
[057] (special)

Throughout the city of Doeta, several important events were taking place roughly at the same time, all under the direct supervision of the Goddess of Fate. Events had, roughly, unfolded as planned. The minor slip-ups along the way had been concerning, particularly that human woman's swerve towards mistrusting the Weaver, but in the end, everything had worked out.

Even the aspect that had escaped from the trap-room earlier than expected had not managed to reach her charge in time to make a difference.

A similarly concerning moment had transpired when the human had called her true name. Never had she felt as if her very name were a curse soaked in self-loathing. Usually, it would be anger, hatred, despair, but the twist upon the mortal's lips had caught her by surprise.

Nevertheless, he had been caught and contained. Thalgrim's priestess had screwed up by pulling in the human woman, but the Weaver was confident her former High Priestess was properly geared to fulfill her mission.

Nothing stood in Thalgrim's way.

Oh, how joyous today would be.

Of course, with success came apprehension. The box was closed, the mortals would die, and that brought forward a question regarding what her success meant. Never before had she been so blind to what lay beyond current events; the very nature of the threat she was dealing with made it impossible to predict.

As far as she could fathom, the instant the sealed room opened, one of three things would occur. The first possibility would be that the frayed fates of those partially corrupted by Liam Carter would no longer spread. This would leave the "epidemic" self-contained, as it would resolve itself once the mortals died out on their own.

The second possibility was that it continued to behave as she had observed it to. Those with partially erased fates would, in turn, partially erase the fates of those with whom they interact. This possibility had a saving grace, in that (at least as far as she had gathered) it was impossible for anyone's fate to degrade any further than that of the people they interact with. A fully fateless could potentially cause other fully fateless

people, but a partially fateless could not. Thalgrim was confident this could be resolved so long as she guaranteed none of the Pantheon became infected.

The third, and worse, possibility would be that things got worse, that like a rabid disease the spread would erupt out of control. At that point, the only real option left would be for someone in the pantheon to eradicate a whole section of the continent, and then themselves, an impossible event. At that point, her only true option would be to cut off from the mortal world completely and wait it out.

Thalgrim was placing her bets on it being either the first or second, however, as she had yet to find any evidence that the nature of fatelessness changed even after no longer being in contact with the human.

But the die was cast, and now she only needed to wait.

Never had each passing second felt like so much of an eternity.

The Weaver distracted herself by turning her attention to the fourth important variable in the city: The old Goddess who had spawned the two now useless aspects. She was certain the Goddess would make a move of her own soon, but wasn't entirely sure where.

The rogue deity had spent the single relic she possessed to create an Avatar, an embodiment of power within the mortal world. The move should have been one that anyone in the Pantheon could have sensed, but this Goddess had divinity tied to secrecy, to make things be hidden. No doubt it was the sole reason no one had found her despite having had enough power to possess a proper relic.

Even Thalgrim had found it hard to keep track of her... hard, but not impossible.

The avatar had been spending most of her time in the tiny fortified port attached to the city of Doeta, planting small seeds amongst fishermen and merchants. Though she vanished from the port a few hours every day, it was clear that her goals were to spread her faith and start a net of underground followers.

It was obvious at a glance that this divinity was a feral one, a spirit that had grown up far away from civilization. She clumsily manipulated mortals into devotion by implanting tiny bits of her own divinity into their minds, allowing them to be the ones to define what the dogma meant to them. Thalgrim chanced a guess that Liam Carter had taught this method to the former spirit; however he'd managed to do so was a mystery, but not exactly unexpected from the Weaver's nemesis.

Another mystery was how the divinity had gotten strong enough to possess a relic in the first place. Perhaps she'd merely found it? It didn't matter, she would likely find out in a few hundred years once the feral Goddess was properly hunted down.

Of course, Thalgrim had sprung her trap during one of the indoctrination sessions, to make sure that even the Avatar was as useless as the aspects she'd made.

The Avatar had, not surprisingly, vanished the instant her aspect had been caught. Her fate was annoyingly hard to read, no doubt Liam Carter had used his strange powers to corrupt the deity. But even then, Thalgrim watched the fates of the mortals in the city, but things were too muddled; her own fingers having plucked too many strings, resolution of the current uncertainty was the only way for fate to clear out once more.

Despite this, Thalgrim had a few guesses at what the bestial divinity could do now that the puppeteer was gone. She would either discreetly rampage through the city, consuming mortals over the next decade or two, or she would run for it, to that empty fort city where she was currently grooming a priest of some sort.

Whatever the case, there-

Alarm.

