

The next morning Avys lay in her bed, staring dumbfoundedly at the room's ceiling. It was a good way past dawn and she should have long gotten up... yet she had not. Minute after minute, time ticked by until a knock sounded on the door.

"You seem like you could use a bit of help, Avys," Calm walked in without waiting to be answered.

"Very funny," she snorted. "I am not sure I can move."

"Truly, the strains of your work are harsh."

"Are men on this side of the mountains just built differently?" she wondered out loud. There was no point in wondering just in her head anyway.

"Not from what I could tell so far," Calm replied. "Though body modification is likely far more available."

"I don't think I have ever been so outmatched," she said, still not even twitching. "Maybe it's because of all the traveling."

"You challenged a fat superior mage to a contest of stamina. Did you think you would win?" Calm shook his head. "And seeing your thoughts, I should remind you that sex is not a strong foundation to base a relationship on."

"No, but it's a good start," she tried to look over at Calm but gave up after a moment.

"The gentleman had also left a potion behind, perhaps anticipating such an outcome," Calm shook his head.

"And you only tell me that *now*?"

"In my defense, it was amusing," he stepped closer, said potion already in hand. He basically lifted half her torso up, then almost force-fed her the liquid with the little cooperation she could manage. The effect was invigorating though. Almost immediately the aches vanished and strength returned to her limbs.

"I really hope this is not one of those that stop working after a few minutes," Avys sighed, experimentally stretched her limbs, then finally got up.

"Presumably not," Calm nodded. "So, it seems like everything is going to plan. Except for maybe one thing."

"I cannot be sure he meets Johnson's demands," Avys nodded. And she was not eager to break a deal made. Twice so while she did not truly understand how powerful Johnson may truly be.

"You do seem convinced he does," Calm noted. "I also do find it likely, though with far less certainty than you."

"We have almost two months left. Plenty to subtly obtain such answers," she said, though by the look on Calm's face, he was thinking about the same thing she was.

That while she certainly hoped Ezax would be everything that Johnson was hoping for... perhaps the doctor could be replaced instead.

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And how quickly that time passed. Surprisingly so, even.

Yes, Avys was still scheming how to reinforce Abonisle being loyal to Ezax - and quite successfully at that - but there was frankly not actually that much for her to do. Coincidentally, Ezax had very few actual duties. That led to a lot more time spent together.

Not scheming, unfortunately. Ezax was extraordinarily resistant against any attempts to bring the discussion to his background, therefore Avys quickly left those turbulent waters and focused on more obtainable information. For all Ezax had called himself an exile, he was intimately familiar with high politics in the Duchy of Black for which he possessed great insight.

And he was brilliant, if not at scheming. There was wit behind his eyes that Avys admired as equal to hers, merely directed in different areas than her own. Magic for one. Ezax had always been vague about the exact extent of his power... but there had to be a lot. She and Calm had gathered as much from context and how the other soldiers spoke of him. How the two other commanders treated him.

In fact, the last commander, a known hermit and scholar, had literally been converted into a follower by Ezax offering *advice* to the seemingly much older man. When she had half-joked about it, he simply said that 'looks can be deceiving'. She wondered then how much older her companion actually was, though eventually decided against asking. He certainly showed no signs of aging.

Before Avys knew it, a month passed. The more days flew by.

As the time of the doctor's return approached, she did start bringing up Johnson in their conversations. First just vaguely as a likely ally, then more exactly until eventually as her second month in Abonisle drew near to ending almost fully.

She liked to think that she could trust Ezax more than she ever had anyone else by then... she wasn't even sure why though Calm had assured her there was no 'outside influence'. Their goals seemed perfectly aligned, even if Ezax had yet to gather the will to fight back against whatever family issues he so intently avoided mentioning. But she had noticed his dissatisfaction with that. Desire to overcome it. It was only a matter of time before he decided to grab hold of it. She expected that perhaps Johnson would be the one to supply the pressure needed. *Then* her work would truly start.

Instead, it came four days before the two-month deadline.

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"Avys, wake up," Ezax gently nudged her, stirring the schemer from sleep. She was confused for a few seconds, realizing after a moment that she was not in her room.

At first, Ezax had started staying long enough to see in the morning. More lately, she had spent many a night at the borderline mansion that for some reason made up his accommodations among the military facilities. But that was beside the point of her situation. She noted that it was still dark out, not even near dawn.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Drink," he said, putting a potion to her lips. She did, and her aches faded before Avys even realized they were there. "An emergency, dress quickly."

