

Ivor's boots landed on hard topsoil. It was too dark to see, and he immediately drew his sword to protect himself from any nearby monsters he'd landed near. Towering trees and little ferns surrounded him, the sky crowded by a leafy canopy and the moon peeking through a thin slice. Ivor held his breath to listen for any nearby signs of life, footsteps or rustling in the underbrush, and heard only silence.

Still holding his sword, Ivor resumed breathing with relief and took in his surroundings further. The air had a hint of woody spice, and as far as he could tell, this land was untouched. The trees were thinner than jungle trees but somehow managed to stand even taller, but in the dark Ivor couldn't tell exactly what they were. He supposed, he would examine them better in the morning. An unusual forest was definitely not the most surprising thing he'd seen in a world that wasn't his own.

Ivor, feeling safe in the calm silence, knelt to the ground and pulled a drawstring bag from his belt, reaching in and fishing out a red mushroom to smush into the ground. He carefully pulled the bag closed and reached for a second bag to sprinkle ground bones onto the half-wilted mushroom. Ivor blinked, and suddenly, the stalk was taller than he was, and the cap had grown around it to form a nearly enclosed tent.

"I'm going to buy some more bones soon." Ivor murmured to himself as he retied the bag to his belt. Once upon a time he would've been happy to run out into the night with his sword swinging to the nearest skeleton, but he'd had enough brushes with death to start paying for other people to do that for him instead. Ivor pulled a sheepskin sleeping blanket from his inventory, laying it down on the flattest bit of ground in the mushroom tent, hoping to sleep out the night and properly look around in the morning. The Gilded City of Thanate waited.

Laying down with a clump of wool as a pillow, Ivor stared up at the faintly luminescent mushroom spores glistening and felt his eyes starting to drift close.

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Ivor woke with a jolt and a yelp, hearing a chicken cluck outside his tent. His blurry vision made out light shining through the mushroom's membrane, and he rubbed his eyes with a hiss. He sat up and reached to gather his hair back into a loose bun before remembering he didn't have a ribbon to tie it, nor did he have his comb to at least make himself look acceptable. He reminded himself he was trying to get out of his awful routine, besides.

Sitting up and rolling up his blanket to tuck back into his inventory, he pondered the morning's tasks and immediately realized he didn't have anything to eat that morning. He wasn't hungry, but he leaned towards the membrane and dug his fingernails into it, piercing the thin flesh and from there, he easily tore away an opening to side-step through out into the fresh air. Holding a long slice of the mushroom, he wished he had the tools to start a cooking fire to make himself a breakfast soup, but unfortunately he didn't and these mushrooms weren't good to eat raw.

He tucked it into his inventory regardless and stared up at the trees and the shuddering canopy, smelling the air again. The bark of the trees were an earthy red, indeed, a kind of tree and biome he hadn't seen before. The fresh discovery made Ivor's chest rise with excitement, but that wasn't his target for the day.

The Gilded Province of Thanate would definitely have any food he was looking for, but he would need to find it first. Roads or trade routes were a sure sign of civilization. Ivor oriented himself by the rising sun in the east, and began walking towards it through the woods. He was at least, thankful he wasn't very hungry.

Ivor found the tall trees thinning out and being replaced by shorter regular trees as he walked at a brisk pace, making good time but not having spotted a road or any signs of civilization. He'd made it into a mostly untouched birch forest, and he found enjoyment in stepping on and over the occasional protruding root. He'd spotted some animals around that could probably make a passable meal, if he had the time to run around to get the things to create a fire. But then, he didn't have charcoal with him to keep one burning... Ivor moved his mind back to continuing his path.

He trekked around a mountain as the sun rose to its highest, but spent a moment to gather some snow at its foothills to take with him. Ivor didn't need snow for anything, but snowballs could come in handy, or he could fiddle with it when bored and camping out for another long evening. Coming around the mountain, Ivor stopped at some flowers he spotted, the stems protruding out of some loose rocks but standing tall.

