Summary

Lux enters a relationship with Ezreal as a strategic rebellion against her parents. Ezreal enters a relationship with Lux because he actually likes her. Valoran's politics are thrown into chaos when the League of Legends officially ceases all operation and shuts down, and in the face of a rune war, he isn't the only one who wants her.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Things spiral out of control rather quickly, but Lux has to admit that it was her own mistake. She does nothing to stop them, clumsily allowing momentum to build up.

It is grey and rainy the day it begins. She had been delivering a letter from her prince to Sheriff Caitlyn - all formality. There were no secrets that needed protecting, but Demacia could not show weakness in any form, nor let the enemy know what documents mattered and what did not. Everything was to be hand-delivered by a capable fighter, lest anyone get any ideas about interception.

The sheriff is all business, drowning in paperwork and seeing her off tersely, and so Lux makes her way back to her suite at the inn, weaving under the sheltered storefronts the whole way.

She pulls open the door and feels warmth wash over her. Ezreal's voice catches her before she can make it inside.

"Hey," he greets.

She freezes, almost safely alone, almost out of the storm.

She puts on her best smile before even turning around, as if she is pleased to see him. When she faces him, he seems fooled and nods back. She lets the door shut so she does not appear to be rushing him. They make small-talk. The weather. Why she is in Piltover. That she is done with her work. She is polite and friendly.

Unspoken and unheard: she wants him to shut up, wants to retire to her room and get some rest.

Out loud she says, "it's a pity these business trips are always such a short stay. It would be so nice to visit longer."

He looks at her, eyes scanning over her slowly, with no regard for how he may or may not come off. Ezreal does not stare to make her uncomfortable, but he does not stop himself from staring, either. There is a brief moment where she doubts herself. As if he can see through her feigned formalities.

But he says, "well - if you're free for the day, want to come on an adventure with me? I could use the light."

Her mind races, but she can't come up with a feasible excuse not to in time, and finds herself agreeing cheerfully. She tells him, "may as well see the sights while I can!"

"It's a sight," he says, and grins, rough around the edges.

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He leads her to a cave, far past the edges of the city. It's miserable. He complains when she stumbles, though the path is rough and confusing, and even with the light spilling from her hands, it is dark and hard to see. He rambles at length about minerals and cave paintings as if she doesn't already have one hundred times his academic knowledge.

Demacian schooling leaves out a lot, she knows. It is biased, paints themselves as the heroes in every situation. They do not invade, they discover. They do not take over, they join and assist. They do not sit idly by, ignoring pleas for help - they are caught in tangles of helpless politics.
But even through this propaganda, she knows. She learns as she travels. She studies histories as written by others.

All in all, Lux would really love Ezreal to shut his mouth for one goddamn minute.

There's something to be said for hands-on knowledge, and she acknowledges he is every bit the prodigy they call him. But even if it is not her title, she is one too.

"These kinds of formations," he says, his voice echoing off the cavernous walls in the dark, "shouldn't form this way. Taric said he thinks they're being affected by the magic nearby and absorbing it."

"I see!" Lux says, as though she is captivated. Irritation wells underneath the surface. He has been here before. He didn't need her to join him at all, but she has endured his boastful chattering for hours. "Do you think they could be useful?"

Ezreal shrugs, straightening from where he had been crouched down by a crystal on the ground. "To Taric, easy. But for me I'd have to figure it out." She watches him reflexively tap the gem on his gauntlet. A magic that is hardly his own.

She hums with feigned interest. She is sure she could figure it out. Twisting other magics to make use of them herself has always come easily - spellthief is a title she has earned. But there is really no need to exert herself, here.

This does not captivate her. What piques her curiosity is how easily Ezreal admits that it isn't his forte, how casually he praises Taric. She wonders if he would do it to his face.

Ezreal pauses, looks at her for a moment. He taps the gem in his gantlet one more time, and she can't react fast enough to stop the sudden swell of magic. Her light shatters, fragments shooting out like stars around them, hitting the crystals on the walls and ceiling.

The cave glows in ethereal violet, each crystal growth a light source. Her heart races from the magic; she had been startled, as if expecting an attack. She is glad her reflexes weren't fast enough. She had wanted to kill him. In equal measure, she hates that he outdid her, and that he is oblivious to it all.

But Ezreal just shrugs at her again. "Thought you'd wanna see," he tells her, voice as gruff as always, but pinks and purples sparkling on his cheeks and in his eyes.

She has to catch her breath and soothe her anger. The cave had felt musty and gross, but now it shimmers warmly. The air is still unpleasant, but she lets it cool her to her core. She is honest for the first time today when she tells him "it's lovely. Thank you."

He sits down, his pants already dirty from crawling around these tunnels. Lux would normally frown, but her clothes are already so messy, and she's sure he of all people thinks nothing of it.

She sits down beside him, and almost isn't annoyed he dragged her here.

The curious tilt of his head when he looks at her is casual and strange. "You alright?"

"Of course," she replies, a carefully trained reflex. She smiles brighter, more forcefully. "Why do you ask?"

She begins to suspect that he is a chronic shrug-er, as his shoulders rise and fall again. His eyes leave hers, staring off at the glowing crystals. She does not miss the way they glow brighter with his cheeks, his magic flaring up against his will. "I dunno. Just thought - you looked down."
She looks at his blush with a vague feeling of alarm. She gives him an easy out, teasing, "Must have been the weather."

She does not think he understands anything. Not when he looks at her like they are equals and she is transparent to his indifferent eyes.

"It was very dreary," she adds, trying to prompt a response.

His expression finally breaks into what she recognizes. What knows how to deal with. He grins at her, cocky and smug and thinking he is better than her. "I thought maybe you get depressed without the sunlight."

She laughs; "I'm not Solari."

He waves a dismissive hand. "Lunari, then."

"The moon is only lit by the sun. Solari makes more sense, objectively." Lux pauses, looking thoughtful. "Which isn't to say anything of Miss Diana, of course. She's pleasant company, herself."

"Of course not," Ezreal drawls, "wouldn't dare to say something rude about Diana."

Even with Lux's delicate socialite sensibilities, it's hard to say Diana is pleasant company. She's like an elephant with its own personal raincloud in any room she enters. Even when she tries to be nice, her humor is awkward and cringe-inducing.

He blinks, slow and deliberate. "Anyway, that's objective only under the assumption that light itself is what you worship. Then of course the giant fire-ball will let off more. Or if you worship fire. But if, for example, you worship the sea - then the moon would make more sense than the sun. And the planet is more water than land, so doesn't that make more sense?"

"I suppose so," Lux concedes.

Ezreal continues, pleased as always just to hear himself talk, "To me, worshiping anything is dumb. Especially with people like Taric running around. Whatever gods you come up with, the hundreds they make up in Ionia or the few staples in Freljord..."

Lux opens her mouth to politely protest the phrase "make up," but the boy just continues.

"We have confirmation that there are other planes of existence, sure, but we also know there are other worlds. Like Taric's. If that kind of thing exists, how can anyone think their idea of a higher power exists? Why does anyone think their gods are right, when they made them up the same as any other culture?"

She is only playing devil's advocate, but Lux argues, "How does that disprove anything? I think if anything, the existence of planes of reality we've only just become aware of gives more credibility to the guardians in history. There may be different guardians in Taric's world, but that doesn't negate those that may or may not exist in ours. The more versions of reality there are, the higher the chance is that something exists. It has more opportunity to exist."

"Spoken like a true worshiper," Ezreal says, and condescension drips from his tone.

Her eyes narrow. "Excuse me?"

"You just worship a place, instead of a God." Ezreal tells her, rolling his head to crack his neck loudly. He rests his elbow on his knee, his cheek in his hand, and looks around dismissively, as if he
is far more interested in the walls than her.

"You," Lux snaps, "wear and use a gauntlet of Shurima! The hypocrisy to say there are no guardians when the ascended walk among us, these days!"

"I'm just sayin' - nothing deserves worship." He cuts off any protests, standing up and pointlessly dusting off his knees. "Let's get going."

His magic slips away from hers and the light gathers up in her palm again as if pulled by a magnet. She is too dignified to keep up a childish argument, and only allows herself to roll her eyes before letting the matter drop.

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Ezreal sees her to the Inn, seeming unphased by the weather the whole way. She is not surprised to catch eyes on her way back to the inn. They are both champions, and while she's sure Piltover is used to seeing the boy covered in dirt, it's not expected of herself. She gives polite smiles to those who meet her gaze, and takes note that Ezreal ignores them altogether.

"You're a public figure, you know," she tells him at the door. She is under the shelter, watching the drizzle soak his perpetually-shrugging shoulders. Droplets weight his messy hair down. She struggles to tear her gaze from the dirty-blond strands that cling to his cheeks and peak from the nape of his neck.

"Whatever," he says. He does not apologize for the snags in her skirt or the grime on her shoes. He does not apologize for her hair, frizzy with the rain, or her exhausted lean in the doorframe. He just lingers for a moment, awkwardly shifting his weight as if there is more he wants to say.

But he lets her part with his "See ya."

The next morning is her carriage ride home. They're able to take her as far as the mountains, but through there she has to go by foot.

She catches herself, once or twice, thinking of what she might say to Ezreal if he were with her. Of course, any company would be nice, she tells herself. She is not sure how he gets under her skin the way he does.

Her steps are aggressive, when she is alone. She treks quickly and pointedly, wasting no time in reaching the other side of the mountains. She feels on edge, this close to Noxus. With the Institute of War nearby, she doubts anyone would try anything, but there is always the chance. If done quickly, there would be no stopping an assassination. It would simply be up to Noxus to clean up afterwards. Dispose of her body. Claim ignorance - accidents can happen in the mountains, after all. Or even to point the blame on a single citizen.

Lux is everything Noxus hates. They can hardly accept Katarina's strength, her being a woman. For an even younger girl, bright and bubbly, to be a contender in these wars - she is sure there are many who would gladly kill her without the order.

Politics exhaust her. The mere concept of Noxians makes her body vibrate with hatred.

She barely catches herself when she spots the carriage waiting for her on the other side. She has to straighten her body, straighten her smile.

They let her know she can nap in the carriage, and she agrees that surely she will.
But she does not.

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When she finally arrives, safe at the temporary housing within the Institute's walls, she is about ready to pass out.

Here there is less bustle for her attention. These are the organizers, used to her presence coming and going as it does. They lead her through sterile halls, shoes clicking on the tile, all the way to her small unit.

It feels stiflingly empty, even with the trinkets she has gathered. It has the basic furniture of a home, all expensive, Demacian imports, as her kingdom rushes to sponsor her and keep her comfortable. But it is the skeleton of a home. It's eerie, as well, to be roomed so close to creatures from the void. To monsters with nowhere to go between battles. They are unnerving, but there is still a part of her that thinks the Institute has done such good, providing homing for them.

She thinks perhaps she will visit Taric tomorrow to discuss those crystals. She also reminds herself to see if Ahri is still around, or if she has already set sail for Ionia - last Lux heard, Irelia was announcing a homing project for those with ties to the Institute's battles.

