Arodus 16

My body ached. I'd been exercising this body since I arrived in the Shackles, but that had mostly been focused on strength training and building muscle. To be perfectly honest, I didn't think I needed to work on endurance too much given Autopilot's ability to shrug off fatigue outside of extremes.

My hands, jaw, and hips were the worst. I reached out for a glass of water and almost dropped it on the way to my mouth; gripping anything made my fingers throb with pain.

Restoration was supposed to fix this, wasn't it?

Quite so. However, these areas were still the most physically vulnerable parts of our body when we elected to act against the terms of our contract. The penalty was fairly minor, of course, since we only requested a delay with full intent to cooperate. (Spellcraft 11+10=21)

"Good, you're awake."

I looked up and saw Syl standing in the doorway of the room. She slumped against the wall. Behind her, Olga stood with crossed arms.

"The temple was kind enough to let us use the room for the night." Syl explained, yawning, "Dovnu and her eye candy are camped out in a cafe across the street. We considered bringing you back to the ship, but…"

"No, you made the right call." I said, "I assume they want me out once I wake up?"

"Ya." Olga confirmed. "Mimi was very annoyed, being moved to a different room for second day in a row."

"Please apologize to her for me," I said, rising to my feet. "Thank you for the assistance. May I speak to my first mate in private for a moment?"

A bit more security on the girls coming in would have been nice, but it won't get me anywhere to complain now.

"I'm faster, tougher, and I can use a lot of my magic more often. Mostly the ability to see magic, float, and produce darkness." I told Syl quickly. "I think I was also given a lot of knowledge, mostly involving magic and extraplanar beings. Languages, species, weaknesses… that kind of thing."

"Anything like the mirror?" She asked, leaning in, "I'm really hoping you picked up something that can let us abort this insane plan."

“Miss Lonegan, I am a man of my word.” I said, feigning affront, “Also no, I didn’t get anything quite powerful enough to stand up in infernal court. I can thank you for one extra thing, though.”

“What?” Syl asked.

“Apparently my visions thought you should indulge a bit in a new kink.” I said, smiling. “Selling me off to people, specifically. I had an extra mission that gave me an additional perk, which made my new abilities much stronger.”

“Nine Hells…” Syl whispered, “you’re telling me we could have gotten a six perk benefit if we had been able to properly plan and execute this?”

I snorted.

“I think this is good enough.” I assured her. “Even with better logistics, 191 would have been incredibly difficult. I’d have needed to practice somehow.”

“I would have happily volunteered.” Sandara said, poking her head into the door. “Get a stopwatch, see if you could finish me off in under a minute? Sounds like fun.”

She and Sosima came into the room, with Sosima trailed by a dark skinned gillwoman I could vaguely remember seeing the night before. Sandara was, of course, the only one of the three who looked rested. She needed sleep to regain her magic, a fact she never neglected to leverage for her beauty sleep.

“Perhaps for the first dozen times. Lubo, set the table.” Sosima said. “Are you well, Emrys? I can scarcely imagine how that must feel. The most I was ever obliged to service like that was…”

She looked into the upper corner of the room and shrugged.

“Too many.” She concluded. “But not a tenth of what you managed. Was it worth it?”

“Too late to tell, but I think so.” I assured her. “Syl can fill you all in later.”

The gillwoman, apparently a drastically youthened version of the old woman we’d brought in, dutifully unloaded a tray full of small sandwiches and a pot of coffee. She was much quicker, without the years weighing her down. She noticed me staring, and gave me a wink. I smiled back; she’d been quick to cum the night before, which had saved me a few minutes.

Apparently having a whole new body after not having sex for decades will do that to you. Maybe Sima is onto something.

We were joined by the rest of my officers save Ivey, who was on the ship. Even Cave Mother joined us, hauled in by Rosie.

“Ok.” I said, taking a deep breath. “Everyone knows the plan, right?”

