

Every damn second spent waiting for Irao to return cost Viv a year of lifespan, or it would have if she didn't really have a lifespan anymore. Her heart thundered in her chest and she bit her tongue not to swear in case the potted golem had ears. Solfis spent the entire thirty seconds inspecting his inferior brethren. When the Hadal returned, he had the audacity to lift an eyebrow and point at the door.

Viv realized that she technically could have started on opening it. This was her part of the job. Now she was angry at herself for acting stupid. Great. With a silent sigh, Viv got to it.

The net covering the door was exactly as Abe had recreated it. She had practiced on that construct until she could stretch it reliably and quickly, yet she still took her time. There was no reason to hurry. The change of the guard would take another half an hour at the very least and the only thing they were bound to find was not-safe-for-work material. With deliberate focus, she made a decent sized opening in the structure, leaving the enchanted steel exposed. A last inspection using her mana senses confirmed that there were no spells directly on the other side. Everything was normal.

Viv called a thin Excalibur, then muffled the sound made by cutting the opening. Once she finished separating a disc, it was a simple matter to levitate the hunk of metal on the floor, taking great care not to trigger a pressure plate. Irao went first, then Viv followed him with Solfis watching over her.

The safe room was small and cramped with safes piled on top of one another. Elunath's safe was at the back. They stuck to the ceiling once again since the entire ground floor was made of pressure plate in this room. There were no more wards except those on the safes. Viv notices that Elunath had an additional layer of defense. Unfortunately for him, they were all near the lock so Viv simply cut a hole near the hinges. They ended up with a head-sized gap in the protective steel. It was now time to check the loot. She excitedly glanced through the opening.

What she saw surprised her at first. There were no obvious valuables. Only stacks of documents tied together alongside a little black notebook she picked up after checking for lingering enchantments. It was encrypted in some script she'd never seen though the structure of the text evoked a list of profiles. Abe would probably be able to make sense of it. She picked an errant document at random. She opened it.

It was a saucy letter thanking a certain 'Lezebeth', or Lezzie, for a night of torrid carnal acts, and it was signed 'your Bareon'. At first, Viv recoiled before the medieval equivalent of sexting but soon, the names triggered an old memory from her ethics class.

Lezebeth Icarina, leader of the Builders Guild.

Bareon Adolis, current head of the minority faction in the Council of Elders.

Definitely no formal alliance. Most definitely married to other people.

Holy shit.

Viv opened another. It was a financial record with circles around what she immediately recognized as 'creative accounting'. Another document was a will repudiating an important socialite. There were dozens of similar documents.

That was... Elunath's entire collection of blackmail material, organized and ready for plunder. She immediately shoved everything into a bag, only stopping to check for enchantments. There were none. She turned excitedly to find that Irao had opened another safe and removed a fancy cup made of bone with inserted black pearls and a tiny little skull. It looked tacky and quite old. Irao certainly seemed to like it. With his trophy obtained, they were ready to depart.

Viv resisted the urge to open more safes. She was here to mess with Elunath, not ruin families.

Had to resist. She was here for the lesser evil which was more or less the greater good if one thought about it.

Solfis waited for them outside. The plan had always been to use his monstrous strength to carry their loot, in case it was something massive. His assistance would not be needed after all but Viv still wanted to give him the bag to hold. She stopped and gawked as soon as she was out.

Solfis was hanging upside down with his feet and hands firmly anchored on handholds like the universe's ugliest, deadliest sloth. Attached to his body like a baby sloth by stolen curtain ropes... was the bank's golem.

Viv firmly gestured her incomprehension.

//You can talk, Your Grace.

//I have taken the liberty of deactivating the golem.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

//I am stealing.

//You unequivocally gave me the permission to do so.

"I didn't say you could steal their fucking security system!"

//You never forbade it either, Your Grace.

"What do you even intend to do with that thing?"

//A great many things which should not be listed right now.

“Great. Fantastic. Isn’t it too heavy?”

//I have secured it to my satisfaction.

Viv resisted the urge to slap her face. It was her fault. Her fault. And arguing with Solfis was an exercise in futility. At this stage, she just wanted out.

“Ok well fine, fiiiine. Let’s just leave then. I’ve had enough.”

The crew retraced their steps, Irao recovering his handholds as they retreated past the sleeping couple and up to the atrium where they waited for the poor dog and guard pair to be at a respectable distance. Viv felt sorry for that unfortunate lady who would probably be fired alongside everyone else although she was the only one doing her job. They retreated to the third floor where the director and his rival had started another round, then absconded through the window. The escape was surprisingly eventless. As soon as everyone had gathered on the theater’s roof, they took off and returned to the Chalice with no one the wiser.