Pain.

Thalgrim's world spun as she felt an intrusion upon the sanctum of her temple in Doeta. A presence stood within her domain, slick blackness pushing through the defenses. The relic Thalgrim had at the epicenter of the domain lashed out, unleashing a fragment of her power to protect itself. Every moment the avatar stood within the stream of divinity would have torn a mortal a thousand times over, yet this was an Avatar, it pushed forward one step at a time, growing ever closer to its prize.

With a flicker of annoyance, the Weaver stopped time within her domain. She looked upon the Avatar, the intruder, glaring at it. The Goddess had chosen the shape of a female dwarf, with fiery eyes and soot-covered skin and beard, her clothes torn rags, grubby filthy fingers stretched out.

A relic was, at its most simple, the most concentrated form of divinity that could exist. It was a mana singularity, an object of immense power that allowed a God to project their domain into the mortal world. It also served as an anchor, keeping the deity tethered to the material plane of existence, and if a divinity were to lose all relics, then any deity could just banish them, scattering them into a billion pieces throughout every other plane. In effect, a God without a relic was as good as one strong breeze away from true death.

This was but one temple, one relic out of thousands.

For Thalgrim this would be a loss, but it would be one that would doom this thief.

Behind the Avatar, outside Thalgrim's domain, priests and knights lay unconscious. Thalgrim growled at this; had they at least died at the hands of the Avatar, then their divinely-touched fates would have become entangled. It would have, perhaps, even made it possible for the Weaver to more easily twist and thread something past the invader's own defenses.

As it stood, only a direct confrontation was possible.

One she'd rather avoid.

"Your master is either dead or dying," Thalgrim spoke, her voice echoing out not as sound (for sound could not move when time was frozen) but as power. "By the time you assimilate this relic, I will have hunted you down and scattered you. This is a gamble you will lose."

"You could kill me here and now; you could manifest enough power through this relic to do so. It has at least thrice the power this Avatar can wield," the intruder spoke back, the smirk apparent through her eyes. "But you won't."

"This is a tiny city, forgotten; the relic here is among my weakest," Thalgrim replied dismissively.

"All truths, but so is the fact that you are a coward, Weaver," the Goddess spoke, meaty fingers frozen in place, yet she flared out her own power, pushing for time to flow once more. She failed, of course, yet the domain shuddered. "You won't even put up a fight because you are terrified that doing so will draw the attention of the other deities. You can't take the risk of them showing up here. To do so while Liam still lives could risk them becoming partially or completely fateless, just like I am."

And for the briefest moment, the Weaver hesitated. The intruder was not wrong in that she could have killed the Avatar even with this meager relic. She was part of the pantheon, tied to the Triumvirate Throne; a feral thing could not stand a chance in a fight, and it wasn't like Thalgrim cared for the mortal lives in this tiny mortal settlement.

But she did not manifest her powers; she could not afford to fall for the taunting words.

"Who are you?"

"You might not get off on manipulating others, but you're terrified of losing control. You can't trust others, especially not those that can hurt you," the eyes blazed as she spoke. "Thalgrim, the Weaver, the Goddess who obsesses over the things that escape her

grasp. She Who Threads Fate, the deity that loses interest in that which she has leashed.”

“Who. Are. You.” Thalgrim’s temper flared, and with it the pause in time rippled, power surging out, searing away the avatar’s skin, revealing only a deeper blackness underneath.

“It all started so sweet, so... plain. A little nudge here, a little poke there; it started as a way to protect yourself. You were born surrounded by monsters that could have eaten you at any moment, but you got them to eat each other instead,” the beard and hair of the dwarf shimmered, darkening, deepening. The blackness that consumed. “You grew fond of your fellow deities; who wouldn’t? You had each other’s backs... except... except there was always that tiny doubt. What if the Warrior turned that murderous rage your way one day? What if?”

“You do not know what you speak of,” she spoke, a beam of light shot out, piercing through time itself so fast that within the span of a flicker, it seared off one of the avatar’s arms.

The intruding Goddess laughed at that. “I know all about you. I know how you sought to seduce the Sentinel, and when he spurned you, aware of what you’d become, you made a vow to ensure none could ever have him,” the laugh became louder, imposing herself upon time, just enough to allow her body to lean away from the beam ever so slightly. Enough for a new arm to start growing. “You got exactly what you wanted. He grew to wish for the isolation you’d imposed on him. But you were a bit too successful; he now grows stronger by the day as he found a new path to walk. A path where he is better without you.”