They were bright golden yellow, fractal petals clustering around the anther. Ivor hadn't seen this before, and approached it with a faint gasp.

As an alchemist, he'd seen thousands of different flowers in his thousands of years alive... but this was new. When he was lost with Jesse and his crew of friends it was rare he got time to stop and pick or appreciate unusual flowers or plants. Petra especially would throw a fuss about it, they only had so much time and they couldn't waste precious time trying to get home stopping to smell the roses.

Ivor carefully plucked one of the smaller flowers at the stem. Just bringing it to his nose was like drinking a blend of citrus. He pulled a tiny petal close to the anther and with a moment of hesitation, put it on his tongue and sat down on the pile of stocks to think it over, tossing the plucked flower between his hands absently.

It didn't taste anything like citrus as he expected, but strongly bitter. Grinding it between his teeth he got a more sour sensation, but he detected a sharp aftertaste. There was the citrus, and he clapped his hands as he realized what he'd found.

"Incredible, these have the alchemical reagent for night vision potions." Ivor spoke, getting to his feet again to quickly pull the newfound flowers to stuff into an empty drawstring bag he had on his belt. They could be handy, or at least, he could replant them somewhere nice. Checking that the bag was secure, he reoriented himself with the sun and started moving towards the east again. He jumped as an arrow suddenly plunked itself in front of him, his head whipping towards where it came from and drawing his sword. "Who's there?!"

He spotted a leg darting behind a tree, a couple metres away. Ivor's drew his steel mask from his inventory to protect himself and pulling it on, now squinting to see in the dark slat. "I know where you are! I advise you to walk away." Ivor shouted into the wood, hearing a twig snap.

His attacker ran out from a white-trunked tree and hid behind another. They were clad in scavenged metal materials with a small harvesting dagger, perhaps coming back for the golden flowers they'd planted earlier. Ivor's eyes followed them and began to creep through the wood towards them, careful to step softly as to not make a sound. He thought to himself, he hoped he

wouldn't have to kill the person but that he would be able to successfully scare them off to leave him be. Approaching the tree with his leather-gloved hands on the hilt of his diamond sword, pain shot through his body and he shouted as an arrow landed in his left shoulder. How did he forget an arrow landed in front of him and not a dagger?

Ivor's eyes shot to his left and saw movement darting behind a tree, and he quickly realized he was being flanked. In the moment he realized just what was happening, his first attacker, with a thatched mask with twin eyeholes torn out leapt out from behind the tree. They lifted a shining flint dagger and screamed as they tried to slam it into his shoulder, The dagger didn't land, Ivor jumping back and drawing his sword up to stare the person in the eyes behind his mask.

"We need those flowers!" The person snarled behind the fabric, grasping their knife. "Give them back, and we won't give you trouble."

Ivor's eyes went to the arrow in his shoulder and back to the person. He heard shuffling in the trees, suggesting the archer was changing position.

"I would give them back if you didn't shoot me in the shoulder." Ivor hissed. "You could have asked nicely, and we could have split them fifty-fifty."

"No, they're ours! We planted them and you can't just stroll up and take them." The person asserted, gripping their knife with white knuckles.

"Why did you plant them under some rocks and not in your residence?" Ivor folded his arms. "If they're in the open it's fair and square."

"Why would you plant precious resources in your house?" The person spoke, stunned. "Then they're all in the same place."

Ivor paused to let the words roll around in his skull, and then groaned.

"That's one of the most foolish things I've ever heard!" He objected. The person rose their knife again, and Ivor rose his sword in turn. He hopped back behind the trees as he heard the archer in the trees pull the bowstring again with the clink of arrow against wood. The person rose their flint knife with a scream and were cut off by two arrows landing in their shoulder – from the right.

Ivor hummed with surprise and hopped back again as his attacker fell to their knees in pain with a howl. The arrow in his shoulder stung. Had they never been shot with an arrow before? He giggled in schadenfreude and spotted two identically dressed people emerge from the woods to his right, one with their bow drawn but both clad in full steel.