She does not read the newspaper, delivered to her room. She falls asleep on the bed and dreams of the bright lights of home instead of these dimly lit halls.

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Taric welcomes her to his unit with a wide smile. It is still strange to see him without his armor, but the casual clothes suit him nicely. He is a gentle man, and Lux does not have to pretend to find him enjoyable company.

"Coffee?" He asks, making a sweeping motion with his arm for her to make herself at home. "Tea?"

"Coffee, if you don't mind," she says. The sun has barely risen, but if she does not get these visits out of the way, it will be dark for far too much of the journey ahead. She is almost surprised he was awake.

She hears him tinkering in the kitchen. He seems to have made himself at home enough. She supposes, on second thought, that he has had no choice. The furniture is all clearly used, probably from thrift stores or simply given to him. She is sure he could afford better, but knows he is not the sort to be wasteful. There are not many trinkets decorating his place, unlike hers. Her own apartment is full of more expensive, decorative junk than actual furniture.

There are lights strung along the walls as if it's Winter Solstice, glowing violet and blue. They remind her of the crystal's glow in the caverns.

Taric returns and sets a cup down in front of her on a saucer. There are pre-packaged creams and he leaves and returns with a sugar bowl and a spoon.

"You're so prepared," Lux laughs. She takes note of the ombre blue pattern of the cup, of the ornate golden handle that swirls around her fingers. She takes note that he owns precisely one cup this feminine, takes note that his own cup is a plain mug, mismatched with the others he owns. She takes note that he drinks tea, but knows just how to prepare coffee, and just how it should be sweetened.

His voice is musical. "I wouldn't want to be a bad host."
"Do you take visitors often?" Lux asks. She pours cream and sugar into her coffee and gives it a dainty stir. "I know that you stay away from the journalists, for the most part."

Taric pretends it was not a loaded question. "I've made many friends since I came here. I'm never opposed to good company."

"I'm glad you aren't alone," she says with sincerity.

A look of amusement crosses his face. "The same to you."

Her confusion must be clear in her expression, and when he realizes she doesn't understand, he rushes to explain. "The Journal of Justice ran a brief interview with Ezreal, yesterday."

"Oh," Lux says, relieved. "Yes, while I was in Piltover he stopped by the caverns with me. Those ones with the crystals. He said you'd been there with him."

Taric's eyes light up at the subject, and he looks eager to discuss the magic, but catches himself. He clears his throat. "Is that all?"

He is met with another blank stare, and instead of explaining, fetches a copy of the paper for her. The segment is brief, but bolded and enlarged. Tarumca of Zaun interviews Ezreal outside the city limits. He asks about his date with Lux. She can picture the boy's indifferent shrug, but feels the oncoming dread. She wishes he would not be so indifferent. She wishes he would argue instead of shrug, but to Ezreal, words are just words and a journalist is just an idiot.

Ezreal does not deny that it was a date. It is such a tiny, tiny thing.

But it takes up the whole page.

There are paragraphs of speculation. They are the same age, after all. They are both blonde, after all! (Lux questions the author's brainpower, if he felt that was a factor.) They work together well on the fields.

The extended interview is pathetic. Ezreal does his own thing, as always, and talks their ear off about the caves and caverns as if it were what they asked about. She wonders if he is oblivious enough to think they care. Then again he might see them as a captive audience to show off his knowledge to. Maybe he is just making fun of them for trying to make a celebrity of him.

But he is a celebrity, and she is a celebrity, and the world thinks he has admitted they are a couple.

Lux brings a hand up to her forehead, rubbing a gentle circle. She wills away a headache and murmurs, "Oh no."

"Inaccurate?" Taric asks, more sympathetic than amused, but she sees the subtle quirk of his lips.

"We went to the caves," Lux says. "That's all there is to it. We're not... You know?"

"Of course," Taric says. She can hear in his voice that he believes her. "After all, I hear that as a Crownguard, you are a potential consort for the prince of Demacia."

Lux blinks. This is not a secret. But she is impressed he knows. "You're well versed in Demacian matters."

"Yes, well," he says, eyes flitting down to the showy blue and golden cup, "It's important to be able to keep up a conversation."
She calls him out, this time. "A one-sided conversation."

"Hardly," he says, like it is the natural answer. Lux feels her chest heating with a second-hand compassion. They are lucky to have each other, despite the odds. She wonders what will happen when Taric finds his way home. She wonders and she worries, and she is almost overwhelmed with a mix of sympathy and unease at the thought, and has to force herself to focus on herself.

She stands up purposefully. "I'll get it sorted out when I'm back home. I'm certain they will be clamoring for my side of the story."

Taric sees her to the door; "I hope so."

They linger there, for a moment, her in the hall and him in his warm but out of place home. She remembers at the last minute. "Do you know if Ahri is still here?"

"Her ship sailed last week."

Lux can't help but feel downcast. She had wanted to visit with the fox. Still, Taric sees her off with such warmth that it's hard to stay upset. Even this tabloid drama will end. She will speak with a journalist back home and the public will see that she and Ezreal are not a couple, and all will be well.

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The trip to Demacia is long and boring. Another carriage ride alone, which she vastly prefers over being stuck with other travelers. They are either of status enough that she must keep up the socialite act or unheard of journeymen with a bombardment of questions for someone of her celebrity.

This leaves her alone with her thoughts.

She thinks that Ezreal not caring does not stop the journalists from caring or the public from caring. They all care so much.

She wishes she did not.

But she needs to remain a viable bride to the prince. It would be such an honor to marry into royalty, and the rivals are slim. A Demacian noble family. Vayne is immediately removable from the pool of competition. Terrible publicity. The Buvelle family is noble enough, but Lestara is aged and Sona is not even of her blood. Besides, she seems to be spoken for in every sense.

That leaves the Laurent family. Fiora is certainly doing a good job of redeeming their name, but the fact that she needs to at all puts the Crownguards in the lead. A child prodigy, a warrior for her kingdom, a spy, and mage. A champion. There is no stain on Lux's record.

Except this, now.

For a noble such as herself to date someone like Ezreal. A messy boy with no care or influence for politics. She can only imagine the disappointment on her mother's face.

But oh, the image is so sweet.

It occurs to her. Ezreal would be no one of note, without the League. Famous in Piltower for his antics and his genius, sure, but a local celebrity at best.

But he is a champion of the Institute of War.

Could her parents openly speak against someone in a position their daughter shares? Could they
publicly announce how superior they feel they are to someone working with the Institute? Sure, his background is below them, but his position now holds weight.

She imagines her parents disappointment when she does not disgrace their family, yet does not marry into the power they would seek for her.

She thinks of how betrayed they would feel, yet unable to say a word of it. They would have to talk so highly of her - of Ezreal - at all their silly parties. They would have to respect him, research his stupid hobbies to make suitable conversation as if his adventures were his 'work.' He is in exactly the right spot to infuriate them without them being able to express it, to influence it.

She could even feign innocence. She could get away with it if she played it right. They are champions of the League.

She laughs, catching sight of her reflection in the window with a wide smile. She knows that it is wrong and knows that it is a daydream, but the idea is so fun that she keeps running scenarios in her mind the whole way home.

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Lux finds it easier to relax when she is safely within Demacian territory. She appreciates the architecture here more than anywhere else. Powerful spires full of bumbling hard working men and women tower around her, and the roads are paved and smooth. Windows are brightly lit, a warm glow spilling into the night-time streets around her.

Business is taken care of smoothly and easily. Shyvana is the one to take her report, a quick verbal assessment of her trip to deliver to Jarvan IV when he is available. Lux is almost relieved that she doesn't have to speak to him today. Irrationally, she worries he would sense her traitorous, selfish daydreams.

Her shoulders fall, finally, like a puppet's strings cut. The report is done. She can finally drift home. She will speak to the media tomorrow and rid herself of this brief and fake love affair.

She hopes it will leave her mind as easily as her name is cleared.

She is rigid again by the time she reaches the Crownguard mansion. She does not want to deal with her family on a good day, let alone when there is news that upsets them in the air. The daydreams are all good and well, full of snide looks and no words. She has the upper hand in her mind.

But in reality they are still her parents. Even if she is more important to society, they do not view that way. And so it is not that way.

Lux hates the way a family bends reality to their perceptions. It should not be so easy. Lux works with light and visuals and understands playing pretend. She understands fragmenting light to appear different - to disappear entirely if needed.

She does not understand convincing yourself that the illusion is reality.

She stands outside the manor for an hour, shivering in the evening air and hating the stars for being beautiful against a perfect city skyline, before finally coming inside as quietly as she can.

Lux remembers when she used to wish Garen were home, more. When she was a child who thought he might be her brother. A partner in crime, or a friend. Sometime to tease her and love her in equal measure. When he was never home he was all but a stranger. She built up a story-book brother that he could be.
They are closer now in the military than they ever were as family.

She knows he would not shield her from their parents, though she suspects he isn't as positive on them as he pretends to be. (And she is bitter, so bitter, because what reason does he have to resent them?) But it would be simple to talk to him and be caught up in talk of the League and talk of the prince and talk of work. Why, she imagines they could talk all through the night until her parents were fast asleep, never getting a chance to politely interject with family matters.

Garen is not home. He is never home. Why would he be home? She needs to arrange a bunk for herself at headquarters. She is not sure how much of this family life she can take. They sent her back with good intentions, surely. Just like her parents sent her there with good intentions. Surely.

Her parents are on the couch, sidled so close that she thinks they are juvenile. Her father looks more interested in the book on his lap than his wife, even as Lilia curls beside him, pretending to read over his shoulder. Lux wonders if she is bored of faking, staring blankly at the pages with her mind wandering aimlessly.

They do not hear her enter. Lux is not used to poor reflexes and senses. They could be killed in two seconds, she thinks. They wouldn't see it coming.

Lilia finally notices her, at the over-loud sound of the door locking behind her. She rises up carefully, her long evening robes flowing with the motion. Sometimes Lux suspects that Lilia wants to be a ghost; that her pale hair and vacant smiles are paired with light gliding dresses as a statement.

Her voice is unpleasantly thick like honey. "Luxanna, I'm so glad you're home."

"Sorry for the noise, Momma." Lux says, smiling and bowing her head. She has to, to choke out the words. "I know it's late. I'm surprised to see you awake."

"We were just about to retire for the evening," her father interjects. Lilia seems vaguely surprised to hear it, but simply nods along as if to say you heard the man.

"I'll try to keep it down, then," Lux says, and fakes a giggle.

Easy. Easy. She does not let her hands shake on the railing as she heads upstairs. She does not let herself exhale until she is in her room. She feels clammy and uncomfortable as she changes into her pajamas. She climbs into bed slowly. Stares out the window. Brushes a curtain out of the way to see the starlight.

Breathes.

She is not at ease in her own home, but she wants to be.

Lux does not want to feel anxious.

She wants to be her own daydream Lux. The kind of girl who goes against her parents in a way they cannot fight and meets their gaze with a smug twinkle in her eye. And maybe Ezreal could be in on it. He could fan the flames with indifference as she scolds him not to, and it wouldn't matter that she didn't mean it because he would have ignored her either way just to get a rise out of those stuffy Crownguards.

