

CHAPTER 5: Well, One of Us Has to Change

The crew on the airship has spent the past few days practicing their magic, learning about Tsrif, and waiting for word back from Suo. Their spirits have remained high, regardless of the time they've spent waiting.

However, on the third day of waiting...



"So this is it, then... Hm."

A woman stands outside the airship, her long blue gown sliding effortlessly through the sand behind her. She tilts her head slightly as she looks up at the vast machine, thoughtful in her silence.



...After some few seconds, she steps up to the door and knocks.

At first, there's silence.

After another few seconds, thunderous steps can be heard racing towards the door, faster, louder—



Until a certain someone opens it, staring up at the woman with a wide-eyed smile.

"Hi, lady!"



“Hello, young one.” The woman doesn’t hesitate, giving Cornet a polite smile. “My name is Nadia Ironhymn. I am here to see Ash Temple. If it’s alright, would you mind leading me to phir?”



“I dunno...” Cornet tilts her head back and forth. “I’m not supposed to let anybody on the ship without Robin’s permission! It could be dangerous!”



“Is that so...” Nadia takes a moment to think.



“How about this, then? You can act as my chaperone. With you at my side, there’s no way I could cause any trouble, is there?”



Cornet stares up at Nadia with a face that implies intense mental gymnastics.



She then runs back into the ship, yelling at the top of her lungs:

**“AAAAAAAAASH! THERE’S A LADY OUT HERE WHO
WANTS TO SEE YOOOOOOOOOU!”**



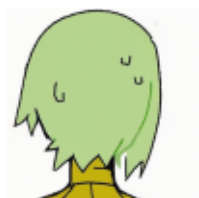
...Well. That’s one way to go about it.



Ash eventually pokes phir head through the doorway.



“Hello, Temple.” She dips her head politely. “May I enter?”



Ash stares for a couple more seconds, a range of complex emotions crossing phir face.



The one phi settles on does not bode well.

“How did...you find me?”



“A little birdie told me that I would be able to find royalty here.” Fufu. “Plus, that airship is quite large, no? You can see it from miles away.”



“Fair enough.” Phi still doesn’t seem entirely convinced. “Why are you here, then?”



Her expression shifts.

“Despite how much seeing your **idiotic** face makes me wish I could **cleave it in two...**”



“I have a favor to ask.”



Inhale. Exhale.



"Fiiiiine. You can come aboard."



She blinks in genuine surprise.



"...Thank you."



Ash leads Nadia to the airship's lounge. They're silent and tense.



Atlas and Lariat are there, going over some moon magic spells.



“This is a counterspell. It automatically counteracts sensory magic used against oneself, so long as the user is aware of its existence and invokes it before or after the sensory magic has been cast. When used in combination with sun magic, one can draw sigils below their own eyes that will produce a similar effect, protecting the senses from manipulation.”



“Ohh... I see.” Atlas nods, practicing drawing the sigils in their sketchbook.



“I didn’t know you were running a school.” Nadia tilts her head, intrigued.



“Oh!” Atlas looks up at Nadia, closing their sketchbook. “I’m sorry, I didn’t see you come in...”



“Ash, is this one of your friends?”



“Absolutely *not*.”



Sheesh.

“Sorry I asked...?”



“My name is Nadia Ironhymn. I am—”



“Don’t introduce yourself as Nadia! You’re lucky that no one here knows who she is!”



"Tch. Fine." She glares at Ash, but she complies.



"I am not Nadia."



By the time those in the room have blinked, "Nadia" has become someone entirely different.



"My name is *Saria Steelsong*. I am a servant of Nadia Ironhymn, the ruling queen of Driht."



Atlas blinks. They rub their eyes.

"...Lariat, is that...?"



They look at Saria, blinking once or twice as well.

“I do not believe she was using sensory magic, no.”



“Ha! Someone such as me doesn’t need to use magic like that.” She seems quite proud of herself.



“I am an *illusion shapeshifter*—and one who’s quite skilled in her craft, at that.”



“Saria’s an assassin, just like me. She’s from the second oracle clan, Driht.”



“She’s also tried to kill me. Multiple times.”



"It's quite simple, really. Your death means that your brother would, in turn, be much easier to kill." She says it so nonchalantly...



"You're not here to kill Ash *now*, right...?" They hadn't practiced combat magic at all!



"Of **course** not, you fool." She grimaces at Atlas. "Even if I *hadn't* learned that Temple is like a many-headed cockroach..."