The next morning.

Two men in the gambeson of Helock’s guard sat on the step of the previously unassailable Bank of Helock, smoking pipes under the curious gaze of a crowd of gossips. The younger one sighed heavily.

“That’s some mess we got on our hands.”

“Damn right,” the other replied, “in thirty years of career I’ve never seen the like. No wards triggered. No missing guards. No seals broken. No signs of entry of any sort. If it weren’t for the damaged safe room door, no one would have noticed the theft until the customers came.”

“They cut through enchanted steel too, and without bleeding mana. And without melting it! Who the fuck can even do that?”

“I don’t know. Hell, I’m scared to find out. No one is safe in this city. It’s a terrifying thought.”

“Yep. Never seen such a flawless job before. One thing’s for sure. We’re dealing with gods-damned professionals.”

Elunath held two new pamphlets in his trembling hands. Rage filled him in a way that no emotion had touched in a very long time.

“What is the meaning of this? I killed that idiot myself. WHY DO THEY HAVE MORE OF THOSE?”

His gaze landed on Sen.

“They must have anticipated it.”

She pointed at the first pamphlet.

“Is Elunath afraid of the truth?”

Yesterday, our previous copier was found killed by a falling boulder.

It happened one day after he bravely showed the truth about Elunath.

Coincidence? You decide.

Elunath is trying to silence us but the truth will always come out!”

“They must have anticipated your move,” she said.

Elunath dragged her bodily with kinesis until she stopped against his desk with a pained huff. He had never used violence with her yet but that was her fault for provoking him. She should know better.

“Are you saying I’ve been outwitted by her? HER?”

“You had no choice but to react,” Sen croaked, “so she had notes ready. Her or someone else.”

“Yes! Yes. She has a low, animal cunning but she lacks the intellectual faculties to come up with such a devious plan. She must have received help from... someone. Most likely my political opponents. I need to... visit him again. Remind him of the cost of duplicity.”

He glared at the second pamphlet.

“Elunath purchased dark gods artifacts.

It should be expected when one believes himself above the law. Elunath has purchased a cursed club bearing the mark of a dark god, according to a sworn witness to the transaction.

This dark staff could be anywhere in our fair city, spreading its vicious corruption.

Protect your families from the clutches of evil!”

The piece of paper was shredded by an uncontrolled burst of mana.

“That bitch sold that thing to me herself. The gall. The audacity. The hypocrisy! I will not spend a second more than necessary on this sorry diversion. I ought to be obtaining ink for your tattoos, not wasting time chasing a rat! What of my orders?”

He caught another glare filled with venom from Lana. That decided it. Bedding Renea yesterday had been nice but this time, Lana would get a reminder.

“Renea and the mercenaries didn’t find anyone because no one recharged the sound speakers. They faded in the morning. Instead, someone installed more sound speakers in different parts of town, mostly near the south gate.”

“They saw such enchantments as disposable?” Elunath asked with disbelief.”

“They appear well prepared,” Lana replied with a shrug. “As for the patrols outside of the walls, they have found several smugglers hideouts but no signs of her so far.”

“The city guard?”

“Their best investigators are busy with an important theft.”

“So they are delaying, as expected! Except killing the scribe you two found, which is something I did myself, nothing was achieved! Nothing! Can I count on anybody around here?”

“They are obviously well-prepared,” Lana finished after a short hesitation.

“You keep blabbering that excuse. It really is true. One can only count on oneself. You two go out and find a way to ‘motivate’ those mercenaries. Our foe comes and goes too easily to be very far. FIND THEM.”

They left in a hurry.

Elunath sat back in his chair and regretfully discarded the mail containing the ink and tattoo patterns he intended to purchase. It was time to drop the act. His servants would be marked as one announced their ownership. The contract gave them entirely too much leeway, and enforcing it required active focus on his part. The magic more or less warned him if someone was actively working against his interests but he needed to react to inflict pain. Tattoos were much more... visceral in their enforcements of magical binds. With those, he would no longer have to fear half-truths and secret sabotage. But that was for later. For now, he had a bug to squash.

No matter what, making so many copies had to cost a lot of money. She had to be getting it from somewhere. Bareon Adolis was a good place to start. If he wasn’t responsible himself, his path would let him find who might be. He would comply if he knew what was good for him.

Elunath fell through the ground and swam through the rock towards the distant shape of Bareon’s manor.

AN: Hello everyone! After experimenting with shorter, more regular chapters for all of two chapters, I have come to the realization that I mindlessly hate it. Next update will be the normal size on Friday. Cheers!