She realizes, suddenly feeling tiny in her over-sized, over-plush bed, that she is not going to clear up the misunderstanding with the journalists.

She is going to tell them Ezreal is her boyfriend.
And she is going to thrive in the chaos.
Chapter 2

Playing the journalists is easy. Prediction has always been her strength, and manipulation goes without saying. She was meant to be a socialite. She was meant for fancy dress parties and playing host to guests. A careful line of shallow conversation and etiquette. Leading while letting them think you are following.

Playing war games has only strengthened these skills.

During the interview Lux brings her fingers to her cheeks to hide a nonexistent blush. She skirts away from confirming or denying that they are a couple, per se, but she implies, oh she implies. She lets them paint her as a shy girl, a bit bubbly at the new experience of flirting with a boy her age.

She is not as flighty as Ezreal. It is easier for journalists to find her, so she strikes the perfect harmony at work, making herself bright and busy, so that she is not described as exhausted, while simultaneously avoiding further interviews. The others around the base, mostly no-name underlings and her past students, get skilled at turning away journalists.

Shyvana does not humor them for even a second, always excusing herself with a "no comment," before they can ask about Lux or herself or anything at all. Quinn is better - though Lux suspects even she is taking Lux's act at face value. She looks amused when they try to grill her for details, and just fakes a wistful sigh, "ah, young love on the battlefield."

Her parents do not read the initial interview. There are always interviews running and for the most part they are trivial and uninformed. There have been tabloids about this very thing for a year now. It's just that, until now, they've always been baseless rumors.

So Lux spreads the rumor, subtle enough that even if they read it, she's sure they wouldn't take issue. Her demure persona is exactly who they raised her to be. Who they think she is.

It's not a big deal until the tabloids make the connection. Ezreal called it a date, and Lux blushed - are they flirting? Dating? Since when, why, what do they do together? How does it impact them on the fields of justice? Have they slept together, and what do Sir and Madam Crownguard think of it? What does the prince think of it?

Lux reads the theories as she walks up the steps to her front door. As she tucks the paper under her arm, she pictures her parents, waiting for her in the living room and flicking on the lights just to loom over her. Life is not so cinematic. They are not waiting in the dark.

In fact, the way they look up at her in the doorway gives the distinct impression that they did not expect her to come home at all. She feels unwelcome, but crosses the boundary and enters anyway.

Lilia gives her a nod in greeting. She doesn't waste any time. "Those journals are always so," she says airily, trailing off and gesturing in the air.

"They're always exaggerating," Lux agrees, laughing. "So embarrassing!"

She knows her mother is an actress just like she is, but she can never tell how well they read each other beneath the surface. There is a difference between knowing you are starring at a mask and knowing what is underneath it.

Lilia seems appeased. Her expression softens and she smiles. It is convincing, the way she bows her
head and tucks her hair back behind her ear. Lux almost wants to trust her as a mother. "Please remember that you can always talk to me, Luxanna. Even about..." She seems to flounder a moment, like she is about to say 'suitors.' She comes up with, sounding the perfect maternal mix of caring and awkward, "young men."

Her father's voice is low, but loud enough that he means to be heard, "please spare me."

Lux and her mother both laugh at his joke, daintily covering their mouths in identical, trained motions.

"It's just a rumor," Lux assures them, and begins heading to the staircase.

"It doesn't have to be, dear."

Lux's hand hesitates on the banister. Lux used to fall for these kinds of lies. Tricks to make her admit her mistakes. She is glad she is smarter, now, but there is a part of her that wishes she still had the capacity to believe it. "I know, Momma. I'm sure the fuss will die down. It's hardly the most important matter at hand."

This was the correct answer; Lilia looks pleased. "I'm proud of you. You always know what's important."

Priorities. The prince's potential consort. Her heart stutters in her chest, tight and anxious. Her palm feels clammy.

Lilia carries on, her voice cheerfully following Lux up the stairs. "We'll always be here if you need to talk."

Lux is almost home safe. She is almost to the top of the steps.

"You're a Crownguard, after all."

Lux does not reply before heading into her bedroom.

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Ezreal is at her doorstep the next week. She does not even get the chance to greet him before he has brushed straight past her, letting himself in.

He has amazing luck, considering her parents are at a dinner party that she only got out of to spend more time at the military base working, which she then also bailed from. Quinn, for whatever reason, has been enamored with taking over Lux's latest deployment assignment. She concedes that she has every faith in Quinn and that it's a nice break, allowing her to focus on tedious reports.

Ezreal looks around the living room with his hands shoved deep in his jacket pockets, as if he had been invited in. She waits for a decidedly unimpressed comment, a sarcastic 'nice place.' Instead she gets him whirling around to look at her, eyebrows furrowed. The blue glow on his cheeks flares with his emotions, and Lux remembers when the marks were a solid red. She isn't used to not understanding magic around her.

She realizes she has been staring at the ocean-light patterns that waver on his face instead of listening to him. He said something. She blinks. "Pardon?"

He looks no less irate, hopping up to sit on the arm of the sofa. It's regal curling polish does not suit the holes in his jeans or the dirt smudged across the hem of his shirt. She is so used to seeing her
parents, the picture of elegance, lounging in that spot. Now there is Ezreal in ratty clothes. He is painfully out of place in her estate - in Demacia.

She opens her mouth to scold him for not sitting properly, but he speaks up first, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Quinn was interested in synergizing our forces in our assignments and wanted full control. I trust her judgement. And it isn't as though I'm slacking off, I have plenty to be working on from home to--"

He interrupts her, "--no, not - whatever you're talking about." Ezreal huffs and crosses his arms over his chest. "Are you even allowed to talk about that junk with people outside of the Demacian military?"

"No," Lux realizes, but does not feel as horrified as she should. Piltover is not the enemy. Even if they were, Ezreal is not the enemy. This thought is so illogical, so out-of-nowhere, that it confuses her.

Amusement sparkles in his eyes for a second before he remembers that he was angry. He lets out a long-suffering sigh and leans backwards until he falls onto the sofa, laying down with his legs still propped over the arm rest. His voice drifts up to her, gruff. "You knew exactly what would run in those dumb articles. You knew what you were doing."

She wonders what his expression is like, but even after finally shutting the door, she remains where she stands. She is worried he will misunderstand her staring.

It occurs to Lux that she never thought about this part. How Ezreal will react. He clearly sees that she calculates her appearance, but she doubts he realizes to what extent.

She thinks of him in the caverns, face flushed.

In her daydreams he is in on it. Now she is not so sure how much he can know.

"What about you?" She asks, trying to divert the blame. She approaches the couch but still does not allow herself to peek over the high back of it. He appears to have skinned his knee on the way over. "You know someone will have seen you entering my home. You've never cared about rumors, but if you're claiming to now, you've already made a mistake."

His hand comes in the air to wave away the notion. "Nah, I'm all ninja-sneaky."

She resists the urge to snort, but doesn't doubt him. "Sure." He is quiet for a long moment, and she wonders how long he was planning to lounge in her house. Eventually she has to be the one to speak. "But you don't care, right?"

He kicks up his legs to cross them, dirt falling from his shoes with the motion. "Of course not."

Ezreal does not question her when she starts unlacing his boots. He is helpful enough to lift his ankles off the arm rest for her to tug them off, and she is polite enough to ignore that he snickers. She catches a glimpse of him raising an eyebrow at her, but she still takes his shoes and drops them beside the front door.

She returns to the couch and sits down on the open space beside his head.

She thinks of when she was a child and came downstairs after her bedtime. She had spotted her father, napping on the couch with his head on her mother's lap. Lilia had pet his hair and Lux had
thought this was such a sincere moment, and that maybe arranged marriages could blossom love after all. It is a notion she is not sure she still believes, but her faith in that moment, at least, has not entirely faded.

She keeps space between herself and Ezreal, and if the thought of scooting up to rest his head against her thigh even crosses his mind, it doesn't show on his face.

"They're all just bullshit," he says, tilting his neck to look at her upside down. "So I like to play games with them."

She thinks of the way he gives them archeology lectures against their will, and concedes a small smile.

Until his cheeks go red under the magic marks. She feels frightened by the way he averts his eyes and mumbles, "you don't usually play around."

"No," Lux agrees, her voice flat to keep the horrified tone out. "I don't."

His blue eyes take in the room around him, only settling on Lux for moments before seeking a distraction. She wishes he weren't blushing. She is acutely aware of his jawline; she does not remember it being so defined. "So what was your goal, there?"

Lux does not have an answer. She opens her mouth and begins, "I..." but trails off. Somehow, telling him, I just want to make my parents angry, doesn't seem like a viable option. But without that information, Ezreal must think she has essentially confessed to him indirectly.

No. His eyes are narrowed as he avoids her gaze, like he is suspicious.

She does not know quite what to say. Thankfully he takes over. He tilts his head back to finally look at her again and asks, almost as if he is accusing her, "do you actually want to go out with me or what?"

"Um." Her mind goes blank. How stupid, when this is her own fault. When this is what she wanted. Ezreal does not beat around the bush, but all Lux had wanted was the aftermath of this. Lux always hears stories of people too caught up in the moment to think of the future, but she is the opposite. She hears herself answer. "Yes."

Lux could never say that Ezreal is anything but relaxed, but there is still something about his body that seems suddenly less tense. Like he is finally exhaling after holding his breath. If it weren't for that, and his rapidly coloring cheeks, she would think he didn't hear her for how long he stays silent.

How do you be a couple? Dates? What do you do on dates? How do you maintain a relationship when you live as far apart as they do? And when it's entirely founded on a lie?

But she stares at Ezreal and feels the ebb and flow of his magic and sees it shimmering a contrast to his red cheeks, and she thinks with sudden clarity: he wanted to date me. This should not be surprising. Ezreal is not subtle and Lux is not blind.

"Don't, uh," Ezreal eventually tells her, reaching up to knock his fist light against her leg. He pulls back again just as quick, like he is afraid of touching her. "Don't overthink it and stress yourself out."

What a nice thought. She appreciates the naive sentiment. She lies, "I won't," then thinks that perhaps she should show some affection to her boyfriend. "Thank you."

He shrugs, the top of his head bumping into her leg with the motion.
But he does not scoot closer and neither does she.

Lux fights away the discomfort of a lie this big. She tries to put herself in her memories of lazing about with Ezreal, when she felt at ease from his presence. She manages pretty well, and their silence is almost comfortable.

He does not ask questions or push for anything more then simply relaxing beside each other.

It is hours of quiet, and Lux knows she should be working, but does not want to make him leave just yet. She tries to do her work mentally, wording what she will write and figuring out the logistics in her mind.

They both hear her parents coming before they reach the door. Ezreal stands up in a rush and knows he should not be seen here. Not yet. He waves good-bye, almost grinning, and in a glimmer he's gone - disappeared through the living room wall out to the side of the building, unseen. Lux thinks it is ridiculous the way someone like him uses magic without a second thought, when it is not even his own. Still, she is grateful for his arcane shift at a time like this, and more grateful still that he is the type to abuse it.