He was not yet wearing anything himself, meaning that whatever was happening was urgent and likely very recent. By the time Avys had put a dress on he was still long ready, of course. Ezax could move imperceptibly fast if he wanted to.

"Leave the jewelry, there might be no time," he said, grabbing her hand and gently but firmly leading her out at a fast pace... for her. Perhaps it was good that she did not have the leisure to put on her high heels.

"What is the matter?" which only worried her more. Just as they made it out of the corridor right next to the bedroom she suddenly began to hear sirens. In the middle of ringing from all around the town.

"Something stirs, something comes," Ezax said, staring into the distance as they walked.

"Thank you for not being overly cryptic," she frowned.

"You know, my father had a hypothesis," Ezax still would not answer her straight. "That Fate works in patterns and picks favorites. But that this favor can be terrible indeed. Because when it sees its most beloved individual on *just* the brink of greatness, it will try to force them over that edge."

"What are you saying?" Avys fought down rising fear as they were quickly leaving the mansion. Soldiers were beginning to swarm around though the two of them seemed among the first.

"A tribulation, Avys," he said, face severe. "A way to prove my mettle and rise... or die a failure forever."

"Please, can you speak straight?" Avys took a deep breath and clutched at the wrist still softly dragging her other arm along.

"Something terrible is rising from the lake Avys," he looked at her then, intensity in her eyes. "A horror the likes of me should not be able to overcome. You cannot feel it, but I do."

"What happens then since it cannot be fought?"

"We have great weapons prepared here, just for this eventuality... but they are not quite enough," he explained. "All the formations and great weapons prepared here for *exactly* this will not be enough to win. I hope it will give us a fighting chance at least. Abonisle has fallen before, Avys. Many times, over the millennia. If it does again, run. You might be beneath its notice and appetite."

"What are you even...!?" she began to speak, but Ezax shouted over her.

"Captain Melisa," his voice carried, gathering the attention of a woman rushing by near them.

“What is happening, sir?” she asked with worry, approaching with haste. The soldier barely glanced at Avys. Her visits were clandestine but not enough so that most officers would not notice. There was no real need to go that far with secrecy so she had not.

“The lake stirs, spread the word,” he gravely commanded. “Everyone at peak conception at long-range support. Domains will all have to fight. Ready our every contingency. I have already notified City Black of the situation. Follow the Crumbling Doctrine.”

“Yes, sir,” the Captain seemed thrice as worried as before but immediately ran to notify as many of the quickly appearing soldiers as she could.

“Where are we going?” Avys asked

“You are going to relative safety. Listen, if I fail...”

“You won’t,” Avys said, suppressing another nudge of fear in her heart.

“If only I could be so certain,” he chuckled bitterly.

“You. Will. Not. Fail,” Avys grabbed at his face and he did not resist. She forced him to stare into her eyes and willed them to *burn* with certainty. Few could fake that kind of intensity, which was why it was such a powerful tool. “I will not run. Don’t you *dare* die on me tonight.”

“Will do,” he smiled at that. “Fate calls. I suppose I will see you soon.”

Then he waved for another nearby soldier, a Lieutenant, to escort Avys to safety.

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There were no great blows or quakes within the underground shelter. In fact, the room was almost comfortable with all the luxuries and amenities one might expect. Avys shared it with Lieutenant Amalleous as well as several other officers with good connections but apparently not enough power to participate in the battle above.

“The surveillance equipment just broke,” one of them announced about ten minutes after Avys had arrived with tangible fear in their voice. “Whatever it is, just its presence overwhelmed it.”

There were nervous conversations and Avys participated almost absentmindedly. Her thoughts were elsewhere and she *desperately* wanted news. But there were none to be had - communication has been mostly cut off. They had to have faith that *someone* would come and notify them when things were over.

Minutes crawled by. 15, 30, then almost a full hour as Avys counted. All in stomach clenching dread. Nothing had reached them. Then...

The walls of the shelter cracked, a tremble coursed through the room, knocking everyone off of their feet or even chairs. Like a single moment of an earthquake. There was a wail heard after that, so overwhelming it coursed even through metal and stone to reach them. Then silence again.

“A-all clear signal,” one of her co-shelterers spoke with a stutter. Avys immediately tried to rush out but the hallway outside their fortification had collapsed. Thankfully it took the group of mages only a few minutes to find a way out to the surface in spite of that.