"Thank you?" Ivor kept an eye trained on the archer as they approached him, leaving his attacker writhing on the ground. Their flint knife had fallen out of reach as they lay on the ground, squirming uselessly and making pained moans. The two armoured people approached in silence, and Ivor felt suspicion ping in his skull. "Is there anything I can do for you today, armoured friends?"

"You are in violation of The Gilded Province of Thanate's laws." A gruff voice came from behind a helmet as one approached. Ivor assessed his options, realizing he had three people on either sides of him, a mountain face behind him, and two arrows drawn and pointed towards him. He was lucky the last arrow had landed in his shoulder.

"What law have I violated?" Ivor asked. "Is a man not allowed to use a sword to dispatch an attacker?"

“People in or surrounding the Gilded Province may not possess precious materials as ownership is deferred to the Lord and Sovereign or the court.” The guard spoke again as they moved closer. Ivor tightened the grip on his diamond sword.

“I didn’t think this was near or part of Thanate.” Ivor spoke back, and the guard grabbed the hilt of his sword to yank it out, despite his grip. It hit the ground and before Ivor could react, he was grabbed by the shoulders, the arrow pulled out. Ivor tried to throw the palm of his hand to smack the guard’s windpipe only to be sprayed with a viscous potion, and the hit landed on the guard’s throat as if a fly had landed there. Potion of Weakness, Ivor immediately recognized.

“This way.” The archer had refitted a potion bottle and the bow and quiver onto their belt, catching Ivor in their steel hands as he fell to his knees. They took his mask, affixing it to their belt. “Very nice mask, there.”

“I don’t need to hear it from you.” Ivor hissed, but felt fatigue rooting into his bones as the guards began to pull his weightless body across the dirt, his diamond sword dinging against the other guard’s belt like some sort of trophy. Despite the discomfort, the fatigue was heavy enough to force Ivor’s eyes to close.

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When Ivor woke, the ache in his back and knees came to him before his eyes even opened. He groaned against the hardwood and pushed himself to sit up, pain shooting through his back. He was resting in a small dark wooden carriage with a thin slat on each side for windows. As the carriage tilted up slightly, his ears brought him to a corked bottle of water and a plate with meager rations. Ivor’s stomach grumbled, but he hadn’t eaten that day and he didn’t think as he picked a half loaf of bread from the plate.

The crust was hard and half of the bread was air bubbles. He took a reluctant bite, feeling the hard crust prick his tongue – his beard and mustache would have crumbs in it later, unfortunately. The colour of the light through the thin slat suggested it was the evening.

Putting the bread aside, he shuffled on his sore knees to the window, reached his fingers through and used it to pull himself up. He looked out towards a dizzying walled clearing with hundreds of people working to clear more land from the trees, people carrying wood back to furnaces, people giving out tools and rations... People were too busy to watch the cart go by, but the angle of the window stopped him from looking out to see just where he was being taken.

His knees and back ached too much to keep standing when in a moving carriage, leaving him to sink back down to sit and shuffle to the plate of bread and the corked bottle of water he’d been left. Refreshments!

Ivor pondered what he was going to say to whoever he was being brought to. Surely if he was going to be killed he would have just been killed by the guards outright, but they had left him food and water. He absently chewed on the bread and tried to pick crumbs out of his beard as he thought.

Soren knew of this place enough to write something about it, Ivor thought over, but the more he thought about it, the more questions it rose. He had already wondered if Soren was here before he came to their world or if he had come here since leaving, there weren’t really any hallmarks on the notes in the vinyl sleeve. Did he visit as a tourist? Did he live here? Did he even talk to anyone here?

Ivor heard chatter from the flood of workers moving by outside, and thought of the things Soren carried with him, and his current situation. Maybe he was captured somewhere. Maybe he was still here?

