

*“And I thought I was uncomfortable.”* Wolf’s mental thoughts reached out to Liam, distracting him from... himself. The male orc she was currently pretending to be kept on pretending it was eating food. *“Relax, before everyone else notices something’s off.”*

The food was good, delicious, the best Liam had ever since entering this world.

The coffee was great, definitely something above and beyond what he’d ever tasted.

The conversation was borderline interesting, with lots of empty words to describe few things. The meeting had the feeling of having been called there entirely just for Aisha to stroke the Emir’s ego.

Meanwhile, the inside of Liam’s head was like a grand war between two nations that had descended into an all-out brawl.

On one hand was the side that knew about how the Caliphate’s culture revolved around relationships. Here, marriage was seen as the default end-state to any romantic interaction between two respectable people. It was the baseline expectation to be aiming for such a thing from the get-go. Most people would have candidate husbands/wives proposed through family connections, and the process of courtship would begin thereafter. To be called someone’s “betrothed” was more or less within the same ballpark as “boyfriend”. It was, in effect, the best way for Aisha to introduce him in a way that wasn’t “he’s my guest” that might otherwise cause unnecessary confusion or loss of face.

On the other hand, the word had rung just about every instinctual alarm in his head that insisted the trolley needed breaks.

Every time he tried to calm down the second side of the conflict, it would scream back at him. Because every time he’d realized things were getting serious, he’d invariably fucked it up somehow. And now the thing he hadn’t been really thinking of all that deeply was staring at him in the face and smiling, squeezing his hand from under the table as if this was a reassurance, as if he wasn’t just one sentence away from fucking up.

Actually, thinking about it, he had at least a dozen different ways he could mess everything up instantaneously. Though most of them involved everyone in the room

going insane and gouging their own eyes out, or calling upon them some force that'd instantly vaporize the area... Liam included.

Liam wasn't entirely sure whether to celebrate or bemoan that he'd managed to keep the mask of calmness this whole time... or the fact that it was starting to slip. He tried to explain what was going on, but what came out of his mind was a jumbled up half-panicked stream of words, meanings, and half-formed thoughts.

Wolf choked on her food and began to cough loudly, drawing everyone's attention.

*"How are you more frightened by this than from nearly falling to your death!?"* She mentally cursed at him as she spoke half-grumbled apologies to everyone else.

*"But-"*

*"Breathe before you forget how to."* Wolf barked at him, forcefully too, the mental sound not unlike nails being dragged through chalkboard.

The full-bodied wince caught Aisha's attention, she spared him a look with the barest of frowns before returning her words towards the Emir. The woman was a paragon of smooth control, she was leading the conversation without barely making an effort, keeping the rotund volar man mumbling half-agreements. Despite the calm of her exterior, her hand on his own had squeezed a bit more intensely this time around, and Liam wasn't sure whether it was as a warning or a gesture of reassurance.

Even as he tried to center himself, the impulse to just get up and run was hammering away like a madman trying to escape his prison-cell.

*"Suggestions?"* He asked.

*"If punching her helps get me out of this flesh sooner, then I'd recommend doing that."* Was her blunt response.

The thought of asking for Bunny's or Maridah's intake on the subject crossed his mind, but he opted to keep it-

*"I asked her already, she says to double down and play her own game against her."* Wolf declared. *"I agree with her. You lack a sense of control, it is not helping you."*

Liam tried very hard not to be annoyed at Wolf for having glanced at his superficial thoughts rather than just read at the ones he'd projected out. He had little doubt the aspect was practically frothing at the mouth to get out of that body. She wasn't wrong either, right now he felt like he was plummeting, and that he was entering a tail-spin.

He knew he shouldn't feel this way, but he did.

Turning to face the woman seated next to him, she noticed this and turned in kind. The question had been half-formed in her lips before he stole it.

"Oh my." The Emir's wife spoke.

Liam's face was blazing red as he pulled away. Aisha's eyes were wide, her mouth parted slightly, as if halfway to a gasp. "Cute." He blurted out, unable to restrain the thought.

"You must be truly without fear, I've seen men flayed for less." The Emir chuckled, heavy belly bouncing with every guffaw. "Our dear Amil has been quite the nut to crack, she was well on her way to becoming a spinster."

Aisha's dark skin seemed to only darken further, though Liam felt it was more than embarrassment as she half-glared at the Emir. "Ahem, yes." She coughed once, looking away and taking a long gulp from her beverage. "As I was saying, this is a rather important matter." She did her best to steady her voice, but there was a warble to her words. "The monsters have been increasing their activity, and I feel that the exodus of priests of the Weaver is an obvious sign of incoming danger."

"Don't call it obvious." The Emir shook his head, flabby scaled skin wriggling with the shake of his head. "If there were danger, the Weaver would have delivered a message through her priests. Undoubtedly the attack on your person wore heavy, and in her wisdom she's chosen to pull away, so as to avoid further complications." He gestured at the window, as if there was something to be seen there other than a vista to his personal garden. "The Warrior and the Sentinel have both remained. If nothing else, I'd deem that a sign Doeta is safe."

It took Liam's mind a moment to catch up with the man's words, his gaze had remained locked on to the back of Aisha's head and now that his own brain felt properly in place, he frowned.

"If I may." He raised his voice a bit, racking his brain for what he knew about the Emir. Not much, as it turned out, but the volar man was a third circle mage and a politician. "Though Doeta might not be facing a cataclysm-" YET "-the monsters have stirred, and it's to my understanding there have been a few villages that have gone silent. At least that is what I've heard amongst the people of this fine city."

"From the furthestmost places, not the first time they miss, inclement weather in the Blue Mountains is often enough to make travel impossible." The Emir waved off.