Outside was complete and utter devastation. Abonisle had been a town. Avys stared, remembering what had still been there not much longer than an hour prior. Working infrastructure, military facilities... buildings.

There was not a single intact foundation left standing *anywhere* as far as the eye could see, much less a house. It was beyond a force of nature, that would usually leave *something* behind intact. But even the omnipresent rubble wasn't the worst sign of devastation though: Those were the holes. Deep, so deep they dipped into the darkness of the void ever present beneath their feet until the bottom could not be seen.

And in the distance, she noticed the carcass. Even from so far away, it was clearly large... But not so massive as to cause such levels of destruction. Perhaps a few stories of a building at most, not longer than a shop's lobby. Not gargantuan. Not a city-breaker at a glance.

But as she came closer, Avys naturally recognized it. Almost anyone would. The monster of legends. Everyone had heard stories about them, even her, more than Avys could count. She also knew from her education that almost every supposed 'sighting' was either made up or a misidentification of a far lesser monster. That they were virtually extinct in the lands she had lived all her life – or in hindsight, perhaps just uninterested. But right in front of her, it was undeniable:

It was a dragon, scales darker than the night sky. Blacker than the color itself. And it was dead. Lacerated by a thousand cuts, one wing cut clean off and a massive hole going from the inside of its jaw all the way to the top of its head.

Avys was not the first to arrive, not by far. Many soldiers had made it there first. Some stared in mute awe while a few were fussing around a figure sitting on the ground. Grievously wounded by every possible account.

“Ezax,” she yelled, rushing forward. “Are you all right?”

“I will live,” he was still bleeding profusely. His right arm had been reduced to an ugly stump. “Do you remember the promise you made when I first offered you wine?”

“Yes,” Avys nodded firmly. She had promised men that would be willing to die for him. She saw no other notable survivors. Not a trace of the other commanders. Not even corpses.

“Come Avys,” he said. “I owe you that much, and more.”

“Your...” Avys spoke with horror and indignation, pointing at the mangled limb. He clearly needed treatment.

“It will be fixed,” he said uncaringly. Then stood up and walked away. The bleeding was... stopping? No one even tried to get in his way. “Come, Avys. Come witness my triumph.”

*Besides the dead dragon?* She thought. There was something manic to Ezax... but also joyous. The dragon was clearly dead, black blood still pouring from it in some places, the ground visibly corroding away wherever it dropped. Yet Ezax still moved in anticipation of something else. How could Avys not follow?

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He led her to a hallway beneath the ruins of his once residence that Avys had never seen. Even on the way it was oppressively dark... like the shadows clung to their own edges despite the lighting. Like they refused to be vanquished or even lessened.

That only got stranger. Ezax kept reassuring her that she just needed to follow, almost manic. *How long even was the corridor?* But further and further they went, the lights glowing dimmer until they eventually stopped.

“Here, apply this to your eyes,” Ezax paused giving her a potion. “It will allow you to see, if only temporarily.”

She nodded, thinking it would merely grant her proper vision in the dark – already a wonderful effect. Instead, it forced her to see so much more. The moment she opened her eyes after applying it, she flinched backwards. The Void flowed around like a river, each blink glimpsing a secret she could never hope to understand. She saw shades of black that could not possibly exist. She witnessed a thousand different and completely unique *nothings* in every direction.

“What is all *this?*” she felt herself wavering beneath it all. “How do I even describe this?”

“It is a rare thing, that potion,” Ezax said, continuing ever further and forcing Avys to follow. “Simply put, it grants insight into the Void, through the eyes specifically. I had used it many times over my years here... until it scarcely had any effect on me anymore. But for you, as weak as your magic is, it will allow you to witness a fraction of what I do.”

“You see all *this?* All the time?” Avys gaped. “How do you not go *mad?*”

“Does breathing drive one crazy?” Ezax chuckled, at least he was talking again. “Is blinking difficult? You see so little but please, try to understand. I do not just see what you do. I *live* this and so much more. You may use magic but to me, it is a limb. And soon, I will be much more to it.”

“So, what is this about?” she finally asked.

“There are great divides in magic,” he said, finally coming to a stop in front of a door. It gradually ground open. The darkness within was so overwhelming Avys flinched, even though she could still see through it as easily as day. Because she could also see *into* it. “Bottlenecks, walls, fetters... whatever term one might use. I have long stood near one, Avys. I have been staring into that lake for 50 years, waiting for an impossibility. Stuck before a leap further than the stars. Sipping at every potion and remedy that money could buy, scrapping for the slightest insight until I had once almost given up.”