There was also the chance he had died somewhere, but Ivor let the thought pass. He had to pretend that wasn't a possibility.

Ivor took a bite into the bread and flinched as some crumbs got in his eyes, and he dropped it to rub his eyes, mumbling complaints. When he pulled his hands away, the light had disappeared outside the window and he heard echoing hooves on cold stone. The cart's wheels were quieter on the floor, and a cold draft was creeping in. They'd entered a tunnel, he realized. Wherever he was going, he would have to look presentable. He set the bread down and quickly uncorked the water bottle to drink it down. He emptied it and recorked it, then tried to continue picking stray crumbs from his beard when he could. There was only so many he could pull out from how many fell before he presumably reached his destination.

Indeed, the cart stopped suddenly, and the back wall was opened and lowered to a ramp. Ivor, wanting to maintain an air of dignity, got to his feet despite the pain and moved down to the two guards waiting. They had come through a long darkened stone tunnel, and Ivor stood between the two guards with a nod to indicate compliance.

Both guards walked him the last leg of the tunnel as the weakness in his legs evaporated up to some stone-carved stairs, and with the armoured guard in front of him, Ivor watched his home-smithed diamond sword swing on the belt in front of him and huffed quietly.

He was lead through several tall corridors of darkened stone now lit with flaming torches until they came to tall doors made of twisted but symmetrical obsidian glass. They towered over them, Ivor staring up at them until one of the guards grabbed the back of his tunic.

"Do you mind?" Ivor hissed, the guard reaching around his arms to the ribbon tying his tunic together.

"This is the cathedral of Katerina the Almighty, Lord and Sovereign. She demands all who must be presented to her come dressed this way."

"There's no need for this." Ivor complained, but the guard untied the ribbon and pulled away his green tunic. He accepted his fate as the guard pulled his adventuring slacks down, stepping out of them and closing his eyes in shame.

"Katerina the Almighty will most likely assign you to work in the mines or the fields." The guard informed him, folding his clothes and tucking them under their arm.

"Probably the mines, they're pretty scant lately." The other guard by the door spoke. "A creeper went off and took out a whole group of miners." Ivor grit his teeth and hissed but got a firm hand on his back.

"You will receive worse if you complain in there." The guard whispered. Ivor rolled his eyes.

"I understand." Ivor was thankful they at least left his boxer shorts and boots, one of the guards leaving down the hall as the other guard holding his clothes and sword pushed one of the enormous obsidian doors open, moving inside on a crimson carpet. Ivor followed closely behind, trying to stand tall to maintain some sense of dignity. The cold air on his bare chest made a part of him want to fold up instead.

The enormous chamber looked as if it had been made from natural obsidian flows, but the ground had been smoothed to a shine. The ceiling towered above them and came down

around the edges, a completely motionless liquid. They approached a black throne, embedded in the ground and spiking upwards. An armoured woman sat, two arms on the armrests and heavy black obsidian boots on the ground, her whole set of armour foreboding and streaked with gold. Katerina the Almighty, Lord and Sovereign, Ivor assumed. She was intimidating as her title sounded – it was well earned.

The guard stopped and moved behind Ivor, placing their hands firmly on Ivor's shoulders and forcing him to his hands and knees, drawing a pained scream as his knees buckled. Pathetic.

"Lord and Sovereign." The guard saluted, folding their arms over their chest and bowing their head. "We found this man at the edges of our borders with rare and precious materials."

"How rare?" Katerina's voice boomed behind her helmet.

"A diamond sword, and an iron mask." The guard responded, holding to their salute.

"Bah." Katerina rolled her fingers. "Sounds like a common thief."

"I assure you, I am no thief." Ivor spat, his eyes still on the ground. The guard kicked him in the side and Katerina tutted.

"Don't do that. Let him speak for himself. Get up." Katerina demanded, and Ivor carefully rose from the floor, his knees popping as he straightened himself up to see the woman moving towards him, an enormous square bludgeoning warhammer at her side. With one hand, she miraculously swung it over her shoulder. "What is your name?"