“But there have been no reports of such, even from the merchants.” Aisha doubled down, giving Liam a slight nod of appreciation. “All I request is that we be prepared, stock up on supplies and weapons. If nothing happens, then we can sell it back, but if it does, we wouldn’t be caught completely by surprise.”

“I will consider it.”

And with a wave of his hand, it was made clear the subject was to not be discussed further. Aisha’s expression took a dangerous blankness to it, the sort of impassivity that only came about when you were expressly trying to hide your true emotions on the subject. For a moment, she glanced at Liam, and then, carefully, her gaze flickered over to the Orc that was Wolf.

Then, she looked back at the Emir. “I urge you to reconsider.” She spoke softly, in a low voice. “We potentially face a great danger, and moving quickly is the only way to prevent unnecessary deaths.”

“And I said I will consider it.” The man waved off. “If you feel so distraught, go get yourself-”

“Yes?” Aisha’s voice became chillingly cold, a quiet anger that stood like a shard of ice.

The Emir hesitated.

His wife leaned forward. “I believe it might be best to call it a night, to allow better thoughts to prevail.”

“I think so as well.” Aisha abruptly stood up. “Liam, I believe we should depart.”

Though Aisha was the sole focus of the Emir’s attention, it was not lost to him how Wolf’s body-language had shifted, eyes staring very intensely around the room.

“Hospitality is important.” He spoke loudly, earning a long look from the aspect and a very slow nod. With that confirmation, Wolf wasn’t about to try anything while as a guest of the Emir, he stood up and took Aisha’s hand, giving the Emir and his wife a cold smile. “It’s... been a decent meal.”

To say they exchanged pleasantries on the way out would’ve been an understatement. It was the sort of “goodbyes” that held all the warmth of a blizzard. Aisha was fuming in the same way that an iceberg stood in the middle of the ocean, waiting for a boat to crush and sink to the bottom of the ocean. Her green eyes were like daggers, staring directly ahead.

Liam merely did his best to keep pace with her and not step on a landmine, still caught up with his own thoughts. The whole interaction had drawn him something else to focus on, and fortunately for him, it was a welcome distraction.

“What happens if I take the reins of this city?” Aisha’s question came out of nowhere, giving him a severe look, arms crossed. “What will be the consequences?”

“If you mean to ask whether you could have the Emir assassinated, then you could, and I’m sure you’d be able to maneuver into a position to temporarily gain control over the city.” He scratched his chin in thought. “After that... well, the meteor hits, a state of emergency is declared because the whole Caliphate’s going to be in chaos, so your temporary hold could become permanent. I guess it would depend on how you solidify your position? I don’t have knowledge on the nuance and details of Doeta’s inner workings.”

Aisha’s brows furrowed. “How extreme would this state of emergency be?”

“They’ll be fighting off against rebellions and secessions for years.”

“I notice you’re not telling me not to try.” She glanced at him with a curious frown.

“If you expect me to tell you not to try, then you’re looking at the wrong person.” He quirked a brow. “I’m against murder as a general approach to things, though.”

For a moment, she didn’t say anything, closing her eyes in contemplation. Slowly, she looked around, gaze lingering on the dark streets of Doeta, pausing here and there, as if seeing something that existed only within her memories. “I know I could strong-arm the Emir into this, if I had the time.” She glanced at him. “He’s sure to encumber me, though, force me to burn favors and goodwill. And then only do so in a half-measure.”

“Seems you know him better than I do,” he said.

“I’ve wanted him dead for a very long time, but never enough to think it to be worth the hassle.” She sighed. “I think I came expecting something different, tonight. Liam, you said that it might be in my best interest to become the Whisperer’s Champion.”

“I did.”

“Then I will have to apologize. I do not see myself as a woman of faith. I am a matriarch first, and a merchant second.” She breathed in, letting out a slow breath as she took his hands in her own. “I will give you my full support, and to that end, I believe that having full grasp of Doeta would be to our benefit.”

Liam’s jaw tightened before he could completely hide his emotions.

“You disapprove.” Aisha declared with apprehension.

“I said it’s your choice and I stand by that.” He immediately replied, even though he still didn’t much like it. Perhaps he was being greedy and selfish, but he saw Aisha as the perfect candidate to become Maridah’s champion. Not only was she a skilled politician, but her knowledge in managing a city could prove invaluable once she gained hold of proper Champion-tier powers. “Still, the Whisperer is... she’s a Goddess. As much as you’re not a person of faith, she’ll likely demand you become one of her followers as a baseline.”

“I expected as much, seeing how loyalty is important, showing some willingness to defer to her is to be expected.” Aisha nodded. “What of... Doeta?”

“Yeah, sure, with the Emir out of the way we’d save lives,” Liam said, casually nodding along. “And Cracked Bay is in desperate need of a population. Two birds and one stone and all that. I’ll argue in favor of this, don’t see much reason why she might vote against it other than the two temples.”

She eyed him for a moment, coming to a stop as they reached the spot where their roads split, one leading to her bedroom, the other to the guest quarters. Aisha made to look towards her corridor, and then back at him.

To him, it felt like there was a rock in his stomach.

“You’re nervous.” She declared as she leaned closer. “I am too.” Her fingers gently traced circles against his hands, she eyed him meaningfully. There was a question in her eyes.

“I really don’t want to mess this up.” He muttered.

“It is not your first time, is it?” She asked with a strange mix of trepidation and something else in her voice.

Liam blanched. “No, definitely not.” He declared defensively, shaking his head. “I just...”

“Too many things in your mind?” She’d guessed correctly, he sheepishly nodded along as he tried to get his head in order. “I can help with that.”

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she pulled him closer, against him, a warm embrace punctuated by a kiss. Then another, and another. His hands descended upon her hips and she pulled him closer.

And step by step, she led the way.