“Yes, have better plan.” Rowe said, “Read contract, great idea. Use mirror, make better Elf chief. Give 1000 gold. She give back thirty times. Contract done.”

“Rowe I don’t think…” I said, then trailed off thoughtfully and checked with my lawyer.

“No, it would not work.” Cave Mother said, exasperated, “Not unless Captain M’Dair earnestly believed that Lady D’Lann had gone entirely mad, rather than being replaced. If he went along with this plan, it would count as foul play.”

Her phrasing sparked a cascade of thoughts, most frustratingly impossible to act on.

“If you can fool me, that might work.” I said thoughtfully. “If you have another idea like that, talk to Syl and Mother first. Don't tell me.”

“Should be easy.” Sandara quipped. “We won’t be seeing you for a few weeks.”

“Speaking of, I can’t stay long.” I said. “I need to go soon. Take care of the men.”

I stood and pulled on a complementary cotton robe. I handed Sosima a satchel containing my red suit, coin purse, and gun.

“I’m trusting you all to be in position when I need you.” I said, “I’ll get in contact when I can.”

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“Ah, dear boy, so good to see you.” Kiyon greeted me warmly. “I was worried you had become lost.”

He sat, ankles crossed, with a half-eaten pastry hanging from his fingers and eyes completely closed. He didn’t turn to look as he greeted me. Beside him, Dovnu leaned back in her wicker chair, hands crossed. She had a large, floppy hat pulled down to cover her face.

“Oh?” She said, pulling her hat back to only shadow her face, instead of covering it. “Ah, pleasure to see you, Stud. I was about to check the contract to see if I was allowed to start killing your crew.”

She tossed her cigarette onto the stones of the patio and stomped it out.

“Thank you for your restraint.” I said, deadpan. “I understand that it must have been very hard to avoid putting us both in an extremely awkward position in a moment of pique.”

“I see you’ve decided to try a new style.” Kiyon noted, smirking. “I’m flattered, really, but I don’t think the robe is quite right for you. Especially if the only one you could find was that ratty old thing.”

“I was worried that Nendra would be unimpressed.” I drawled, “I can’t imagine she’d have approved of my choice of accessories.”

“Probably wise.” Dovnu agreed, “That seemed like a decent gun. You might be able to pawn it for a few gold.”

“Masterwork, actually.” I said with a smile. “More than a few. I didn’t think handing it to Nendra was wise. The slippers might have been a bad idea on these cobblestones, but my boots were magical.”

As we spoke, Kiyon’s shadows retrieved his palanquin from the nearby alleyway. As he rose to his feet, a bird made of dark smoke landed on his shoulder and looked directly ahead of Kiyon. Ghostly white lines connected Kiyon and the bird, and he walked with far more confidence than most could manage with their eyes screwed shut.

We all filed into the box, settling into small cushioned seats as Kiyon’s shadows carried us away. I examined the curtain walls, which allowed hardly any light through them.

Velvet, maybe?

I felt a sharp pain in my scalp as my head jerked down, slamming my face directly into the handle (stock) of Dovnu’s firmly clutched whip. In a frozen moment of shock and pain, I heard a crunch. She jerked my face up to meet her gaze, her lips twisted into a mocking smile.

“Next time I’m waiting for you,” she whispered from a few inches away, “remember your place, hmm?”

Failed Sense Motive vs Bluff
Surprise round!
Dovnu has struck you for 10 nonlethal damage
You are now afflicted with Bleed 2
Dovnu has intimidated you
You are now afflicted with Shaken for 2 turns

“I’ve read the contract.” Dovnu said, letting go of my hair and pushing me back into my seat, “I’m not allowed to do anything that could stop him from fulfilling his obligations or challenges, nor can I act against him indirectly with that in mind. I know that you, as an extension of me, will provide medical care long before he bleeds out and he will be in a fully functional state long before we get home. Also, I just did that out of spite, rather than any tactical reason.”