They entered and Ezax gestured for her to sit by the door. He stepped further in, then lowered himself onto the only feature in the room: A dais. To her enchanted eyes, it seemed like all the darkness gravitated toward it.

“I don’t know if it is coincidence, luck, or perhaps Fate nudging me forward,” he said. “But with your coming, things have begun to change. Still, I did not speak because, in all honesty, Avys, I

am too weak. No matter what scheme you conjure, I would not be able to carry it through against my family.”

“You have slain a dragon,” she pointed out.

“Yes, and with that act I have shed the Fate of inferiority,” Ezax smiled. Then he reached somewhere with his hand and withdrew two items. It took a moment for Avys to realize what they were: Eyeballs. The dragon’s eyes. “By the Mother’s grace, I have taken it. Through strife and peril, I have *finally* plundered a Truth. I have proven to be *worthy*.”

He stared at them with intensity Avys had never known. So much desire, so much longing... So much ambition. There it was, Avys thought. Exactly what she had hoped to make him pick up all along. She wanted to shiver but did not let herself despoil such a sacred moment.

“It all begins here, Avys, so witness me,” he was not even looking at her, so focused on his remaining palm. “Behold. My apotheosis.”

Then, with one smooth motion, he ripped out his mortal eyeballs.

What followed, Avys would never find the words to properly describe. Even if she truly beheld only a fraction of a fraction, she did not think they existed.

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Abonisle started to rebuilt astonishingly quickly. With mages, shelter has been erected in just the first day, enough to house everyone. Enough food had survived the catastrophe to feed the, frankly, diminished population for more than long enough. Further help would come.

Then there was one last fate left to resolve. Johnson had reached out to Avys, arranging a meeting not long after Ezax recovered. His hand had regrown seemingly without any healer and his exhaustion had passed. He had not changed overtly, no, but there was something fundamental about him that was greater. But Avys was no great mage and could not put it into words.

What came next would happen outside of Abonisle. Ezax was naturally interested in meeting the ‘likely benefactor’ Avys had revealed much about and they had implicitly agreed that should it be impossible or too difficult to meet Johnson’s demands, there would be no insistence tolerated on the doctor’s part.

Avys and Ezax chatted for a while. Until Johnson finally approached from a distance away, arriving almost exactly on time. He paused momentarily after seeing Ezax but kept going.

“He is exceptional at controlling his presence,” Ezax noted but did not seem worried in the least.

Then some kind of boundary was crossed when Johnson was about 20 meters or so away from them. He froze in place, eyes sharpening faster than Avys could perceive. It was the first time she had ever seen Johnson *tense*.

She looked to the side at Ezax and realized all signs of relaxation had left him. She had not seen him be this serious. Not even when he went to face the dragon. Then, it had been more

anticipation, the knowledge that a fight was coming - this was the face of already standing right in front of a *threat*.

"Is something the matter?" Avys asked but the two men kept staring into each other's eyes. They did not speak. Did not react. Not for several seconds.

"Are you also wondering if you had just walked into a trap," Johnson was the first to speak.

"Yes," Ezax nodded, much to Avys baffled glare.

"It seems... some matters of etiquette *do* escape Avys," Johnson slowly said. The tension seemed to be receding but not gone.

"I do not quite see what I could have done differently, given the circumstances," Avys said. "Nor do I see what faux pas I have committed."

"You cannot bring people like us together carelessly, Avys," Ezax slowly said. "Our natures might... clash. Which could lead to problems if we are not *ready* for that instinct to try overtaking us."

"Yes, very true," Johnson nodded. "Though it seems that our paths are not conflicting. And I hope neither are our interests."

"I was told you have made a deal with Avys," Ezax slowly nodded.

"And I see she has greatly surpassed my most optimistic estimates," Johnson nodded back. "It seems re-negotiations are in order."

"Have you shortchanged me so, Johnson?" Avys raised an eyebrow with a smile.

"You have received a rather generous offer from me at the time, as the risks were comparatively minimal and alternatives less appealing to my ends," Johnson glanced at her, also wearing a smile. A disarming friendly one. "But of course, things have clearly changed since then. Neither of you seem to understand how much your value has risen in my eyes, Avys. And in a way, so has mine to you."

"Curious," Ezax interrupted with a grin. "Feeling rather confident, are you? For someone *not* suited for battle. I can tell that much at a glance."

