

“Dayum,” I mutter, watching the [Baroness] whip her bright blond hair back. The sensual motion lifts her generous breasts and for a timeless moment they strain against her blouse. Even the world sends a sigh of appreciation, making her plaid skirt flutter tantalizingly up around her long, smooth legs. The woman stills and so does the breeze. Her deep, hazel eyes land squarely on me. She pouts slightly, accentuating her long eyelashes and small lips.

It’s real fuckin’ hot.

I can’t help but think that I’m looking at an older and more mature Jessica. Without a doubt that this woman is her mother.

As she nears, I sense her own aura covering her body like a blanket. A thick metal blanket, one trained from hardship and loss. A cover to protect herself, but also to protect others.

With a thought, I activate [True sight]. My eyes glow violet as I stare into her soul.

Juliana Carpe Diem

Level 287 [Restoration Monarch]

Level 127 [Baroness]

“Damn,” I say once again, seeing her class and levels. The [Baroness] class is alright, but it is the [Restoration Monarch] that really surprises me. Monarch implies a level of control nearing perfection. The only thing greater is if she had Sovereign, which she would get if she gains another thirteen levels.

A healing spell at that level would be quite a sight to see, though its usage would be rather specialized considering its strength. For example, the skill I got at level three hundred is called [Herald Of Undeath]. When activated, every corpse in a ten-mile radius will rise as an undead... every minute, for an entire week. It’s a great skill for playing “zombie apocalypse,” but I would rather have a skill smaller in scale and with broader application.

Speaking of broad applications...

As Juliana struts forward, I feel the auras of both Ethan and Joe disperse. They take a knee.

“[Baroness],” they say in unison.

She spares them both a brief glance, but her eyes fall on the handsome and all around impressive [Gentleman] still standing. Her pout turns to a frown as her eyes harden.

I fold my arms, lean my back in the cart, and return the look with a smile.

After a moment, her eyes shift from me to Joe.

“You called me. What is there that requires my presence?”

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Joe explains the situation. The head [Priest] of Tyr was killed in a supposed accident, while he was trafficking children. Sex trafficking is a capital crime, with the victims being children making it that much more abhorrant. As according to the city laws, a [Priest] or clergy member of equal or higher rank may serve as a judiciary and judge, handing down the sentence after the due process.

I glance again at the man who put a stop to this. His eyes stay trained on me, his true thoughts kept hidden behind an arrogant smirk. As the [Baroness], I should punish him for his show of disrespect. I would, on any other occasion. However, there was something off about him that convinced me to wait, a subtle feeling warning me I was about to do something I would regret.

After listening to Joe, it seems ignoring him had been the correct move. An Adamantine rank mercenary is not someone to insult, something Ethan took absolutely no care of. That idiot probably even threatened him.

“And you, Ethan? Why are you here?” I ask, enjoying him squirm under my gaze. He should know better than to order around my [Guards] without my permission.

“I-I came to retrieve Jared’s remains and offer sanctuary for the poor children.”

“Oh yes, that’s a wonderful idea! Let’s give a bunch of boys raped by one [Priest] to another [Priest] and expect the kids not to be molested,” the mercenary exclaims sarcastically.

Ethan scoffs, having slightly recollected himself. “Those are heinous accusations to put against the dead, especially the man you killed!” He points an accusing finger at Bone. “We know nothing of why Jared was transporting them or if he’s done ill to them.”

I snort and look at the children sleeping in the cart. My eyes glow as I see through flesh and bone. I analyse them, checking for discrepancies... and find that the mercenary is correct. Scar tissue is prevalent in their rectums, and their anuses have been enlarged

I look over to Joe. “Where is Jared’s body?”

“Over there,” he says and points.

My gaze follows his finger and finds the body covered by a white sheet.

“Follow me, Joe.”

I start walking and hear my [City Defender] match step.

I stop at the body and see the javelin lying next to it.

*‘Curious,’ I muse. ‘The spear seems to be made of a substance similar to bone, but it can’t be bone. It is much too dense and the internal structure is vastly different.’*

I lift the sheet covering the body. Jared’s corpse lays there, already stiffening. Considering his condition, it confirms that only an hour has passed since his demise.

“Give me a moment,” I tell Joe. I ready my mana and extend my hand. I usually would not use this spell without sufficient compensation, but I’d like to hear what he has to say.

“[Resurrection],” I say. Joe gasps. I feed the spell my mana, which gobbles down a fifth of all that I have.