But he is back inside as the doorknob rattles, staring at Lux with wide-eyes. She realizes why, but they both know it is too late.

They do not turn to look at her parents in the doorway. They turn to look at Ezreal's shoes, beside them.
Chapter 3

There is a moment where Lux feels on the verge of hysteria, Lilia and Marcus staring her down with blank expressions.

Her mother breaks into a smile, picture-perfect as always. “Ah – I didn't realize we would have company.” Lux winces, then again as her mother offers, “Ezreal the... Explorer, was it?” Passive aggression at its purest – exactly where Lux learned hers from. As if he is not famous. As if he is not a prodigy.

But he is Ezreal, and titles are meaningless to him. If he catches the insult, it doesn't show. Lux is startled that he gives her parents a slouch that looks vaguely inspired by a polite bow.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” he says, sounding surprisingly sincere.

Lux feels like the intruder in her own home.

“Ezreal had matters to discuss regarding the League,” Lux lies, in a hurry to suggest a reason before he can. She wants to make her parents feel like the outsiders. To remind them she is a champion, and Ezreal is too. She hopes they take note that his status trumps theirs. That her legacy is so much more than they ever wished for.

She glances to gauge his reaction, but he does not give away her lie for even a second. He does not question it, either.

Ezreal just nods, and heads to the door to put his shoes back on.

Marcus all-but ignores him, and Lilia’s nod is noticeably terse.

Lux feels in a daze as she watches him go. She hears the creak of the door and the distinct click as it shuts behind him. Seconds pass in a tense silence with her parents. She feels like a robot, forcing herself to take steps. Her body is not her own as she drifts past her parents to her bedroom.

In the morning, Ezreal has left Demacian territory, headed home.

Lux wonders what will come of this. She doesn't know how to 'date,' let alone to date someone who lives a thousand miles away. She did not think this through.

Not having to do anything to maintain their fake relationship is convenient, so Lux is hardly bothered. Sometimes she has to tell the journalists something endearing Ezreal has done, has to giggle shyly and blush a bit. Seeing as how they don't see one another very often, she has to draw on old stories, but thankfully they have spent enough time in the past that she can always come up with something.

Sometimes they interview him, and Lux takes to scouring every journal issue in case he mentions...
her. Not because she wants to hear from him, of course, but because it's important that she seem like they keep in touch.

But they do not. He does not send letters. He does not visit.

When she thinks about it, Lux is hardly surprised. Ezreal is not the type to be a doting boyfriend. Even if this is real to him, he is still absorbed in his exploring, in his own interests, far more than he is in tending to her.

She doesn't mind.

She doesn't.

***

The weather has been clearing up, lately, and Lux feels her mood lifting with the morning fogs. Things at home are unpleasant as always, if not more uncomfortably quiet. It makes her nauseous, makes her lay awake at night and wish that she were somewhere else – anywhere else.

Yet it also feels easy to concentrate. She gleefully buries herself in work, allowing herself to drift along through the media's gentle pull. In the mornings she wakes early, before the sun rises, and treks to headquarters.

She likes heading down market street, exchanging greetings with all the shop owners as they set up for the day. She likes watching the sun rise over the shimmering buildings and tall, heavenly spires. She is the light of this kingdom, her heels clicking on the paved roads, her smiles encouraging her people.

She almost feels like a princess, sometimes, and is quick to distract herself with any other thoughts. She has chosen this ruse with Ezreal over that path. Who knows if she can ever go back.

They have been dating almost three months without a letter between them or a single visit shared. Lux is not counting, of course, but she is acutely aware that it has been far too long for a couple. Especially one so newly established.

Perhaps this is why something feels off, one morning. Why her footsteps echo with an odd clarity, uninterrupted by the usual morning chatter.

The shopkeepers are there, staring at her with unreadable expressions. They do not speak to her. They do not smile or wave or approach her with well-wishes and offerings.

Lux hurries her pace, eager to escape this strangeness.

Once on the grounds, she finds out why everyone was behaving oddly. She wonders why she wasn't among the first to know. She doesn't even get the graces of learning from a letter or a newspaper or a messenger.

Instead she is faced with Quinn, seething in the halls, noisy enough that Lux hears every word before she reaches them.

“Just – closed! Just like that?!” She rages, stomping her foot and crossing her arms and looking every bit a child.
Shyvana is beside her, looking anxious with eyes darting about, scanning for reactions. Quinn's outbursts do not get as much attention as Shyvana is perpetually afraid of, but even so she shifts her weight uncomfortably.

“It's not as if they were without ulterior motives,” Shyvana mumbles. “Perhaps it's best to let us solve our problems naturally?”

There are certain things that are not to be discussed publicly, as champions. Distrust in the Institute is at the top of the list. Sure, all of them whisper among themselves in private, but to let common folk – even military folk – learn of the corruption in the system designed solely to be unbiased...

It doesn't matter anymore. The institute is no more, and Quinn huffs. “And destroy the planet? We'll trade a little bit of their greed for another rune war?! It's more important that they don't demand land to use for our battles than they keep Noxus from committing genocide against planet and people alike?”

Lux approaches, trying to quiet her steps and make herself unassuming. She is better at soothing Quinn's moods than Shyvana. “That isn't the situation, Quinn. It isn't as though we voted to shut them down. The Institute chose this themselves.”

Quinn's shoulders seem to relax a fraction, and Shyvana amplifies the motion herself. Quieter, now, but no less angry, “then what was their decision? Was it just too inconvenient, protecting the weak? Homing those drawn to Runeterra through unknown magic? Preventing genocide?”

“I can't say what their motivations are,” Lux reminds her, because sometimes Quinn is a child who needs scolding.

This gets Quinn to grit her teeth, take a deep breath, and when she exhales she is calmer.

Lux only reads the official announcement hours later in her office. She is later delivered a brief update from Jarvan IV, though he is not able to visit her in person. Xin Zhao looks lost, handing the envelope to her.

She feels lost. She was able to talk Quinn down so easily, but all she can think is now what?

The League of Legends has been her everything. Her everyone. Who is she now? Just a military official? High ranking, sure, decorated and honored. A successful and useful spy to her prince. A Crownguard.

This is all. A Crownguard.

No longer even a potential bride to the prince, and oh God, what has she done? She is able to keep it together until Xin Zhao leaves the office, but then her head is in her hands, desperately trying to fight back a panic attack. She can feel her fingers shaking on her forehead.

She should never have done this. What meaning does this fake relationship have now? Slamming the door in the face of her parents dreams but her future is right there with them. Ezreal is nothing, now. Just a smart kid who can scrap for his life, too curious and adventure-hungry for his own good. He is nothing, and she has tied herself to him as if to drag herself down to nothing.

Lux does not get any work done for the rest of the week, knowing that it will all be useless.
Anything she does now is in the context of the Institute's existence instead of this strange, post-League world.

She sleeps in the spare bunks of the military base. She does not know how to face her parents. Will they be angry with her, though it was not her choice? Are they disappointed in her? Relieved that she is brought back down?

She cannot decide if she fears their sincere disappointment more than her mother's eyes, staring her down like she has the upper-hand again.

It is only a week before the bombs go off in Piltover.

Chapter End Notes

Remember that time Riot decided that the League of Legends doesn't exist anymore? And we were like "oh...... okay...... well... what are you replacing the old lore with?"

And then they never answered
News of the explosions in Piltover reach Demacia fast. The Demacian network of reporting is intensive and dedicated, and Jinx is not a person to act with subtlety.

Quinn's fist slams on the mess-hall table, the sound dulled by the newspaper underneath. “Ridiculous!”

Shyvana winces, and as always, her eyes dart around the room to see how much scrutiny they are under. Quinn never minds these things, but Shyvana still seems sensitive. She is nervous of the judgment of her peers; Lux doesn't think she's ever seen Shyvana relax around anyone other than Jarvan himself. It's strange – most would be the exact opposite around royalty.

But she understands. Knowing Jarvan through the League has changed all her perceptions of him. He is casual, more than you would expect of a prince, but it is soothing and unassuming. He is not rudely ignoring boundaries, presuming to be on good terms. The way he eases into his surroundings is natural, kind.

Lux feels at home with him, like Demacia is somewhere she loves, really loves.

She can understand Shyvana feeling the same, when she was brought into them from nothing.

The dragon-born shifts in her seat uncomfortably, though no one stirs at Quinn's outburst. “I had thought they would... I'm not sure – have something arranged for her. For everyone.”

Quinn's fury is in her voice, and her whole body as she surges into her bite of lunch. She motions wildly while she chews, eager to talk again. After swallowing she imitates a snotty voice, “we'll just let a terrorist loose after getting rid of all the regulations that were keeping her from blowing up the whole damn city!”

“She only avoided jail through the Institute's protection, you'd think now that they're, God, I don't know, doing whatever they're doing now, they would have helped her to be locked up.” Even Shyvana isn't as composed as usual.

“Well,” Lux ventures, “they were always meant to be an impartial party.”

Quinn's shoulders slouch, but she knows Lux well enough not to think she is truly defending them. She almost looks like a sulking child. “They could break the rules this once, you think?”

Lux opens her mouth to explain, but Shyvana cuts her off. Not intentionally. She is staring very intently down at her plate. “If they break that rule even once, what's to stop them from doing it again? Why help Piltover instead of, say, Zaun? Why not just take a side in our wars? We know they didn't always act impartially, but when they took action it was to their own benefit, not any one faction. At this point... Up and disappearing without action is their only option.”

“The Institute is disbanded,” Lux agrees. “They can't very well continue to offer Sanctum Calamitates after ceasing all other operations.”

“It's not as if Jinx is directly fighting for Zaun,” Quinn mutters, but Lux gets the distinct impression she understands the point. Despite her complaints. “And, I mean, why not help us over Noxus?”
They're the worst."

Lux lets out a long sigh, obviously fake on purpose for once. Quinn shoots her a resigned smile.

Shyvana looks troubled for a moment, poking at the remains of her meal. After a moment of hesitation she sets her eyes on Lux, speaking soft. “Aren't you worried about your boyfriend? Have you heard from him?”

Lux blinks.

She is grateful Quinn is noisy enough to distract from her obvious confusion, the older woman jumping at his mention. “Oh! Ezreal! That's right, is he okay?”

She has seen war, before the Institute. And the Fields of Justice were never far from war, just on a smaller scale. A more intimate war. But there is no property damage on the Fields, no civilians hurt in the aftermath, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But she has seen towns torn to shreds. She has seen blood on the pavement, demolished buildings with their rubble strewn across streets. This is Piltover now. She glances down to the newspaper and cannot make out much underneath Quinn's arm, but there is a death toll.

She squints. *17 in critical condition, over 20 announced dead at the scene. Not all bodies identified as of yet, names of minors to be released with consent of the families. Thus far those identified: Stephanie C. Pearl (26), Connie-Marie Ardus (19) --* her eyes scan desperately over the names, but she recognizes none.

