

The young mage woke from the single ray of sunshine that peeked through the hole in the stone wall. Like an arrow, the light shot through her eyelid every day, around 10 in the morning, assuming she got the cardinal directions right, for what felt like months in a row. But it was the only thing that helped her keep track of the passing time and what was left of her sanity.

She reached for a pebble, that in its previous state was most likely part of a brick, and marked a faint, but dramatic, orange-red comma on the wall.

- 3... 9... 27. - the mage mumbled counting the marks again. Per the daily ritual.

- It's the Holy-Day - she whispered to herself. A sacred time of the month, according to the Mosque. Three entities in the pantheon. Nine days for each. That's 27.

Dragging herself onto the opposing wall, she started multiplying by 3s, as if sending a prayer in the Caliphian fashion, staring from the beginning.

One.

The first day of the month. Also the day of her capture. They beat her and put a heavy chain around her neck, as if she were a vicious Drakehound, so she couldn't cast, and threw her in the cell.

Three.

By the third day they had taken out all of her fingernails, prying for extra information, as if she had more to give in regard to questions she didn't understand.

Nine.

She liked that number. Very balanced for an odd number. She used to think it brought her luck. That is also the number of days that had passed from her confinement when she tried to piss off the Tenebrian official enough to get them to send her off to the Place Beyond, but unfortunately they were far more calculated than this. That's the day they cut her left hand off instead of giving her the easy way out.

The woman stretched her trembling and broken arms in front of herself, comparing the stark difference. Remembering the time she was complete - naively decorating her fingers and wrists with jewellery, unknowing that one day she would never be able to cast with sigils ever again - her eyes started welling up.

Twenty seven.

She counted the tears that fell onto her previously stark orange-gold clothes. Now destroyed, cut, torn, dirty from the grime of the cell and her own blood.

Two hundred and forty three.

The amount of days since the invaders arrived in the Caliphate. Recalling this made her blood boil. How could a country so powerful and mighty as the Caliphate, blinded by its own greatness, be toppled within a couple weeks.

She admired everything about this country. The markets. The aroma of spices and tea in the cities. The way the harsh conditions moulded the people into a prosperous society through ingenuity, while still in tune with nature. However, humans are imperfect.

Like an illness left unattended, the Caliph, but mostly his right hand - the Sultan, had overlooked the little people. Those unable to live according to the Mosque's expectations and thus - were looked down upon by society. An underbelly that had grown ripe for harvest from whoever knew how to exploit it. "whoever" turned out to be an invader.

The steel door of her chamber flung open like a drape in the wind.

Black masks.

Terror washed over her like a cold shower. She yelped as she was picked up by two faceless men by her arms to be strapped into the chair that, like her, was being dragged into the deepest corner of the cell for the rest of the daily ritual. Now so weak from starvation, she only managed to cry out. Her voice cracked in tune to her expression and her now frail spark trembled. Her spirit was broken.

Now that she was securely confined to the seat, the familiar face of her torturer, a Tenebrian official, walked inside for their daily chat.

- State your name - he demanded and signalled a frightened Calliphian scholar to start writing the record.

The Mage remained silent from fear.

- You should know how this goes by now, so save us both some time.

After a short pause, the mage's voice cracked again:

- Asha... - she answered while staring at the ground.

- What is your occupation, Asha?

Without a thought, the woman answered like a mechanical toy sent into action:

- I am a merchant mage. I travel between the Caliphate and the kingdoms at the other end of the Black Sea. I do my business fairly and legally in accordance with the Codex of Trade - she continued as if she were just stopped on the street for a chat - Is there an issue?

- Yes - he played along - As per Tenebrian law, I would like to see your travel papers.

- But of c... - the muscles of her right arm flinched. If not restrained, the mage probably would have reached for the inner pocket of her former robe. Then she realised. She threw the official a shocked stare, as if just now waking from a dream, and frantically looked about, checking her surroundings, and fell into a panic.

- Contain yourself. - he commanded in a cold tone, but with no result. No words were going to reach the mage, so the Tenebrian gave a glare to one of the Faceless, who swiftly delivered a punch to the stomach of the emaciated woman. Naturally, her body reacted - regurgitating a concoction of stomach acid and blood - but definitely diverted her attention back to what mattered.

As the mage was gasping for air, the official kindly gave her a bit of time, turning to wave for a stool to be brought for him to sit. Like usual, this interrogation was going to take far too long, in his opinion, so he'd rather be seated for the remainder of their daily interaction.