Ivor couldn't make eye contact through the helmet but was sure the hammer would be able to crush his skull with a single swing. He tried to speak strongly, narrowing his eyes.

"Ivor the Arcane." Ivor responded.

The woman let the hammer drop to her side with an echoing thud, and she threw her head back with laughter. Ivor felt like his chest may implode, but stood his ground. Katerina's cackling trailed away with a sigh, leaning on the hilt of her hammer.

"I know what's going on here and it doesn't work." Katerina spoke firmly. "Thieves get caught, they get brought to me, they claim they have some extravagant title, and then they get sent out to labour."

"I'm not lying." Ivor hissed. "I am extremely proficient in alchemy and enchantment."

"Oh, you are?" Katerina cooed, condescendingly. "Would you like to demonstrate?"

"If you would allow me and provided me the equipment." Ivor spoke lowly. To his surprise, the woman pulled her hammer back up over her shoulder to call for the guard, who snapped to attention from their salute.

"Please take the thief three rooms down." Katerina demanded. "I will speak with Florence and the rest of the court to prepare."

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Ivor pulled the gloves he had been provided with on, snapping them around his wrist and turning his gaze up to the shadowy court hanging above him on the molded obsidian stairs. All of them stood in long fabric robes with gilded sleeves, hooded so he couldn't see their faces besides blinking eyes and darkened shadowy features. Katerina had her own seat right in the middle, tapping her fingers expectantly on the arms of the throne. This was all clearly an intimidation tactic – he'd seen it before, and he'd experienced it enough times that he could see

through it. Ivor's lips twisted to a sneer, but standing there naked except boots and gloves had clamped down much of his confidence.

"Ivor the Arcane, start your demonstration. Show us how you've earned your title."
Katerina crooned. "Since you definitely earned it?"

"I did." Ivor whispered with scorn, and he jumped as the woman pounded her fist on the side of her seat, the room rumbling. He cleared his throat. "Ladies, gentlemen, those of other genders in this honorable court... Let me demonstrate my abilities."

"Florence." Katerina called, and a person in a deep blue hooded robe emerged from the sidelines, holding a large carved stone bowl filled with an enormous assortment of flowers, herbs, ingredients... They placed it down, bowed, and turned back to the sidelines to shuffle away. Ivor carefully separated and removed the ingredients to place across his workbench. There was a brewing stand and other equipment, most notably a granite mortar and pestle, but as Ivor arranged the ingredients, his heart sank as he realized he didn't recognize any of the flowers they'd set out. Looking at the collection of herbs too, he noticed he didn't recognize any either.

Sweat was beading on his forehead, and the longer he leaned on the workbench and stared at the ingredients, he noticed a quiet chatter emerging from the court.

"Will you be quiet?! I'm not familiar with these reagents!" Ivor slammed both his open palms on the table. "Let a man work."

"These are common plants, Arcanist." Katerina boomed.

Ivor glared back until his eyes went over some familiar bright yellow petals. Compound for night vision, he realized. Hurriedly, he picked them up and put them down into the mortar and began to crush and grind them down with the pestle. The chatter went quiet, and he smiled in vindication.

"I do recognize this one." Ivor whispered, his eyes going to a familiar red organic substance on the table, like a cluster of little bubbles. He set down the mortar to quickly smush a couple of the nether warts, then scooped them off the table to place them in a glass dome atop the brewing station. He checked the water bottles at the bottom were correctly attached, and turned a little knob at the side to start the brewing process. "These, my friends, are nether warts, and they are solute when melted into water. They form the base of all powerful potions by binding with particular compounds in an added reagent."