Kiyon rested his hand on her thigh, and flicked his fingers in a subtle dance. As I noted them, I heard his voice in my head.

"Precious Silver, be careful." Kiyon said in the secret handsigns sometimes used by my people on the surface, "Nendra hasn't been able to control him with brute force for decades, and that was before he found success abroad."

He rolled his hand on her thigh, allowing her to feel the movements instead of see them. (Perception vs. Sleight of Hand 15+10=25)

I learned sign language by fucking people?

Many languages, in fact, starting with those I would have reason to know.

Dovnu flicked her fingers as she pushed Kiyon's hair behind one ear in an affectionate gesture. "Don't remind me. The delay irritates me."

Only then, after a surprise round and a full round of non-hostile actions from both of my captors, did combat officially start. Time froze, leaving me with the throbbing pain in my nose and a warm wetness on my upper lip. I took as long as I could stand the pain to consider the situation.

Alright, power move. Trying to reestablish her position as my owner. She doesn't know that she just gifted me five minutes to think, and I sure as hell don't want her to find out that's how things work. I'm thinking I'll go with unimpressed.

While I looked the two drow over, I noticed something awfully strange. Normally my vision descended with the light level from full color, to sepia, to black and white, and eventually to a strange black on black I can't even describe to someone who hasn't seen it. Here in the palanquin, shielded from all the light of the morning sun, I saw color.

Dovnu in particular looked absolutely garish, with smudges of blue, green, purple, and red all over her body. Each smudge centered on an article of clothing; strong light blue around a gold ring, orange in her belt, and dark blue emanating from her whip, as well as a dozen smaller smudges. Kiyon was more subdued, but his eyes glowed with a faint, constant white light. I wasn't sure what was happening, but I knew better than to ask autopilot during a "fight"

"Seems flimsy to me," I said, calling infernal magic to mend my injuries. The bleeding stopped immediately, though I knew it would take a full minute to fully regenerate with Infernal Healing.

"I haven't been punished by the contract, unlike some people in this palanquin." Dovnu taunted, "Feel free to submit an appeal to the infernal courts if you like."

"Careful, I might." I said, "My first mate could probably draw up an imp from the depths to file on my behalf." (Opposed Bluff 11+13=24)

Kiyon chuckled, then stiffened.

“My dear boy… what has happened to you?” He asked, cocking his head and looking at me closely. The glow from his eyes intensified and focused on me.

“He picked up a spell to heal himself?” Dovnu said, “Not bad; you hardly ever see that with arcane magic.”

“Take a note of that one for the sales pitch, husband.” She added with her fingers, “People like rare spells like that.”

“No, Precious One,” Kiyon said, excited, “It is not only that. His eyes, they have the look of nobility now. His skin is drinking in magic.”

Dovnu blinked, then grinned.

“Oh, that is a delight!” She crooned, “You’re telling me that whole ritual gag was serious? He’s become a noble somehow?”

“Yes.” I admitted, deliberately not loosening my tongue with magic, “I figured it might give me an edge.” That’s all it did, and fully justifies the effort I put into it. (Bluff to redirect a line of thought 11+12=23 opposed by target Sense Motive)

Why aren’t you using Silver Tongue?

Kiyon can likely see it just as easily as we can see his arcane sight. It makes much more sense now; the nobles always gave the impression that they were all knowing.

“Oh? I’m curious to see what else you scraped together on your way to nobility.” Dovnu said, leaning back and taking out a flask. “It sounded absurd, but it makes a lot more sense that you would be so cocky.”

I smiled, because that’s what we all expected by this point, though I knew they wouldn’t buy it. I wasn’t even entirely sure what I was selling. I winced involuntarily when my nose clicked back into its proper shape, which probably undermined any interpretation of me that looked particularly cool.

I’m just a poor boy in over my head? I have become more powerful than you can possibly imagine? I’m staring at your v-neck and I’m hoping you don’t notice? Take your pick, just please underestimate me.