Now, somewhat comfortable, he leaned on his elbows, resting them on his knees and stared at the mage. If it were up to him, she would've been made an example of long ago and he would not be bothered wasting his time with glorified freaks of nature, but she still held some clues to a suspected criminal, and hopefully to an organisation, he's been trying to prove to be rebel since pretty much the beginning of the invasion.

- The only thing I want to hear from you are precise answers to my exact questions. Do you understand?

- Yes - the woman replied through tears.

- Are you a citizen of the Caliphate?

- Yes.

- Are you a mage?

- Yes.

- Your name?

- I have abandoned my name and lineage.

The woman's eyes continued pouring like the Great Waterfalls of the Mirage.

- Before your arrest, was it your job to conduct research on the magical artefacts stored in the royal vault and thus had complete access to the archive - yes or no?

Her eyes widened with fear and worry. Waves of terror started washing, crashing into her conscience, much like a storm over the coast would stir up the waters. The answer was yes. That archive was essentially a treasury. Thousands of priceless artefacts were stored there not just to be examined but for the safety of the people. Nobody random knew of it, let alone was ever allowed to go inside or conduct research, not to mention that even fewer knew how to open it, which is why whoever had access to the vault, not only had to undergo an oath of anonymity, forsaking their name and life (past, present and future), but was kept off of any written records. Obviously to her, she'd made a grave error somewhere.

- Yes - she wailed out, starting to cry more loudly.

The official, on the other hand, remained focused and indifferent to the bound soul in front of him and continued:

- Are you in any way affiliated with the Guild of the Sand Blades?

- No...

She cried and melted into her seat, the same way her answer did - the "no" transforming into an "aaah".

The official took a short pause. At this point, he already knew that for some reason the woman was having a split personality.

One is a nameless mage-scholar that was conveniently kept off of any written record to keep any information of the archive as vague as possible.

The other - a foreign mage named Asha, suspected of using her merchant status to export illegal items and resources, affiliated with the Guild of the Sand Blades. The Guild also danced the thin line that was considered legal by the Empire's laws in the previous lands of the Caliphate, which is also why this particular Tenebrian was tasked to harvest as much useful information from the woman in front of him as possible.

The only reason the Caliphate fell was because the Empire seized the Capital - the Mirage, which was in turn possible, because they acquired word of the vault and seized it before any Caliphians managed to weaponize themselves with magical (and supposedly) anti-magical artefacts. However, a little over a month ago, someone not only managed to unlock the vault, but also emptied the whole stash of every last piece of artefact stored there, and that was definitely a problem waiting to escalate. The real question was - is the scholar the same person as the smuggler and if not, who is posing for who?

He looked around for a second, as if the correct answer was somewhere hidden within this basically empty room. Apart from the commas on the wall, the only other characteristics of the cell worth noting were a bucket and the woman. So naturally, he examined the commas.

Every comma was almost identical to the next one, drawn with a small swirl and a flick of the wrist downward. And all of them were in a line, separated into three columns, now forming three perfect rectangles that together formed another, bigger rectangle.

The Tenebrian hated this backwards symmetry that was so common for this stupid country. Balance is in the even numbers, not the odd ones. The traditions of the Caliphate all revolved around the 3s somehow, not only in their magic but their religion as well. And that made him wonder if the marks were in any way involved in her daily prayer.

- You are religious? - he demanded.

- Yes - she mumbled through rivers of tears. Very few people here were atheist and even they usually just played along, so as to not get punished by the religious guard.

- How do you pray?

The woman hesitated to answer. She wondered for a second if he was trying to trick her into saying something she shouldn't.

- I... I have a single meal each day while I pray.

Makes perfect sense - one deity, one prayer, one meal. He could even guess correctly if he assumed she was praying to the Abyss.

Then why the three columns? A Caliphian's prayer wasn't necessarily vocal, but in every case it involved some odd personal ritual that reflected the individual's personal understanding of the entities, or entity, they worshipped.

- Are you aware of what these markings are? - he pointed at the stacked commas behind him with a vague gesture.

The tortured soul followed his gaze and examined the wall.

- No... - she replied, growing more worried.

The official shot the Faceless a glare only they could understand - compelling them to place their hands to the mage in preparation. Whatever was causing this woman's mind to be clouded had to be magical in nature. If the Official could bypass it, he would definitely find the incriminating information he's been looking for this whole time.

So he decided to start from the beginning - with a thorough cleanse of the nameless woman's magic and any effects that may be lingering.

Today was looking promising... for the Empire.