Thalgrim raised her hand. “If you are seeking death, then-”

“Do it,” the intruder sneered. “Unleash your wrath, use all this untouched power you’ve left here to rot and waste away for an entire Age. Call upon this world the attention of two Gods that hate your guts. Have them touch the mortal world and become fateless and free of your sticky grasp.”

Her hand froze, her projection snarled as the gesture didn’t come. Her features twisted into a scowl. “You better run, thief because when that box opens and your puppeteer is dead, I will hunt you down. It doesn’t matter where you hide, nor how long it takes, I will find you, and I will make sure not a single record of your existence remains.”

Time flowed again.

Fat, gritty fingers wrapped around the relic, yet they did not pluck the item away. The thief took a moment to look at Thalgrim, caressing the marble of hyper-concentrated divinity as if it were an old friend.

“I tried to do that. I tried to have the world forget me, and I can assure you I am far better at it than you will ever be.” Her grip tightened. “And yet, when I thought not a soul knew my name, a certain someone dug me up, called for me.” She laughed. “And now we’re here, with that tiny, squishy mortal putting a lot more trust in me than I rightly deserve.” Power flowed through her fingers, attacking the connection the relic had, like a swarm of ants invading live prey. “That’s one reason why you will lose today, Thalgrim. You only trust yourself.”

Then, the thief smirked.

“The other is because you were a bit too quick to forget about discarded tools.”

A crackle and a snap.

And the city of Doeta went dark. The connection to the mortal world in that area was gone, leaving Thalgrim floating within a space of possibilities. The muddled fates of the citizens of Doeta, merely muddled a few minutes ago, were now practically invisible to her. Too far away from the nearest relic, leaving only weak impressions upon the greater weave of her tapestry.

The Goddess of Fate looked into the inky blackness of uncertainty.

Slowly, her gaze drifted towards the divine realms. The threads tying her to the Warrior and the Sentinel were still there, their fates woven in on themselves, yet supported and reinforced by the Weaver’s own touch.

Though she could not see them any longer, their temples still remained within Doeta, intact, a small relic each. It would take but a thought for either of them to fully manifest there, a minute to remove any uncertainty about whether Liam Carter lived or not. They would sense the invader, detect that she’d taken Thalgrim’s relic, and within hours they would hunt her down and crush her.

All Thalgrim needed to do was call out.

Anger and frustration coiled through Thalgrim like a red-hot poker.

No.

They likely would not answer, too wary this might be another of her ploys. Besides, this was exactly the sort of revenge the puppeteer would’ve wanted to unleash upon her.

What better vengeance than for a seed of doubt to be planted and to have her sabotage herself right when victory was at hand?

But the human would be dead soon. Her plan had been near perfect; the only uncertainty had been the feral deity's actions. Now, all Thalgrim had needed to do was observe some of the fateless-touched mortals that had left Al-Zahra's quarantine. The moment Liam perished and the room opened, there would either be a shift, or there would not.

So certain was she of her victory this time around, that Thalgrim began to weave a quarantine around Doeta as well. There was no more use for that city for her, not when her relic had been stolen and her domain shattered.

Better to send out orders for her priests to discreetly vacate the mortal city while she began preparations to cleanse the stain Liam Carter had left on the mortal world. One way or another, she would find a way to purge this blight he'd brought. And Thalgrim would make sure no one ever found out about it, especially not her fellow deities.

It would take her a year or two, but by the time anyone figured out what had gone down, if they did at all, all traces of the fateless would have been erased.

Imani was in a box.

She'd been dressed in armor more expensive than anything she'd ever worn and immediately stuffed into the box by the demon, crammed in until she'd been contorted into the right shape, a knot of limbs, and barely able to move. Imani had been told that she would be free either after a day or when Liam set her free. Her task was to ensure that, if it was the latter, then she was to save Liam from whatever might be trying to kill him.

There was one problem.

Imani couldn't tell how much time had passed or what was happening around her. She was cramped in this box, in total darkness, in total silence, barely able to move, and feeling like she should've gone hungry and thirsty a long while ago. Perhaps she should've needed to breathe at some point too. Something about the box kept her alert and alive.

Despite this lack of urges, or perhaps doubly so because of it, being in the box was even more uncomfortable.

Irritated.

Above all, she hoped the pay was worth it.

Yet as time went on, she began to doubt there would ever be enough gold in the world to make it worth being in the box this long. Even the armor she'd been provided was proving less and less a boon she'd appreciate.

Whatever the case may be, Imani would never be paid enough to ever go back into this damnable place.