Her sigh of relief doesn't make it past her lips. There are too many uncertainties. She thinks of unidentified bodies and – does Ezreal even have a family?

The ocean-wave shimmer of his cheeks flashes through her mind, quickly replaced with memories she buries carefully deep; blood pools and broken limbs beneath wreckage, innocents, not warriors, dead like nothing more than collateral. By her own hands, sometimes, if it meant keeping up the disguise on a mission.

And for *what?* Demacia and Noxus have always been at war, have always torn each other down, army or not, but Jinx is just one girl. She is just one girl against a city and no one knows what she's trying to prove. After fighting her, after seeing her eyes wide and grin wider on the fields, Lux is not convinced that there is really any goal at all.

She has seen Jinx shoot Ezreal straight through the chest and felt so little panic that it seems unreal, now. Nobody dies in the League of Legends, but now he is a hundred miles away and there is no magic to revive him if he is hurt. Ezreal is strong, truly a prodigy. Ezreal is also amazing at being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“I'm sure he's fine,” she says, but her voice cracks awkwardly. She clears her throat, but realizes belatedly that this only makes it more conspicuous. Who cares? Who really cares about her pretenses?

Ezreal was with her so recently, making himself at home on her couch and shyly averting his eyes. She is still not sure how she feels about this play-pretend love, but her gut feels hollow, because it does not matter if she isn't truly in love with him, he is still a friend.
She has spent hours at his side, listening to him talk at length without hearing a word, even forgoing her bubbly-persona to roll her eyes at him and tell him to shut up. There have been times he spoke of interesting things. Times they laughed childishly behind others' backs. Times he challenged her and rolled his eyes at her, and...

And...

Her breath hitches. Shyvana and Quinn look equally as sympathetic as they do uncomfortable. Shyvana opens her mouth, probably to comfort her, but Lux stands up quickly, rushing to cut her off. She doesn't want to hear it.

“I have a lot of work to do,” she lies, realizing how transparent it is.

She does not even clean up her lunch tray, does not wait to let them answer. She leaves in a hurry, feeling short of breath after a mere jog to her office.

Lux all but collapses into the seat at her desk, buried behind paperwork. All she needs to do is read them and sign off on Quinn's plans for her troops, but she doubts these plans will go unchanged, given the circumstances. This entire mission might get scrapped to make way for damage control.

No more Institute. They are at war with Noxus. Not yet, but she's sure it is only a matter of time with Swain in charge. There is no time for petty missions of little consequence. They'll need so many troops, they'll need strategy. Spies, again. Lux wonders if she will be drafted, wonders if she should make herself familiar with Noxian military officials again in preparation.

She reads two or three pages of reporting, slow and distracted. She has to read each paragraph eight times over, her eyes scanning without comprehending. Noxian identities keep flickering through her mind, and she tries to match them to faces, tries to remember how the light needs to fall to pass for them. Willem Nightshade. Tobias Drumm. Richor Ebony. Which Hawkmoon still lives?

They were almost allies, she thinks. Not that the idea had ever stopped churning her stomach, but – they had almost been allies. Briefly, against the Institute's corruption. Against Swain, she had begun to think.

Not anymore.

When she finally manages to get through enough without her mind wandering, all it does is confirm for her that these are useless now. Poor Quinn. All that work, that strategy, all her time spent on this. Straight to an incinerator.

She stares around her room, full of maps and folders and well-worn books.

What is she supposed to do now? She buries her head in her hands, fingers tangling messy in her hair.

She remembers breaking down, admitting that the League of Legends was all she had left. It had brought so much back for her. The League was true hope in her prince.

Where will all of that faith go, now? What is she supposed to believe in? If all she had left, her very last glimmer, is gone now?

Lux takes in a shaky breath.
Sanctum Calamitates had protected Demacia as much as anywhere else. Still, their military is the strongest, she is sure. She is always sure. She always wants to be sure, but sometimes she thinks about the Vanguard forces and thinks about Noxus’ allies. Brute strength, no honor. Allies who gain their victories without moderation, growing and growing like mold.

Nearly everyone sides with Demacia, she tries to assure herself.

Ionia's strength is the biggest contender. Freljord is not weak, and she trusts that they would overlook their past conflicts with Demacia. But Lux would think it naïve to compare their population with Noxus'.

And given the circumstances, Piltover must be too preoccupied to help.

She shudders, the unease traveling from her shoulders to her fingertips.

Lux stands. She needs to find out if Ezreal is okay. She needs to find out what she is going to do next.

***

Lux seeks audience with Jarvan in the morning. She does not miss the dark bags under his eyes, or that Xin Zhao's wrinkles seem to have doubled over night. There is recognition in their eyes that she has only been able to share in other champions. They are all comrades in this sudden change.

It feels like her parents abandonment all over again.

She wonders what the other champions think of it. Those in Demacia and those not.

Jarvan gives a nod to her salute, and Xin Zhao closes the door behind her as she approaches his desk. It is immaculate, spotless of paperwork. Lux imagines this is for the same reason that her desk was cleared by the end of the day. So many documents are completely useless now, meaningless without the context of the Institute.

She realizes in an instant that it was mania that brought her here. There is no way he has plans for her already. There is no way he has plans for much of anything in this wreckage of a system.

Jarvan does not question her silence, but does not give her answers either.

“You know,” Jarvan tells her, eventually, “I never faced a judgment of my own.”

Lux blinks. She tries to gauge Xin Zhao's expression. He does not look like this is news to him, though she admits it's difficult to read much of anything from his face.

“They did stop administering them,” Lux says, cautiously, “with the influx of champions, of late.”

He looks amused. “Far after my enrollment.”

Lux nods.

She remembers one of the first times she spoke with Ezreal, just the two of them. He made a horrible first impression - had rolled his eyes at all the “political nonsense,” and shrugged off “conspiracy theories” as if the world around him was painfully irrelevant in light of ancient worlds lost.
She remembers just six months ago, sneaking him into the secured archives of the Demacian military base library, having to shush him lest he give away her invisibility spell, as he mumbled on and on about corruption within the Institute walls. She had nodded along as he mapped out the Institute's actions that lead to Kalamanda.

That was not the end of it, but the news of it just—died. It wasn't as if they stopped pulling strings, stopped manipulating factions against factions. It became so familiar to her, with Ezreal digging into it with more and more interest, that it began to feel like a public secret.

Much like Ezreal's access to their hidden books. He was going to get at them anyway, Lux figures. She was simply reducing the damage in his wake.

“I had one scheduled,” Jarvan continues, and looks distracted by his own memories.

Lux nods again. She recalls the fuss the next day. Swain had disrupted the whole thing so far off schedule that it had been moved to another day in haste, then moved again and again until it simply fell off the calendar all together.

He looks her dead in the eye. “I never showed up.”

Lux feels her knees go weak. What? No, that can't be right. She read the reports. She read the official documents that explained his confrontation with Swain. Her mind reels. Then who was there?

“We can no longer rely on Sanctum Calamitates provided by the Institute,” Jarvan says, drawing out his words as if wringing the meaning out of them. “But Demacia will not close its gates.”

Jarvan is so good for Demacia. He is so good and right, and it is such a relief to have blind faith instead of faking it. Their bond created through the League makes Lux feel like the champions are the only ones who can really respect him as others feign to.

It is also what makes them the only ones with the right and relationship enough to speak against him.

Xin Zhao's gaze is intent on the bookshelf, as if he is speaking to the book-spines more than Jarvan. Like observing the weather: “Though it has, in the past.”

Jarvan winces visibly, and does not look at his bodyguard. The Ionian, captured from his home in Shon-Xan when Demacia refused to allow refugees during Noxus' invasion of Ionia. The invasion that made Ionia join the League of Legends in the first place, as a last resort. Only to lose rigged matches and barely even make it back to regaining their independence before the whole goddamn system crumbled.

Sometimes she wonders if Xin Zhao thinks of Demacia as home. She wonders if he ever will. She knows that now, without the Institute to protect him from Noxus, there is no safe way for him to return to Ionia. He is safest putting himself in danger for the prince.

Jarvan changes the subject abruptly. “You came for your next task, correct? A mission?”

Lux nods, feeling less and less sure of herself. She wishes the world would stop spinning long enough for her to get a grasp of it. She feels ashamed, like a child asking naive questions.

“I'll have Shyvana deliver the dossier to you this evening, in your home.”
“Yes,” Lux affirms, reflexively. Then catches herself, only able to speak so openly because of their time together on the fields. “Wait – um. I'm sorry. What?”

“With the immediate dispersement of all Institute administration, there's a lot of dust to settle. Someone needs to pick up all the official documents belonging to and directed to Demacia from the Institute's headquarters.”

Xin Zhao eyes are narrowed, like he is suspicious of their surroundings. Lux finds herself leaning closer instinctively.

Jarvan's voice remains soft, comforting. “You won't be coming home for some time.”

She does not let confusion show on her face, though Jarvan seems more invested in looking at Xin Zhao than at her.

“We need you to map out the borders. Many military occupied bases were shut down with the Institute's influence, but now we need to know which show signs of activity. Both ours, and Noxus'. We need reports on, and from these bases all across Valoran. We also need updates on the security checkpoints that were once run by the Institute itself.”

He pauses, and makes a gesture towards a map hanging on the wall. “You know these maps are terribly inaccurate. History is written by the victor.”

Lux examines it. The way Demacia's territory is exaggerated and stretched. She grew up not knowing. She remembers the knee-jerk denial when she first saw the maps drawn elsewhere, the indignation that they would shrink down their glory. Thinking back now makes her laugh at her own naïveté.

These missions are not meaningless. They are not conjured from nothing just to give her something to do. Yet Lux still sees the further purpose in sending her is protection. If she is kept moving, she is safer than in the infiltrated walls of Demacia.

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“Will everything be....” She begins, but trails off, unsure. How egotistical is it to be concerned for the whole kingdom in her absence? She does not presume such importance.

Jarvan is not the type to take it that way. His voice is firm. “We'll have much to do between your reports. But we will need them.”

She does not need to apologize for questioning him, and so she doesn't. She just asks, bluntly, “why not Quinn?”

He raises an eyebrow at her, beginning to look amused. His voice certainly rings of it. “Do you think Quinn is as hated by Noxus as you? Do you think she is under as big of threat?”

Sometimes Lux thinks Quinn has a giant target painted on her back. But it is not a target for Noxus. Certainly, something is after her – has been since she returned from Freljord – but there is no doubt in her mind that it isn't Noxian.

“Do you think she can blend in the same way you can?” He continues.

Lux shakes her head.
“Although,” the prince muses, “you're very astute. Valor will be running communication between us.”

Lux takes a deep breath. “I understand. I'll read over the dossier tonight.”

“You can come to me with any questions, tomorrow morning.”

“Right. Though... May I ask just one more, now?” At his nod, Lux ventures, “I know I've always done well academically, but I am no cartographer. I can certainly make crude markings on a map already drawn, and you know the quality of my reporting, but I worry this will be the extent of it.”