Dovnu took a few pulls from her flask before speaking again, while Kiyon laid back in his chair. Each had a hand laid affectionately on the other.

“So you know,” Dovnu noted, “there’s no clause in the contract preventing retaliatory strikes after we are done. I mean, legally I won’t have a leg to stand on, but these pirates understand how grudges work.”

“I’d say I have at least as much to hold against you right now as you have against me.” I said, frowning. “We agreed to this contract because we both knew it would be more profitable in the long run.”

“Oh sure Stud, definitely.” Dovnu agreed, “Right now this is a bit of fun. Keep it that way. If you seriously hurt my daughter or my position, though? It won’t be fun anymore. I understand playing hardball, but if you actually leak half of what you know, I’ll need a scapegoat.”

She clicked her golden nails, summoning a magical spark to light another cigarette. The tiny ember was a glowing beacon in the darkness.

“Precious Silver,” Kiyon silently tapped upon her thigh, “you know how I feel about smoking in enclosed spaces.”

“Nothing personal, Stud.” She explained, ignoring Kiyon’s silent objection. “You’ve never been important enough to hate, and you still aren’t yet. Keep it that way.”

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I saw Dovnu close her eyes at Kiyon’s signal half a second before the curtain opened. The instant transition to midday sun seared my retinas, almost as painful as the broken nose had been. It faded quickly, and I regretted leaving behind my shade lenses with the rest of my gear. Surely they wouldn’t have taken those away.

Kiyon’s shadows broke down the palanquin and loaded it onto a small boat. I squinted in the sunlight; it was undignified, but I was a prisoner wearing nothing but a bathrobe. Dignity wasn’t really in the cards.

On the trip over to the Crooked Smile I looked over my new abilities. I’d gotten excited at the prospect of a whole second class, but phantom thief was a strange class that really didn’t seem like it would hold up completely on its own. I had more hit points than Sandara now, but less than anyone else in the party. I could use dexterity instead of my abysmal strength to punch people, but it was still a bad value proposition when pitted against my magic. I could dodge explosions and attacks much more effectively, but nowhere near enough to feel comfortable standing in the line of fire. The upgrade had shored up most of my weaknesses, but didn’t turn them into strengths outside of one area.

My number of skill points had nearly doubled, and been automatically invested into anything and everything I'd been doing lately. Enchanting, summoning, politics, interpersonal skills, perception, sexual prowess, burglary; I was better at all of it.

It was likely I had been built with my magic in mind, because all of the biggest class feature boosts complimented my magical abilities, especially summoning. I could speak ten languages now, mostly extraplanar, which would hopefully allow me to remove celestial cat interpreters from the budget, and that was only the most mundane boost I'd gotten. I can't imagine this would be a good build for a standalone Phantom Thief; then again, I wasn't even sure if I was actually a well optimized sorcerer.

Eh. Most people in real life aren't all that well optimized. They take what they can get and are happy to have it.

I went to college with people that had bigger yachts than the Crooked Smile. They were rich guys who could throw parties on their dad's boat as long as they kept their grades up, but the point stands. The ship had one mast with a single sail, a squat cabin that held the only route below deck, and was sparsely guarded.

Three people stood at attention on the deck when we boarded, all tall, broad shouldered, and completely covered shiny black armor cheaply made from giant spider carapace, as befit their status as disposable slave soldiers. (Knowledge Local 9+7=16) I couldn't see any skin, but they seemed bigger than the average elf to me.

I did my best not to stare at them, keying off of the dismissive tone of Autopilot's thoughts.

I may find 6'6" guys in carapace armor and carrying axes intimidating, but Emrys sees them as part of the furniture. Play it cool.

Kiyon's shadows rushed to their positions, efficiently preparing the ship for launch. The wind and tides were right, and we were far from the only ship setting sail. Dovnu went to each of the guards in turn, gesturing in front of their faces.