Silence from the court, and Katerina continued to tap her fingers on the arm of her throne. Ivor bit his lip and reached for the mortar and pestle again to continue silently grinding the yellow flowers. Ivor's eyes drifted to the other ingredients, looking at them a bit closer. He spotted red and orange berries on one sprig of leaves he'd been given, a cluster of dark green leaves with white tips, and some deep purple flowers. Wolfsbane, fell off Ivor's tongue. Red and orange wild berries were poisonous and the white tips of the dark green leaves indicated they could be irritants. He was unfamiliar with these, but he knew the warning signs for harmful plants and if he had been lying about his title and just stuffed some poisonous berries into the brewing stand to melt it into the bottles, then drink it...

Ivor realized he'd crushed the yellow petals into a paste and hurriedly scraped them out of the mortar into the delicate glass bowl, setting the mortar down and taking the small knob to turn the heat up two marks.

“Would the audience like to try this potion I’ve made?” Ivor asked lowly. There was a resounding silence, but Katerina raised her hand from her throne. “Katerina the Almighty...”

“Not you.” Katerina scowled, and Ivor turned to spot the person in the dark blue hood hurrying over to his workspace again, their hands folded together inside the thick gilded sleeves of their robe. Ivor watched the yellow paste flow down into the bottle, and quickly disperse through the water.

“Give it a moment.” Ivor waited for the yellow ooze to stop flowing into the bottles, and when the stream tapered, he plucked two off the stand and nabbed some corks to jam into the top of the bottle. He picked them both up and shook them, the liquid inside the bottles lighting up as the potion properly bound itself together and settled. “Here, mysterious robed figure.” He passed one bottle to the person in the robe, who with some hesitation, took the bottle in a bony hand.

“Thanks Florence!” A voice shouted from the court, and laughter erupted from the whole group. Ivor uncorked his own bottle and took a swig. A moment later, the dark areas of his vision lifted, and the court’s faces hidden by their robes came into clear view, lit by a silvery glow.

“Ah, I can see all your faces now.” Ivor spoke with a grin.

His eyes turned to the blue robed person uncorking the bottle. Under their dark hood, Ivor could now see sunken eyes and thin lips. Their long fingers wrapped around the bottle, they lifted it to their nose and sniffed deeply, before raising it to their lips to take a hesitant sip and hurriedly setting the bottle down. A telltale silver light rose from their pupils, turning to meet Ivor’s gaze and surely seeing the same silvery light he was.

“It works.” Florence confirmed in a rasp.

“This is a night vision potion, prepared from a flower I learned about just this morning.” Ivor tapped the last bottle. “Do you need further proof?”

“Make something else from the ingredients on the table.” Katerina leaned her chin into the palm of her hand. It would have looked casual if she wasn’t clad in armour as black as knight and jagged as seaside rocks.

Ivor’s eyes went to his remaining ingredients. Nettles, poisonous berries, wolfsbane. The word fell off his tongue again, and his eyes slid to the brewing stand to spot the bony woman fitting more water bottles into the three slots.

If he was familiar with any of these plants besides the wolfsbane, he could have known about any secondary properties besides poison to create specific effects. Ivor had learned over the years that poisons with a nether wart base were rarely potent. Often the poisonous substances weren’t solute in water and barely bound to the melted nether warts, but a weaker acid like bile often did the trick to dissolve the substances, and additionally did a good job thickening the finished product to be dabbed on arrows or a sword.

“My friends, to make something else with the ingredients on this table, nether warts will not be the best thing to use for my next potion. May I request any gall or bile you might have on hand in your alchemy wing?”

“Florence...” Katerina snapped her fingers twice. “Get the thief what he wants.”

Ivor huffed as the woman skirted away. He’d bought many a potion from markets across his homeworld only to drink them and find they were almost entirely water with the faint taste of flowers or bitter mushrooms, and did barely anything. Most people didn’t have access to nether warts, and even then, most people wouldn’t know what they could do...

The woman wobbled back in on unsteady legs, holding a large jar of foul smelling yellow liquid. It smelled unpleasant, even with fabric on top. She placed it down on the workbench, and Ivor nodded.