"I am absolutely certain that you cannot kill me, though being hunted by House Blackburg would be inconvenient," Johnson nodded. "I would have to delay my plans by centuries again should your family pursue a perceived grudge. Inconvenient."

"House Blackburg?" Avys' eyes widened, staring at Ezax who was given pause by the sudden revelation. Even she had heard that name. "Ezax? *That* is the origin you have been hiding?!"

"You have not known?" Johnson's own eyes widened. "Strange... unless... Ah, say, you wouldn't happen to be the first son of the fourth wife, would you?"

"Very familiar with our traditions, are you Lesh'xar?" Ezax's eyes narrowed. There was a flicker in them, the faux human shape slipping into something darker and more slit.

"Please, I cannot claim that title," Johnson shook his head. "And I have studied your family's methods of raising progeny, trying to uncover whether they actually held any tangible benefits."



However, I found them to be regretfully almost pointless or even counterproductive from the genetic perspective. Perhaps Fate might favor it, I suppose.”

“What does that even mean? Fourth son of the first wife? Is that a position of weakness?” Avys could only guess.

“It is a very rigid role to be born into,” Ezax spoke with a mighty frown. “By birth, they had decided I would be the Xildrallis, a dedicated scholar. A librarian! Ridiculous, downright outrageous.”

“How bad is that?” Avys remained out of the loop.

“It really depends on the person,” Johnson nodded. “I, personally, would have thrived, were it my fate. But the restrictions are harsh to some. No combat, no claim on the Dukeship, abstinence from all substances except mundane water and food... Celibacy.”

“Seriously?” Avys stared at him in disbelief. *Especially the last one*, the intrusive thought whispered.

“I have struggled long and hard just to get away from my ‘role’,” Ezax said. “Until *finally* I one day had the power to do as I wanted... as long as I stayed out of sight. House Blackburg has terrible reach indeed when it wants to drag you back into your place.”

“So, I assume that any claim to power on your part would go down poorly with the nobility?” Avys asked after a moment of processing.

“Exceedingly so,” Ezax nodded. “To this day, many still call for my death over slipping those chains, *while* I am completely out of the way.”

“How many brothers and sisters do you have, Ezax?” Avys was already scheming, mind spinning ahead.

“37 alive,” he answered. Avys wanted to gape but managed to control her reaction.

“How many do you like?” she instead nodded, moving on to her next point.

“Not a single one,” Ezax said coldly.

“Then I wonder, what would happen if all of them were to die?” she posed the question. Johnson stared. Ezax stared. Avys smiled. “If there was only a *single* remaining heir out of that entire line?”

“It would be incredibly foolish,” Ezax frowned. “There are only so many people you can slay before the rest realizes and gathers to kill you before you come to them.”

“Of course, silly,” she laughed. “Which is why you will actually only kill a few. 4 at most, I think, and make the battles look as pitched as believable. 37, huh, a lot to go through but I reckon that also means they will thin each other out quicker.”

“How would you even achieve that?” Ezax watched her in genuine bafflement.

“Oh, dear,” she could not help but smile. A genuine, joyous grin. “I have spent my *entire* life planning ways to get my siblings to kill each other. This? This feels like a purpose I never knew I

would fulfill.”

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“I... seem to have been forgotten,” Johnson reminded just as Avys marveled at the possibilities expanding in front of her.

“Ah, yes,” Avys nodded, a bit of tension returning. “Our deal.”

“You need me and I want what you have to offer so much it might as well be called a need,” Johnson nodded.

“Do we need you?” Ezax questioned.

“Of course you do,” Johnson nodded. “Otherwise, you will find Avys may not be... how do I say this without sounding guilty and antagonistic? Hmm... probably no way to do that. Avys might be *technically* speaking sterile by most metrics.”

“What have you done?” Avys’ eyes narrowed in outraged surprise. Was that a contingency of his? *Since when?*

“Nothing recently and it is not something intentional nor easily undone,” Johnson raised his hands while Ezax’s gaze sharpened. “It is merely your nature, Avys. And it *is* solvable.”

“Explain,” Ezax almost commanded.

“I have spent some 80 years at your family’s estate, Avys,” Johnson did not protest, turning to the young schemer. “That was for a reason. You do understand I am a researcher at heart, correct? It is not merely the funding I desired. It was... resources and subjects that can be only obtained through like-minded cooperators or involuntary participants. Your grandfather and then father have been fully willing to fulfill both so I had stayed.”

“Human subjects then. Likeminded... Did you experiment on our family?” Avys asked, hiding the twisting in her stomach.