"Return to your waiting place." My mind translated from her gestures, "You will be summoned if needed."

She looked over at me, frowning.

"What are you doing still on deck?" She snapped. "You know policy."

Only Kiyon and Dovnu are allowed to know their route, sometimes Nendra. I'm expected to wait inside the ship while we travel, mostly in the cabin I share with Nendra.

Oh. Well, that's going to make this a fun week.

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“Ah, good, you’re here.” Nendra said as I entered, speaking Undercommon, “I needed a foot rub.”

Huh. Sounds kinda like German. Dad never taught me German, but I guess it fits.

I stopped in the doorway, taking in the image before me. Nendra was on a small couch in nothing but a thin silk shift, reading by the light from a dimly glowing jar of orange paste. The jar created a small sphere of black and white in an otherwise black room.

“That's the first thing you say to me?” I asked in the same language, confused. “It’s been months.”

“What were you expecting?” She asked softly, “A joyful reunion? Castigation? Threats?”

“Any kind of acknowledgment would do.” I answered with a shrug, letting autopilot guide me to his spare clothes. The robe was pretty undignified. “I’m not giving you a foot rub, by the way.”

Her lips fell into a frown, and a pulse of pure pain ripped through my body (6 nonlethal damage). She toyed with the next page of her book as I steadied myself against the small sea chest.

“Then you won’t be sleeping, I suppose.” She said, “a shame. I was hoping I could enjoy some aspects of your company, at least.”

“Stop doing that.” I snapped at her as the pain began to fade. “I’m not your pet, or your slave.”

“Legally speaking you are in fact my mother’s slave, but more importantly you are my husband, at least officially.” She said, snapping her book shut. “I should not have to do any such thing to receive basic considerations. Why was I, of all the women in the world, saddled with such a willful man?”

Willful? I mean me, sure, but Autopilot is terrified of this girl.

“Try the carrot.” I said, pulling up a pair of worn pants. “The stick isn’t working.”

Nendra stared at me with narrowed eyes, clearly nonplussed. She did not recognize my words and believed I may be mocking her in some obscure way. (Sense motive vs. Target you know well 9+10+5=24)

“There is a saying among humans related to the training of beasts and management of servants.” I explained, annoyed at the necessity, “A horse can be trained by offering it the food it

likes, such as carrots, or beaten with a stick as a punishment. It's a very flexible saying, I'm surprised you haven't heard it."

"I've no clue where you have." Nendra said acidly. "Have you been spending a lot of time at the Shackles Equestrian Society in between publicly advertised orgies?"

"My point," I soldiered on, lacing a loose white shirt, "is that you rely on the stick too much. I haven't seen a damn thing about you that makes me want to spend a moment more in your company than I have to. I don't see that I owe you much of anything."

"Fine." Nendra sighed, "If that is what you wish, you may attend to me more intimately."

She stood, and quickly pulled off her shift. I took her in. She was certainly pretty, there was no denying that. She had a cute, upturned nose and long eyelashes that combined to give her a doll-like face. Her snowy white hair was free, tumbling down her pale grey back and shoulders all the way down to her pert black nipples. The only thing about her that wasn't pretty was the annoyed look of a woman who thought the privilege of eating her out was a grand concession.

"Not bad for a first attempt, but still too greedy." I said, turning on my heel. "Try something I might want, instead of the least unpleasant thing you want."

"Come back!" Nendra ordered, "Don't you dare turn your back to me."

My body briefly seized up, but I powered through it and closed the door in her face. (Will save 11+7=18) I summoned my shadow, and had it hold the door shut as she raged on the other side.

Please tell me there is literally anywhere on the ship I can go where I don't need to be near her or else get beaten.

With Kiyon otherwise occupied? Two places. Both are likely to be unpleasant. Then again, she'd be more willing to follow us if they weren't.

Well I sure as hell can't just go back after that exit. Hopefully she can convince herself that she "ran us off" to some dark corner of the ship.