“I was hoping you'd find out from the dossier,” Jarvan says, and he _glows_, as if he has been secretly looking forward to saying this all day. “Piltover may be unable to offer as many resources as they have in the past due to their own circumstance, but you'll be happy to hear that you won't be on this journey alone. You'll be joined by your-” a chuckle, as if the word alone entertains him, “-boyfriend.”

Lux feels the floor fall out from under her. Her legs collapse, and her knees hit the floor hard. Xin Zhao is at her side fast enough to have caught her, but instead just kneels beside her to make sure she is alright.

She hadn't thought he was dead, not really. Not for a second.

But she is so relieved that her body feels light and empty. There is an uncomfortable tremble that runs up her spine. The man she should marry speaking so easily of the boyfriend she shouldn't have. The boyfriend she doesn't love, who was the perfect way to anger her parents without sacrificing status until the League of Legends was disbanded.

And she will be spending who-knows-how-long alone with him.

Her voice feels as weak as her legs. “Understood.”
Chapter 5

The dossier delivered by Shyvana is about what she expected. If Lux is honest, it includes less information than she was hoping. The route she is to take is rough and loose, and the stops she should make are unclear. There are a couple of safe places listed, others coded as particularly dangerous. Allies and aliases, should she need them, and the budget she will be delivered and approximate dates. Everything else is up to her own discretion.

It feels strange not to have a carriage arranged. Everything is up to her, to be handled as it happens. Anything planned in advance can be leaked. They need to make their decisions in the moment.

The date of departure approaches rapidly. Ezreal is to meet her on institute grounds, and she is eager to leave Demacia's uncertainty. Not that the journey is any more clear, but movement feels like progress. Or maybe she is just running to keep from thinking.

She does not say goodbye to her parents. She cannot raise alarm that she is not coming back. Still, there are many farewells to be had, even for a short trip to the Institute and back.

In Jarvan's office, Xin Zhao reaches out as if to touch her shoulder, but stops. Clears his throat. “We'll see you return soon enough.”

Jarvan stands, and Lux awaits a speech, further instructions, anything but what she gets. He hugs her, the embrace soft and fatherly. She fails to suppress a startled hiccup; thankfully he says nothing of it. He tells her that he will miss her, that they all will. Tells her to be well. To be careful.

She wonders how close he will become to Fiora, with her gone. She will be away for so long that she briefly imagines returning home to the Lightshield and Laurent families already intertwined. She feels the stirrings of jealousy and indignation but has to remind herself that it cannot be helped. It may not even be relevant, when she comes home. It is so hard to know what the future holds.

He kisses her on the forehead.

She regrets her decisions made at just the wrong moment. She wants to stay by Jarvan's side. He is the one in the most danger, not her. She knows this. Still, she has wracked her brain and can only agree that this mission best suites her, right now.

Her salute is half-hearted, but she bows deeply before leaving his office.

Shyvana gives a polite good-bye, and Lux gets the impression she does not know the details of this trip. Does not know she is not coming straight back. Quinn gives her a lingering hug, which Lux takes far too long to return. She is not used to sudden hugs; she mostly just gets them at fancy parties, from old relatives and family friends.

“You'll be fine,” Quinn assures her, unprompted.

Lux appreciates it, and when they pull apart she keeps their hands held. Quinn's gloves are rough, and the texture is unfamiliar and interesting. She feels her heart flutter with disappointment as they finally let their hands fall apart.

Quinn must know, for Valor to be involved.
The last good-bye she wants to make before leaving Demacia is to Sona. She does not arrange for the visit in advance, but doesn't have to wait long when she shows up at the door.

Lestara wears curve-hugging dresses under loose flowing cardigans. Her style is so much gaudier than Lilia's, and the colorful patterns of her skirts are complemented by the solid pastel shrug. She looks so much more alive than Lux's mother does, even though she is older. She is not a ghost.

She looks nothing like Sona. Her eyes are too wide, her eye lashes too short. Her skin is paler, freckled uneven across her strong cheekbones. Her hair a dusty blonde, done up in a braided bun. She is thin and narrow where Sona is thick and soft. She is pretty like a lily, Lux thinks, all tall and pale but determined to splash color where she can.

The crows feet around her eyes, vivid as the smile in her voice, are just like Sona's. Lux finds these wrinkles beautiful in both of them.

“You're lucky to have come when you did,” Lestara tells her, hand sweeping aside in invitation. Lux follows her down the halls, lights flickering on around them and dimming as they pass. She makes an inquisitive sound, and Lestara explains, “She'll be setting out for the Institute in just a couple days.”

Lux blinks. “Is that so?”

Lestara nods, and gives her a sympathetic look over her shoulder. “It must be so difficult for all of you. You've been under so much scrutiny and now... They've really made a mess of things, haven't they?”

She lets out a giggle to agree, but quiets herself when she begins to hear the muffled sound of harp strings through the door ahead.

Lestara pauses at the door, and gives her a look to let her know to wait, though she leaves the door open as she enters.

Sona is seated on a chaise lounge chair, her long legs splayed out beside her. Her skirt has a high slit up the side, showing off the curve of her lightly bent knees. Her long hair is let loose, draped over the armrest, curling up with an unnatural breeze keeping it from touching the floor.

The etwahl looks different than Lux is used to, though she isn't surprised that it can shapeshift to an extent. The way it curves is fascinating, gold twisted up like it wants to put its strings under her fingers no matter how she sits and holds her wrists.

“Luxanna Crownguard is here to visit you, dear,” Lestara says, a bit over-loud to be heard over the music.

The music stops more abruptly than Lux was expecting. She always expects Sona's music to fade out. The halts are jarring.

Sona gives a smile to Lestara, her eyes taking their time to look her over before finally landing on Lux as if there is a polite order to take in her surroundings after coming back down to Runeterra from the clouds.

Her etwahl settles beside her, and it takes Lux a moment to comprehend the movement of her hands in the air. Almost as though she were still playing.
No. Sign language.

Lestara smiles along, clearly understanding, then motions for Lux to enter. The older woman hesitates in the doorway. “Would you like me to stay? Of course you’re welcome to your privacy, but if you need an interpreter?”

Lux winces and wonders what the correct answer is.

Thankfully she’s taken off the spot. Sona pulls herself upright, smooths her skirts politely, and shakes her head.

“Alright. Luxanna? Make yourself at home. You’re still a champion of the people, and to me.”

“I appreciate it,” Lux says with sincerity, and watches Lestara fade down the hallway.

There is quiet in her wake. Sona’s hands sit on her lap, strangely still. Lux always imagines they would be restless, being that she uses them for her music and her speech. But she is the picture of serenity, awaiting Lux to lead the conversation.

She always does, when they visit. She didn't think anything of it, at first. Watching her use sign language makes her think twice. Her words waver as they leave her. “Miss Buvelle mentioned you’re heading to the Institute?”

Sona nods, smiling weakly. She looks resigned, and this Lux understands without words.

“Final paperwork and such?” Lux asks.

Though Sona nods, there is a tilt to her head first. She looks at Lux sidelong, as if to say half right. Lux understands, and lets it come through in her tone. “Picking up things from your unit, there?”

Sona’s shoulders shake as her hand reaches out instinctively. She plays her giggle as a chime on her etwahl. Lux watches her fingers dance across taut chords, moving so fast it makes her dizzy. Not from her own unit. Not quite.

Lux thinks of the lone ornate teacup in Taric’s cupboard. That small piece of Sona was alone in his home. Now he will be the odd one out in this sprawling mansion.

“I was actually intending to make that trip myself, departing this weekend.”

Sona perks up like she is eager to speak, but she does not so much as open her mouth. That is not a reflex she has ever had. Her etwahl is edging its way closer and closer to her lap, and this time she plays two short chords in succession, repeating. The same.

Though they are across the room from one another, she extends her hand slowly, as if for Lux to take. Together?

“If you don’t mind the company,” Lux says, cautiously. She second-guesses her interpretations, and doesn’t want to presume. “I’ve already arranged a carriage. Were your travel plans set?”

Sona eyes are bright in affirmation, excited for company, and she shakes her head. She does not have plans yet? Or trying to tell Lux her guess was wrong? No. The first.
Lux knows the trip will be just like this. Awkward and unsure.

Yet soothing, as Sona always is.

Arranging the meeting time and place is a mountain to climb all of its own. At first Lux is frustrated with how difficult it is to communicate, but Sona is so patient, and looks so, so increasingly amused at their failures. Lux finds herself laughing, the two of them giggling at nothing when the game of charades fails. Sona speaks with her hands, words that Lux cannot read. Lux tries to slowly work her way down: “Is seven too early? Eight? How's nine?”

Lestara saves the day. She watches from the doorway for far too long before interjecting, “Sona was hoping to leave as early as possible. By sunrise, perhaps, or if the carriage would permit napping, late at night.” Her voice is tinted with laughter, and she hums and regards Sona directly. “In a hurry to get there, are we?”

Sona feigns a scandalized expression, bringing her fingers to cover her mouth as if she were gasping. After a silent giggle behind her hand, she signs, narrated by Lestara, who's voice starts off normal but hitches high in disbelief. “An important package?”

Lux doesn't quite catch the joke, but Sona is making such a sly face and Lestara looks entertained and flustered all at once. She gets the idea it was inappropriate.

It is enthralling, somehow, to see a mother and daughter get along so well. She is pleased to imagine Taric joining this family, the same way Sona was welcomed into it. The same way she could someday be welcomed into the Lightshields'.

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They set out well before the sun rises. Lux splurges on the cushiest carriage she can find and tips well for the unpleasant hour. When Sona appears she is on time, well dressed, hair curled perfectly, and looking wide awake. Lux watches the staff help her to pack her things into the carriage, watches them fuss over her etwahl cautiously.

The streets are empty this late at night, and still hazy with foggy. Lux still spots the figure approaching long before he gets there.

Garen stares at her, and she stares back feeling vaguely horrified. She forgot to say good-bye to him. She doesn't know what to say.

They were never close. She wonders if he knows that she is disappearing. She wonders what he will do in her absence.

They stare at each other with equal deer-in-the-headlights expressions for what feels like an hour before she simply turns on her heel and climbs into the carriage without a word.

This feels like closure enough, and Sona does not so much as pry with sympathetic eyes. Impressively, she goes from gorgeously put-together and awake to dead-asleep before they even reach the edge of town.

Lux is actually grateful that Sona sleeps. She can't relax to sleep herself, with her mind ever-racing, but she had worried about the awkward silence of the road trip. Only now, without this current trip to
worry her, she spends her time working herself into a frenzy over her trip with Ezreal. She will not only be far from home, but be stuck with him. She cannot even imagine.

She is awake for most of the ride, but dozes off for the last hour of the journey. Sona is gently nudging her awake on the front grounds of the Institute of War what feels like moments later.

She blinks, bleary-eyed, and looks past the older woman, out the window. There are still figures bustling around the Institute, though far, far fewer than she is used to seeing. She does not see any champions – ex-champions. Just administration, shuffling from one room to the next with their arms full of folders and papers. Not even journalists.