“Thank you...” He slid it over and plucked the water bottles off the brewing stand to uncork and half-empty them on the floor. Ivor heard a sigh from the audience, and he ignored it as he pulled the fabric off the jar to pour the bile inside to replace the water, scrunching his nose at the smell invading his nostrils. “You see, bile is an excellent base and solvent when making poisons.”

He replaced the bottles and turned the heat on to boil the liquids, and began to carefully pick the berries from the tiny branch to drop into the mortar. He looked between the wolfsbane and the nettles, and picked the nettles in his gloved hands to put them in too. Ivor didn't know how porous the gloves were and didn't want to touch them, just in case. “These likely very dangerous berries and these stinging nettles will create a brew that will, at the very least, cause a very upset stomach.” Once the berries were crushed into mush, he once again pushed the mortar's contents into the little glass dish. “Sadly, I haven't yet devised a potion that could cause dysentery.”

Ivor expected some response from the crowd and frowned when he got nothing. The berries and nettles were pushed down the tubes to the bottles, and they quickly coloured the liquid a dark red.

A potion that caused stomach upsets probably wouldn't impress these people, Ivor realized. Under-cooked chicken could do that just as easy without any fancy mortar and pestle and bile. His eyes went to the wolfsbane and with hesitation, he gingerly picked the flowers up to drop into the mortar and hastily grind them in circles. “Now, if you add this wolfsbane...” Ivor murmured, pushing the poisonous petals down into the glass dish, and looking towards a potted sapling on the workbench.

As the purple liquid spilled down into the bottles, Ivor placed his hand on the neck of one and waited for the stream to taper. As soon as it did, Ivor tore the bottle away to pour it over the sapling.

The sapling immediately wilted on contact, the green leaves turning brown and the thin bark melting into slag. Ivor tipped the neck back up quickly, looking to the court cooing in awe. Katerina remained still for a long moment, but slowly moved her shoulders and sat up straight with a sigh.

“So, you're an alchemist. But not an arcanist, as far as we know.” She spoke slowly. “We're going to have to move to the sunroom to test your enchanting abilities, next.”

Ivor smirked with vindication until the robed woman took both of his hands to quickly bind them together. He huffed, slouching.

“I expect you have an impeccable enchanting sunroom.” He tried to compliment Katerina, who simply got up from her seat and raised her hand. The woman pulled him out into the hallway, moving and beginning to march him to the next room. Ivor heard rising chatter as they left the room. “Your name is Florence?”

“Yes.” The woman simply replied. “Florence the Architect.”

“My.” Ivor perked up. “Did you construct this place, by any chance?”

"I did. Katerina found me after I constructed a gorgeous little village for me and my friends between the mountains." Florence rasped. "Her guards swept in three weeks after I finished it to capture us into her growing territory."

"And she made you make this palace?"

"Yes, and even though I finished it forever ago, she won't let me leave." Florence hissed. Ivor wasn't terribly surprised.

"It's either here or the mines, right?" He tried to make a joke, though physically felt it falling flat. Being unclothed and marched was probably giving him a waver in his voice. The woman sighed.

"Maybe the mines would be better, I wouldn't have to hang around these people." Florence grumbled, and pushed a large obsidian door open as footsteps of the court started coming behind them.

The door opened to an enormous room with a glass ceiling of hundreds of different hues, a long workbench with an enchanting table sitting atop it and an anvil beside it. Behind the workbench stretched a maze of bookshelves, presumably packed with enchanted tomes. The sitting area was the same as the previous room, although now covered in dancing glass hues.

"This is... magnificent." Ivor exhaled in awe as Florence walked him to the workbench, dropping his hands and folding her robes together. She stood there in silence as the court began to file in. When Katerina moved inside, Florence began to lay out an array of tomes on the table. Ivor recognized the embossed symbols on the colourful leather covers, immediately recognizing the enchantments they would contain. He recognized a Mending tome, Bane of Arthropods, Unbreaking, Fire Aspect... Ivor's eyes went to a smaller empty notebook Florence placed down last, along with an inkwell and quill.