“In a way but not that which you are thinking. For your family, I had a specific and rather safe project in mind,” he nodded, a self-satisfied grin reaching his lips. It was... not quite bragging. It was satisfaction of describing a truly exceptional deed. “You see, through *centuries* of arduous work, I have made a great discovery. Such that it will echo for eons to come, even if I fail to manifest my true magnum opus on its foundation.”

“Out with it,” Ezax demanded.

“I have discovered how to greatly increase the potential for magecraft in newborn children,” Johnson said with a downright rapturous smile.

“Impossible,” Ezax said immediately. “Tried and failed, a thousand times over.”

“It took far more than just a thousand trials. It took cities... an entire nation once. But I have done it. It is possible. Almost refined by now. After all, one of the products of this method stands right here with us! Another awaits in the city.”

Avys stared. ‘Incredible for your area’ Ezax had once called her talent, even if it was just barely not embarrassing among the Federation’s nobility. And she *had* been a prodigy back home. Calm was a once-in-a-millennium terror by all accounts, for all it was somewhat meek compared to the new standard. And she recalled, her siblings too had talents. Some for magic, some for

Honing, some for other arts. So had her father's generation. A great fortune, a seemingly bottomless spring of talent sprouting. *How lucky for her house.*

"I will not hide that Avys' situation is particularly special," Johnson continued instead of letting her just think. "I have promised prodigies, yes, but the expansion of knowledge is never done and has ever been my purpose there. I believed that if I were to engineer a perfect mother from before her birth I could achieve even greater results."

"You called her sterile," Ezax pointed out while Avys was still reeling from all the implications raining onto her head. For the first time in so long she felt truly, completely, absolutely off balance. Unsure what to think, much less do.

"*Technically sterile,*" Johnson repeated himself. "Normal conception is indeed impossible, however, that is simply a byproduct. I have the methods necessary. I suppose another sufficiently skilled Life mage could replicate them but it would be a great labor without any of the engineered benefits. Therefore, as I said earlier: You need me."

"Seduce someone of the bloodline of Wrath," Avys repeated the words of her bargain. Her hand was shaking but she was slowly regaining control. *Nothing must faze it.* "That is what you wanted."

"In all honesty, I was intending to move to the federation before attempting this," Johnson slowly nodded. "But with you leaving your house like so, ambitious and more than just skilled in achieving that... Well, how could I *not* try. One of the greatest bloodline in this entire realm, combined with the sum of my knowledge!

"And if she had met a worse candidate?" Ezax asked sharply.

"I would fulfill my bargain faithfully, observed the results, and then likely moved on in... 25 years probably," Johnson said unashamedly. "I had *hoped* you might snatch a thin offshoot baron in the countryside, Avys. That felt like a realistic goal at the time for all you have shattered it. I do not break promises. Direct lies defy my nature," he said, looking to the other man. "So that is what I offer, besides the bit of strength I hold, of course: A generation of prodigies. I offer you every tool needed to shape the future like no fate mage can."

"A lot of this relies on trusting you," Ezax said verily. "On believing in your better nature against the risks."

"I do not require blind trust. You just need to look at what I am," Johnson bowed. "Watch," then something changed. Avys could not tell what. She barely perceived the slight alteration and only because she had spent a decent amount of time around the man whose presence had always seemed perfectly stable. Something was *surging* from within though, spilling into the world. Out of her perception... but not out of Ezax's.

"I see," the man who would one day claim House Blackburg slowly said as the anomaly faded. But his gaze had changed. The wariness had thinned, almost vanished. Avys thought she even saw a hint of respect. "Let me thank you for your endless dedication, despite how it has been scorned by the Duchy of Green."

"It is long dust," Johnson smiled. "I hear my brother is too. Crimes pass, the rot remains."

"Then allow me to welcome you to my newborn cause," Ezax slowly nodded. "What a strange feeling. Half a year ago I never would have thought I would ever hold both."

“Both *what?*” Avys spoke the question he clearly wanted to be asked. She was still lightly shaken but had mostly recovered. In the end, nothing had changed, she reasoned. She was still getting exactly what she wanted... no matter how disturbing the reality of it was. Those were just emotional responses. Emotions antagonistic to her goals would be snuffed out. She had always been a tool for herself to wield, it only became more literal.

“The means and the desire,” Ezax’s smile stretched across his face, his black eyes seemed bottomless. “But if fate so insists, who am I to refuse my birthright, for the first time within reach?”