*Just burn it all up,* Lux thinks. Like a giant furnace and all of Quinn's plans. Like a thousand peace treaties made useless and a thousand lives devoured by Jinx's bombs.

She helps Sona take out her etwahl, and instructs the driver to return to pick them up the following morning. She does not tell him she will not be present, and pays in advance.

The two of them make their way down the halls together. Lux sees Sona to Taric's assigned unit door, where the older woman digs out a key and begins to let herself in without a second thought.

Lux does not follow her in, but she peers inside. The lights are off, sunlight only barely beginning to make its way in through the windows. His holiday strung lights are still lit up, glowing warm colors around his nearly-emptied room.

He seems to have already done away with most of his things. The floor looks like it goes on forever without furniture taking up space. His remaining belongings are packed and set by the door. Sona sidesteps them and paces feather-light across the room to the sleeping figure on the second-hand sofa.

Taric is curled with his face towards the back of the seat. His long hair is mussed, strands drifting into his face. His broad shoulders, always stone-like strong in Lux's eyes, seem soft under Sona's gentle touch. He doesn't stir, and Sona gives Lux a nod that can be read as nothing but a polite dismissal.

So she leaves.

She makes her way down the hall, down to her own unit, and tries to ignore the rumbling roars in the distance. Taric cannot go home, but he has somewhere to go. There is housing in Ionia. But what of the void creatures? What of Maokai?

She hears her boots clicking loudly on the tile and allows herself to be lost in the sound. She likes the rhythm to it, like a military march. Reliable and strong.

And then there is Ezreal, and the sound stops suddenly. He is sitting outside the front door of her unit in the brightening sunlight. She thinks of the deaths in Piltover and the blood that has been in her mind ever since.

His legs are open wide, a large book propped open between them as he slouches forward, his lower back against the wall, shirt caught and riding up. He has a sandwich in one hand, and he doesn't look at it even as he takes a bite. Bits of lettuce and tomato spill out its back onto his knee.

She wonders how far he was from the explosion. How many circumstances, how many coincidences had to align for him to be okay. It occurs to her that he may not have even been anywhere near it.
She has no idea. Her legs feel shaky. She opens her mouth to call his name and get his attention, but no sound comes out at first.

“You're a mess,” she hears herself say, her voice cracking.

His senses should be as sharp as hers, but he startles badly and drops the remains of his lunch on the floor. He rushes to stand up, forgetting his book he’d been so deeply absorbed in and letting it topple to the floor. He immediately crouches back down, fretting and fixing it to keep the pages from bending wrong. He is nervous, she realizes.

“You're, uh,” he stammers, clearly trying to sound casual, “pretty early?”

Says the boy waiting outside her room like a lost puppy.

Lux steps forward and wraps her arms around him, linking her fingers at his back. “I'm so glad you're alright. I heard about – Jinx – and I didn't know... We only have the reports in the journals.”

Ezreal goes tense, and Lux belatedly realizes that he is just slightly shorter than her. She always pictures him as bigger and taller, like all the men in the army she is surrounded by. But he is not a knight in shining armor. He is just a boy in a hoodie, who does not know what to do in a hug. He stands stiff like an idiot until she pulls back.

She refuses to be embarrassed. He is her boyfriend.

Lux feels herself sway, and his hand is on her arm. It does nothing to steady her. “I think,” she says slowly, “I'd like to lay down.”

Ezreal opens the door to her unit. She does not question why it was not locked, or why he was waiting outside if he clearly knew he had access.

She makes her way to the bedroom, peeling off layers of clothes as she goes. Ezreal trails after her, eyes strict on his book instead of watching her undress – though she is still wearing shorts and a tank-top when she climbs into the bed.

It is harder than her bed back home, but softer than the military bunks. She has slept in worse conditions, and knows she is consistently going to from here on out.

The room is not as dark as she would like it to be for sleep. She can see dust twisting in the beams of morning sunlight that sneak through the blinds. She does not recall ever being so exhausted by change in her life. Even when she was thirteen, and military training was fresh and new and too much.

She closes her eyes and tries to soak in the cool temperatures of day. “We should head out in the evening.”

The bed creaks as Ezreal takes a seat on the side. She hears pages turning, and he makes a noncommittal “mm-hmm.”

“I came with Sona,” she says. She takes note of the way Ezreal perks up at her name. “She's leaving in the morning, and I don't want to be there to be asked why I'm lingering.”

“Don't sleep all day,” Ezreal says gruffly. “I want to see Sona before...”
She waits a very long time, to make sure he is not going to finish his sentence. “Sure.”

Almost defensively, he adds, “and Taric.” No pages turn for a long while. His voice softens. “Gotta say goodbye.”

Ezreal is used to expeditions. Not this long.

“Shouldn't bother them for a while,” Lux murmurs. She wonders if Ezreal has the sense to give them quality time. He is one of Taric's closest friends, he must be aware of their relationship. Private as Taric is with the media, he is not so terse with friends.

There is a pointed silence. She opens her eyes and sees Ezreal scowling down at her, red-faced. “I know.”

She is too tired to laugh, but feels the tug at her lips. “Just making sure.”

The bed dips under her weight, pulling Ezreal to her. She feels his back brush the side of her hip. He does not flinch away from it. She realizes, distantly, that now they are in that same sort of relationship.

She waits, eyes closed, for him to make a move. If she were not half-asleep she might be apprehensive of the thought.

Instead she falls asleep to the sound of turning pages and the small spot of body-heat where they lean together.

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Ezreal is gone when she wakes up, and the chill of morning replaced with a brightly lit room. She is overheated from oversleeping, and takes her time gathering her things for the journey. She cools off with the chore, setting everything by the door on her way out.

The halls are empty, but there is a strange echo to her footsteps. The patterned sound she always pays so much attention to sounds off.

She understands why when she turns a corner and sees Malzahar, his feet barely touching the floor as he stares out from the breezeway at the grey, grey sky. She tries to follow his gaze, but it is blindingly bright, the sun reflecting off the clouds eternally. She squints into the abyss of light for as long as she can before finally giving up and approaching him.

The camaraderie she feels with all of the other ex-champions is absent. He is impossible to read as always, but she knows one thing for certain. This never meant anything to him.

His priorities, as always, lay elsewhere. He hears the whispers of the void and he is so ready to repeat them. Nothing else is real to him. Nothing else matters. The only thing he ever needed from the Institute was publicity, a means of reaching out to the potential void cultists of the world.

Lux steps beside him and knows he is aware of her, though his body does not react and his eyes do not seek her at first. “What will you do now?”

He turns to look at her now, the motion slow and disinterested. His eyes glow bright, bright like always, meeting hers. Not blinking. Not answering. She gets the impression he is toying with her in
his silence.

He certainly won't be welcome in Demacia. Noxus, she thinks, does not suit him either. She cannot place why. The thought of him among those scum makes her shift in place with discomfort. Perhaps Piltover. No. Piltover is dangerous, these days. Zaun? He was there before. A long time ago. She wonders about the hidden wars that no one else sees, now. She thinks of all their faction conflicts on the surface, and just one layer lower, unnoticed: Kassadin desperately keeping the void at bay. The Institute shed light on this, before. No more.

Zaun, where he sacrificed that poor girl. She should hate him. He is certainly just as evil as Noxus, devoid of their twisted sense of honor and respect.

She feels nothing at all.

She knows where he really wants to go. But there is nothing for him, there. Nothing but crumbled buildings and ancient architecture. The source of the voices he's heard ever since his first visit is a dead-end, not worth the travel.

Malzahar's gaze is unwavering.

“Pardon me, then,” she says, and resists the urge to roll her eyes before leaving him.

She checks Sona and Ezreal's units, and neither answer her knock. Lastly, she sets her path for Taric's. She hears voices before she even gets to the door, Ezreal's laughter and the chimes of a harp. A low, rumbling voice, unintelligible through the door.

She lets herself in.

Sona is seated in the middle of the sofa, her etwahl splayed out in front of her. It nudges Ezreal and Taric to each of her sides, neither of them seeming bothered. Lux soaks in the way Taric and Sona's legs rest against one another.

She also takes note of the way Ezreal watches her hands, intent and observant. He watches her when she signs, recognition in his eyes. And he watches when she plays, like he is more enraptured by the flicks of her fingers than the music they produce.

She feels uncomfortable, somehow, but the feeling fades quickly when Taric welcomes her to his empty, temporary home. His voice is warm, and Sona plays a chord for her entrance. Ezreal gives her an off-handed wave, not looking even half as excited to see her as Taric is.

The man rises to make her a cup of coffee, and in his absence, Sona scoots further into Ezreal's side. She makes room for Lux, as if Lux would somehow need more space than Taric's absence opened. Or like she'd rather be on Ezreal's lap. Lux dismisses the thought, angry at herself for even having it.

Lux takes the seat, giving a nod of gratitude, and is ashamed to have to force herself not to scowl at the way Ezreal's legs open wider, knee knocking against Sona like it is the most natural thing in the world. The older woman does not pull back. Twice their age, nearly, Lux assures herself. In a committed relationship. She is being absolutely ridiculous.

When Taric returns he hands Lux her drink, then sits down on the floor across from the full-sofa. He does it without a second thought.
These three, Lux thinks, unsure if she is fond of it or not, are ridiculous by nature.

She watches Sona speak in sign language, and wishes she understood. It is ridiculous, she thinks, that Ezreal has a better grasp than Taric. She can see the disparity in comprehension on their faces.

She feels pathetic for not understanding a thing, but she doesn't for a minute let herself feel left out. Not when she knows Sona is left out so, so much more. Out of everyone she knows, everyone she has ever met, these two are the ones that come to mind who can speak her language properly.

They do their best to include her, though neither of them thinks to translate like Lestara did.

Sona plays gentle music that does not overpower the conversation but keeps silence at bay. Taric hosts, asks questions, allows them space to speak. Ezreal tells stories about his travels. They are rambling, sometimes incredibly boring, other times clearly embellished. There are amazing feats he mentions as a throw-away sentence, not realizing their brevity. There are small details, unimportant, that he goes on and on about like heroism, looking eagerly at Sona for her approval.

Ezreal's story eventually draws him from his seat, motioning wildly as he gestures at Taric, a play-pretend enemy. Taric plays along, stage-whispering to Lux that he was in theater, you know, and winking.

They are make-believe sword fighting and grinning at each other, and Lux thinks that maybe boys never really grow up. This thought is comforting to her, when she thinks of Jarvan's laughter over his battle-scars, and Taric's plays over his lost world.

The sun begins to set, the darkness sliding into the room like a tide coming in.

It's only when Taric stands to turn the lights on that Lux realizes they have only been lit by sunlight and his holiday strings the whole day. Suddenly they are sitting in dark room, and she blurts out, “it's getting late. Ezreal?“

He has to tear his eyes from Sona's narrow fingers, plucking at her strings. He still sounds distracted, but understands her meaning. “Right.”

Then she catches the mirrored expressions on Sona and Taric's faces. Like they have learned the look from each other. Eyebrows high, startled. Then exchanged, knowing looks.