"I'm here as a *refugee*."



"What the hell happened that you decided to leave *now*? You've lived there your entire life, haven't you?"



“And what’s that supposed to mean!? I **enjoyed** living in Driht, thank you very much!”



“That’s what I *meant*! You’ve lived there happily your whole life, so what happened **now**!?”



“What’s with all the commotion in here!?” Suddenly, Janet.



“Ash’s, um—friend? Enemy?? Is here, and, um—“



“It seems that she is seeking safety on the airship.” Placid blink.



"Then...she should be fine, right? That's basically why Ash is here..."



"I wanna know *why* she left, because we don't know if she's **lying!**"



"Yes, because I would *obviously* allow myself to be outnumbered on an airship that I have no way of exiting! Very smart strategy! No wonder no tactician wants to be anywhere near you."



"**Hey!**"



"Stop yelling! *Please!*"

Atlas steps between Ash and Saria, holding their hands out to separate the two.



They both stop, looking between each other and Atlas.



Atlas takes a moment to look between the two, fumbling with their hands all the while.



“...Saria, can I... ask why you’re here...?”



“ ... ”



“I was told to leave.” Her voice is quiet. “For my own good. That is all.”



“So... you were exiled, then?”



“If that’s what it takes to get you off of my case, then yes.”



“...I was exiled. For my own good.”



“...So, um. Can I ask. What Driht’s like...?”



“Driht is the second of the three Oracle Clans. It was established sometime after Tsrif by Nadia. It’s a haven for demons to thrive in, as Nadia is one herself.”



"Wait, *demons*? No one told us that demons were real, too!"



"Temple, where did you find these two...?"



"In. Here?" The airship hasn't moved since phi boarded...



"Nobody really knows what makes someone turn into a demon. The only person who's ever put any effort into studying that kind of stuff is the leader of Dnoces, and nobody even knows who that *is*. They've never been seen outside of their palace, and *I* haven't even gone in there, because both Tsrif and Driht know that sending assassins to Dnoces is a death sentence. No one's ever come back."



"Sooooo two out of three of the Oracle Clans are fucked up and evil?"



“Fucked up? Yes. Evil? No. Dnoces is a notoriously neutral party, and the citizens of Driht are not represented by Nadia’s ambitions.”



“In fact, if you based how ‘evil’ a clan was solely on how many assassins they sent out, Dnoces would be the only shining example of purity.”



“Do you know why Nadia wants to destroy the other clans...?” This all sounded like a major conflict that they didn’t have any place to interfere with, but they couldn’t help but want to understand what was going on.



“If I knew, my life would certainly be easier.” She says it so quietly that it almost seems like she meant to think it.



“That said, no, I do not. Nobody does. There aren’t even any historical records detailing the founding of Driht. All we know that Nadia arrived, established the clan, and began her attack.”



“What about Dnoces?”



“All I know is that Dnoces was founded by demons who opposed Nadia’s attacks against Tsrif.”



“I guess that explains why they don’t take part in any of the fighting...” Politics were complicated...



“...Actually, Ash... you said that the leader of Dnoces was studying Aerumna, right?”



“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of going over there! What part of *death sentence* didn’t you get?”



"You said *assassins* that go there die...!"



"I just thought it'd be useful to learn more about Aerumna, since our hometown is dealing with it right now..."



"Still. I'm sure there's someone else that you can learn about Aerumna from, so don't try going over there anytime soon." Even the *idea* of that palace gave phir the creeps, and phi hadn't even seen it phirself.



"Come to think of it, it's been a couple days... Do you think we should fly back, just to check on Setune Town and make sure everyone's okay? I know I can't really use my badge yet, but..."



"Suo can just pop in whenever they want, so I can't say it'd be a bad idea..."



"You've spent plenty of time learning about the world thus far. I don't think Robin would disallow us from assisting you in clearing the Aerumna from your home."



"I don't see why they'd stop us, either. Sure, we might look a little weird to the people from your own, but you look weird to us, and no one was rude to you about it."



"Maybe I'll get some nice robes when we come back..." She's not self-conscious. Nope.



"Hm. Perhaps it will be interesting to see the world outside of the Oracle Desert."



"I think it'd be nice to show everyone where we live!"



“Let’s go ask Robin to take us there, then! We’ve got plenty of hands on deck, I’m sure it’ll be just fine!”



“Mhm!”

END CHAPTER 5