Katerina sat herself squarely on her throne, putting her hands together.

"Show us your enchanting skills." Her voice boomed behind her helmet. "You may use the enchanting table provided, or the tomes we've supplied you with."

Florence drew an iron shovel from her robe to place down on the workspace. Ivor supposed out of all the things he could enchant, a shovel would be the least dangerous thing to give him, and if he was given a piece of armour to work with he'd just use it to cover himself. She reached behind him to cut the ropes she'd tied his hands with, and he shook them out, noticing red marks on his wrists.

"Any fool with an anvil can bash an enchanted tome onto a weapon." Ivor murmured, picking up a tome with a navy cover and a bolt of lightning on the cover. He placed it back down and instead picked the shovel to place it on the enchanting table, flipping the book floating on it open.

The pages flicked to an empty page, and Ivor brushed his fingers over the paper. Enchanting with a table was less consistent than an anvil for amateurs – the symbols and colours on tomes were easier to memorize than learning the written divine language. He watched runes appear on the paper, shimmering in and out of existence until the words he wanted started to visualize. He smacked them hard onto the page with two fingers, and they became solid ink on the page with a ripple of light.

There were some smoothed chunks of lapis lazuli in a little gold bowl beside the table, and Ivor placed one hand onto a piece as he carefully arranged runes on the pages. He finished the paragraph, and lifted the piece of lapis to slide onto the table. Ivor would have shouted the

finished sentence if he wasn't standing naked in front of an audience, but a mere whisper made the runes flow off the page and onto the shovel, melting the lapis into nothingness. The shovel gleamed blue, and Ivor lifted it to display the new sheen.

"A shovel with a high level durability enchantment." Ivor spoke to the audience, and they politely clapped. His eyes went to the empty notebook again, and a thought popped into his head.

He set the shovel down and went to the book, opening it to the first page. It was indeed empty, and he took the quill to dip into the inkwell to start writing.

The divine script didn't have a direct counterpart to the common language, unfortunately. He'd learned the basics from Soren, staying up late and studying it together by dim torchlight, and made great advances into understanding more of it. He'd spent years with one hand on the command block with his writing hand clutching his quill to study creating increasingly complicated enchantments, and he now felt comfortable creating them freehand. Without the command block, it required more complicated syntax but he could reach into the ether fairly similarly.

/summon lightning_bolt [pos] ~ ~ ~

Ivor closed the bracket and felt a pang of apprehension in his gut. He was out of practice for this, and an incorrect equation could nullify the entire enchantment. He mumbled the syntax over to himself as he reached for another piece of lapis to lay on the anvil. He noticed his palms were sweatier than he thought as he finalized the equation, though he realized he didn't know if he was to close the enchantment with a tilde or if he would had to add a curly bracket.

He couldn't keep deliberating it forever, and decided to go with the tilde. Ivor closed the book and laid it on the anvil alongside the already glistening iron shovel, taking a deep breath and whispering in the sacred language.

Within the blink of an eye, the book gleamed and vanished along with the lapis lazuli, the shovel glimmering again just a bit brighter. It hadn't nullified the endurance enchantment, Ivor breathed a sigh of relief. Ivor took the shovel again to hold, before taking the handle in his sweaty hands to look confident before the court. "This is no regular enchantment, dear friends. This is something you couldn't find from anyone else in this world." The court murmured, but Ivor wasn't sure if they were negative or positive.

With a deep breath, he rose the shovel. A moment of hesitation, and he brought it down on the anvil. The sky flashed white for the blink of an eye and the air roared with lightning and accompanying thunder in quick succession. The glass ceiling shook in reverence, and Ivor felt as if he could finally breathe. The court rumbled, and Katerina rolled her shoulders. The way her gauntlets gripped the seat of her chair, her knees having slightly pulled up, Ivor recognized he'd definitely shocked her.