The magic takes hold and does its work. The hole in Jared’s chest closes and mends itself, leaving no scar, and the world shudders. Hairline fractures of light, the cracking of reality, weave through the air as the spell searches for a soul. With Jared only dead an hour, it’s quick to grasp his soul and drag it back into his body.

Jared gasps for breath as his heart resumes beating. He coughs for a moment as I watch him. He looks around confusedly until he notices me.

“[Baroness]!” he exclaims and rolls over to kneel facing my direction.

“Joe, use a skill. I want him to talk.”

Joe grunts and steps forward and sets a hand on Jared’s head. The [Priest] looks around, confused.

“[Compel Veracity].”

I feel Joe’s aura rise as his skill activates and takes effect. The [Priest] is too low level and inexperienced to fight against Joe’s skill. Jared freezes up, eyes widening in panic.

“[Priest] Jared. You were found driving a carriage hiding five caged children. Why?” I ask.

Jared struggles, his panic rising, but he’s weak, unprepared, and Joe’s skill has already taken hold.

Against his own will, his hand rises and points towards the mercenary. "I was delivering the children to Ethan Boner in exchange for killing the [Necromancer]."

*'The mercenary is a [Necromancer]? I guess that explains the structure of the Javelin.'*

"Thank you, Joe," I tell my [City Defender] who looks utterly shocked. He removes his hand from Jared's head. I gently hold the chin of the criminal.

"It seems I wasted my mana," I lament. "[Greater Heal]."

My magic reaches out to the wastrel and begins to mend. His voice, so cracked and flawed, is fixed; the vocal cords are fused together. Since he was insensitive to the plights of others, I make him more sensitive; I increase the number of nerves across his body. His ribs, once easily shattered by a single spear, are strengthened so that it may never happen again; the bones swell to twice their size under my influence.

Jared opens his mouth to scream, but all he can do is wheeze. His flesh rips as his bones exponentially expand. He will be dead within the hour, but it will be a very long and painful one.

"Now, Ethan Boner. It seems you have a han-," I turn to face the other offender but pause

"Ah, ah. Almost found it. Give me a moment..."

Ethan stands ramrod straight with bloody foam bubbling from his mouth. His eyes try desperately to look back, over his own shoulder, but despite his straining muscles, he can't turn his neck.

His shoes have gotten wet from the growing puddle of blood.

Behind Ethan is the mercenary [Necromancer]. The merc scrounges around inside Ethan's back. "Aaaaannndddd, here we are!" he crows and triumphantly pulls something out with a bloody hand

"This, Ethan, can I call you Ethan? Great." He holds the meat before Ethan's face. "This is your kidney. It's a very important organ. Helps people drink a lot of alcohol."

He let's the organ drop to the cobblestone with a splat. He rummages around inside the [Archpriest] and pulls out another organ.

"This is your liver. A bit weird looking if you ask me, but it's your body's processing plant. It breaks down starches into sugar, stores or liberates fat, breaks down toxins, all kinds of stuff. Pretty useful, eh buddy?" the mercenary says it with a smile that is anything but happy. "It'll even

regrow if there's even a third of it left. But there's not." He drops the organ on the ground and then reaches inside again.

"That's... uh, ughhhh," I hear Joe bend over and retch. He is appalled by the sight, but I have been intrigued.

With a thought, I focus mana into my eyes and scan Ethan's body.

"Skilled work," I mutter, finding that Ethan's bones have been completely fused from the inside, all without restricting blood flow.

*'A [Necromancer] can manipulate with such skill?'* I think as I watch the growing number of organs being thrown at Ethans feet.

*'How do I hire him?'*

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"You met my mother? She invited you to her home?"

Quasi nods. "Yeah, she came down on a griffin and solved everything. I was actually quite impressed."

"And the invitation?" Fiona asks

"She probably fell for my roguish charm and wants to get to know me better." Quasi strikes a pose and winks, which makes Jessica blush.

"No, that's my mother! You can't just, just- No."

"I see no problem with that," Abernick butts in, "Quasi is a [King] with a [Queen]. A [Baroness] would make for a good mistress."

Fiona tilts her head. "Hmmm. I'm not sure how I feel about a mistress." She shrugs and grins. "I guess I'll have to see her first."

Quasi raises a fist into the air. "Then it's decided! Jessica's mother will become my mistress."

"What!?" Jessica splutters, "You can't do that! That's my mother. You can't just sleep with my mom! That's so wrong. How can you even- You can't possibly-"

Quasi shakes his head as the group nears the smithy. The sun is already setting with less than an hour of light. "Jess, it's fine, I'm just trying to explore your point of origin. So don't sweat it," he teases. Her blush grows till her ears turn scarlet.

