods to that, and I relaxed again, finally feeling... maybe a little better now. Despite how unpleasant things had been, at least I felt like things were looking up a little. Or, at least, maybe I’d gotten the lowest point out of the way now. Though, I shouldn’t jinx myself. I headed into my room again afterwards, and was immediately pounced sideways by Kada’s flying hug.