Thankfully, before the teasing can continue further, they reach the smithy, a large, open, centralised building with several smelters and [Smiths]. Near the smelters is Deflon, arms folded, leaning on a wall.

As they approach, the big man stands up and unfolds his arms. Quasi waves. "Deflon, buddy!" he calls out. "How have you been? Did you do whatever you needed to do?"

"Yes," Deflon answers, "though it will be a bit more difficult. It seems Juliana doesn't accept guests easily, so I wasn't able to procure a meeting through my contacts. Instead, I found out that the underground passages under her mansion are still present. We should be able to sneak into the building through those, but we'll need to move fast. My presence alone could have the Assassins guild scrambling to end my life."

Quasi walks forward. "Hey, don't worry! I got you covered. The [Baroness] invited me over for tea. We just came to pick you up."

"What?" Deflon exclaims, flabbergasted. "How did you procure an invitation?"

"It's a long story, so I'll tell you on the way," Quasi waves his question away. "Let's go!" He turns and starts marching towards Juliana's residence in the city's upper district.

After a moment, Deflon shakes his head and follows the group.

Then he frowns as Quasi starts talking about mistresses.

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Ever since Carpe Diem had been attacked long ago, the [Baroness] made defense the highest priority. Her former manor has been transformed into a walled compound patrolled by several hundred [Guards] and equipped with watch towers, kill squads, surveillance and defensive enchantments. Her home is a deathtrap, an invitation for those that would dare harm.

"She's hella paranoid," Quasi voices his thoughts while sending mana into his eyes. They glow violet, and in his vision, the compound bursts into light from the sheer number of enchantments placed on it. Even the [Guards] are alight, their armor and weapons at a quality similar to veteran [Mercenaries].

"She has a reason to be," Deflon replies, his own eyes aglow.

"Well, good thing we were invited!" Quasi walks to the main entrance and waves at the [Guards].

The [Guards], well trained as they are, place their hands on their weapons and eye him warily.

“Who comes in the dead of night? The [Baroness] is not seeing anyone.”

“No worries, I should have an invitation,” Quasi cheerfully assuages their worries. He stops a respectable distance from them and doffs his hat. “Apologies for causing distress. My name is Bone and I am the leader of Merry Marrows. I believe Miss Juliana is expecting me?”

The [Guard] looks at Quasi. He frowns.

“Take off your mask.” he orders.

Quasi does so. After a short staring contest, the [Guard] turns and opens the gates.

“Follow me. I will take you to her.”

The group enters the compound and the gate immediately locks behind them. They continue following the guard who leads them inside the mansion.

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“Madam Juliana, your guests have arrived,” the [Butler] announces. “Shall I let them in?”

[Baroness] Juliana frowns. “Guests? I only invited Bone. Has he brought others?”

“It seems he brought his entire team. Shall I send them back?”

Juliana sighs and waves her hand. “It’s fine. Just send them all to me.”

The [Butler] nods and leaves her study. A minute later, he returns with the full group.

She watches them enter one after the other, finding the masks rather tacky.

Then the last person enters and her heart stops.

“It can’t be,” she gasps and rises, eyes focused on her friend; older now, but not nearly changed enough to be overlooked. “Deflon, is that you?”

Her hands shake as memories come to the forefront. Bloody blades, traitors, [Assassins]... A family gone overnight, an empty mansion, and an empty hole left in her heart.

The big man slowly nods, tears welling up in his eyes. “It has been a while, mistress.”

Juliana's vision blurs. She takes a hesitant step around her desk, then sprints into the man's arms. "You're alive," she sobs. "You're here and alive and... Deflon, where were you, I can't-"

Surprised, the big man watches for a surprised second as she cries into his chest before he wraps his arms around her and lets her cry for a good minute. Eventually, the [Baroness] reels back her emotions just enough to lean away. She sniffs and takes a deep breath.

"You're alive. Is... is Manesh-"

Deflon shakes his head. "No. She's dead, but..." He raises his hand and points towards the woman with a fox mask made of bone.

The woman freezes as the [Baroness'] eyes shift to her.

"Go ahead, take it off," Deflon encourages the woman. She nods.

Hesitantly, she reaches up and removes her mask.

Juliana freezes as she stares into a face with features so very like her own. Her hair is blond, but cut short. Her eyes are a deep hazel green, mirroring her own. The woman blinks once and parts her lips.

"Hello, mother."