Taric claps Ezreal on the shoulder like a proud father, and Lux feels her cheeks heating. It would be even more conspicuous to deny it. She feels both relief and alarm when all Ezreal does is cock his head to the side, looking confused.

“Have a good night,” Taric tells them, like he is in on a secret.

Lux is surprised to see Ezreal hug them both good-bye. She has seen boys hug before with just a loose arm thrown around the shoulder, bodies barely touching. Not Ezreal. He leans his whole body into Taric's arms, wrapped up with ease. His embrace with Sona is the same, long and deep, the both of them larger than him.

She wonders if he is normally more touchy-feely than she realized or if they know about his departure.

It must be the former. In the breezeways leading back to her unit, he tries to hold her hand. He does it
so naturally that she doesn't even question it until she tries to raise her hand to wave hello again to Malzahar when they pass each other.

The prophet's gaze flickers to the entwined hands she accidentally lifts together.

Lux rips their hands apart after he has passed, a reflexive motion that she immediately regrets.

Ezreal does not say anything until they are alone in her unit, door closed behind them. But then, just as she feared, he comments on it. Tentatively, but with no inflection of nerves, “we don't have to, like...”

Lux stares at him, eyes wide. Is he going to assure her they don't have to sleep together? Was his confusion at Taric's unit an act?

Ezreal shifts his weight. “Like. You know?”

She resists the urge to bury her face in her hands. He is too shy to say 'sex.' Lux opens her mouth to clarify for him, but he interrupts her.

“We don't have to date. During this.”

Lux blinks. “Pardon?”

Ezreal seems to be seeking a distraction from looking at her, and throws himself onto the regal sofa. He immediately sprawls out, taking up too much space for Lux to join him. “This trip is gonna be a long fucking trip, Lux. And I'm not just working on it because you're my girlfriend. This is a move against Noxus and Zaun – and intel for Piltover. Can't just let 'em do whatever they want. So... Regardless of our, er, relationship, you're stuck with me.”

“So, what, you want to break up?” Lux asks. There is no hurt in her voice, because she is not hurt.

He shrugs, staring up at the ceiling. “If it'll prevent a fall-out, later. If it'll make this trip easier.”

“This doesn't mean much to you,” she observes. Something in her gut is tight and she doesn't understand why. This doesn't mean much to her.

Ezreal does not turn his head, but gives her an unreadable sidelong look. As soon as he meets her gaze, his eyes dart away. He does not answer.

Their relationship is based on second-hand messages, published across city-state borders. Based on Lux's lies and a title Ezreal no longer holds. There is no reason to continue this ruse. She wants to hurt her parents? Disappearing for – who knows, months? Years? That should do the trick on its own.

He's right. It only complicates things. There is no such thing as a dignified break up, and if they have to have one on the road... Maintaining a lie forever, Lux could do in most cases. But not like this.

She feels out of place in her own unit. Everything around her is Demacia's finest, and all she can think about is that it will be thrown out, or burned up, or left here to be eaten by moths and covered in dust. Lux shifts her weight.

“You were,” Lux says, not sure what compels her, “sitting awfully close with Sona.”
There is a pause. Ezreal tilts his head back to look at her. “Are you being jealous right now?”

“No,” Lux says, certain she is not lying.

She does not love Ezreal. Not romantically. He is a very dear friend, one of the few she thinks is not a lie. They bicker, and he gets under her skin in a very real way. There are also times when they get along, when he is the one rolling his eyes at her but smiling when he thinks she can't see, and this too is real.

He is one of the only real things in her life. She wonders if she is subconsciously sabotaging her only reality, forcing it fake.

“Do you want to break up?” Ezreal asks her, direct and straight-forward. Of course he is.

Sometimes Lux worries that she lies so much that she's forgotten how to tell the truth. “No.”

With the same inflection: “Do you want to kiss me?”

She has to catch herself from answering like a quiz. A reflexive ‘yes’ as though she is being trained dies in her throat. “Pardon?”

Ezreal shrugs, and fails to keep his voice level as his cheeks heat up. “Well. I mean, we're dating. And we haven't. And it's been like months. Just sayin’.”

“We didn't see one another for three months, Ezreal. We didn't even directly correspond.”

He immediately mimics her, voice high with a sarcastic accent, “correspond.”

She crosses her arms, scowling. “I don't sound like that. Who's accent is that, even? Sheriff Caitlyn?”

He waves dismissively. Lux suspects Caitlyn's accent is the only one he knows how to imitate. She must be his image of pretentiousness. Or simply familiar in his mind, since she is his boss.

Lux wonders who approached who for this mission. Did he ask to help Demacia? Does Caitlyn know? Did she reach out to help, or was she asked? Did she volunteer enthusiastically? Was she pressured? Bribe? Is this just something to give Ezreal to do, for lack of anything else?

She approaches the couch, and it feels very familiar. Like when they were in her parent's home.

He is blushing again, looking up at her with furrowed eyebrows. He always seems so defensive with his affection, though he is the one that comes forward with it. He glares and huffs as if he is on the attack, or expecting to be attacked.

She examines her own shadow across his face as she kneels beside the sofa.

Ezreal reaches out, tentative. She lets his hand touch her cheek, and watches his expression. He looks like he's never touched a person before. He watches her face with the same interested look that he'd given Sona's hands.

He draws her in gently, so subtly that she hardly realizes it is his touch leading her and not her own will to lean down. She feels her cheeks heating the closer they get, and has to assure herself this is
She is surprised by how soft his lips are. His fingers creeping just behind her ear and awkwardly bumping at her headband are calloused, a rough contrast.

It is warm and nice and pleasantly mind-numbing. The same way she loses herself in the crystal-clear rhythm of military shoes on tile, she can lose herself in the slow part of his lips against hers. In his warm breath against her mouth as they separate.

At the very least, Lux thinks, it will be nice to have this.
Chapter 6

She feels like a child sneaking out past curfew as they leave the Institute grounds. Ezreal meanders along like he doesn't have a care in the world. Like he doesn't care if they are seen or not. Their first destination is Piltover. Ezreal sighs and complains that he just came from there, but she knows he is happy to return one last time. He must be – he looks in such high spirits, taking long strides to keep the lead.

Lux follows for a long while, not wanting to speak up against the experienced explorer. They travel for hours in a comfortable silence, almost like it's the most natural thing in the world. At first the terrain is easy to traverse, and it almost feels like their time on the fields.

She checks her compass. Pockets it and faithfully follows. Watches his back, takes in his confidence and tries to talk herself out of questioning him. Checks her compass again.

She has to raise her voice to call out to him. “Ezreal?” He glances over his shoulder, but doesn't stop walking. “Isn't the safest path through the mountains just north of the Institute?”

They have been heading north-west for hours. If she is right, they are only getting farther and farther from the pass.

“Yeah,” he answers, like he doesn't understand the question. She gives him a meaningful look. It still takes him a moment before the look of recognition flashes across his face. “Oh! Yeah. Yeah, that'd be the safest route. That route's bullshit, we're not taking that route.”

She tries not to sound exasperated, but she knows her pretenses are going to have to crumble during this journey. To an extent. “And why not?”

“Super boring,” Ezreal says, offhandedly.

“And you're taking us...?"

“Through the marshes. I know a pretty good path.”

“Why?”

This time he pauses, and turns to face her. He does not condescend, simply tells her, matter-of-fact: “With our relationship, if no one has updates on where you are, they'll guess Piltover. Which is true, but not really a threat for them to know once we're there. But we're a lot more vulnerable on the road, especially this close to Noxus territory. We're less likely to be tracked or ambushed through the howling marshes.”

Lux realizes, distantly, that he is taking this more seriously than she expected. She does not want to admit how lightly she assumed he had been taking this, and so after a moment of awkward hesitation she nods, and keeps further complaints to herself.

The marshes are miserable. Her traveling cloaks are a mess, and it's been just long enough since her last infiltration mission that she's annoyed by it. It is muggy and wet and her shoes are heavy with mud.
Despite it all, Ezreal treks along like it is nothing.

She is careful to take in every bit of her surroundings for her report. Landmarks and safe routes that Ezreal thoughtlessly leads her through. Watching him is like having a personal pointer to secrets of the land.

She can't focus on the sound of her footsteps in the mud and shallow water, and even the splashes are uneven.

But sometimes she catches the sound Ezreal's breathing, surprisingly labored. On closer inspection, this is not the only give that he is tired. His footsteps grow heavier, and he is in the habit of running his hands through his hair. She sees a bead of sweat on his neck.

It is nearly hours later when he finally speaks up, and she guiltily tears her eyes from the nape of his neck as if she's been caught. She hasn't; he doesn't turn around. As if they never stopped talking, he adds, "oh, and don't listen to the singing."

She nods, and does not question him. He is more annoying than anyone, but clearly more familiar. She is sure if it becomes relevant, she will understand.

Towards evening he detours off his own route to get them somewhere dry enough to set up camp for the night. By now she's picked up on his mannerisms enough not to worry about sharing a tent. Lux has finished setting up her own before Ezreal is half-way done with his. He is a frustrated mess when she wordlessly takes over for him, letting him stomp about to do something he's more proficient at.

He defends himself from her absent criticism, "I usually just sleep outside!"

"Don't you get sick?"

"Not often."

"But sometimes?"

"Everyone gets sick sometimes."

Lux congratulates herself on her patience.

Over their dinner he tells her about a terrible fever he'd gotten near Freljord. He recounts it lightly, explaining the vague hallucinations as he hid away in a cave near the base of the mountains. Shivering and sweating by a fire and hearing the storms outside at night. The feeling that he'd never get better, never be found.

She can picture it vividly, and it makes her shiver with discomfort. She does not want to hear this so soon after fearing for his life. Further, it is all too easy to picture Quinn in his position. Her journals are always good, but there was a certain paranoia to them, and Lux is sure it was justified.

"We're going to use tents," she informs him.

Ezreal just shrugs.

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She intends to let him rest, in the morning. She wakes up bright and early, packs up her own tent, and prepares to go. She briefly scouts the area, but finds nothing she didn't expect. The marshes are full of bones of previous rune wars. The area is unclaimed and unwanted, so they remain scattered about.

Skulls spring up from the ground like flowers, becoming more sparse the closer she gets to the river. There is fog and mist so thick that their camp disappears in a matter of yards. The whole world is grey and mud and moss. Fragmented bone, stained white under her feet. She can't place the sun to see what time it is through the thick vapor.

She hears singing. Baritone and wordless, the melody draws her further down the river. It feels nostalgic. It reminds her of the classical music played at all the parties she attended when she was young, reminds her of bouquets of flowers and shimmering chandeliers, before she was bitter to them.

The sound of her foot splashing into the river snaps her out of it. She doesn't hesitate to turn around and run back to their camp.

She drops down to climb into Ezreal's tent, making no effort to be quiet.

When she looks, he is sitting up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He blinks at her, eyes half-lidded and hair all sorts of mussed. She is startled to hear herself snicker at him uncontrollably.

He looks at her like he is trying and failing to recall who she is. After a moment he seems to manage, vague recognition flitting across his face, before he reaches out towards her.

“I heard singing,” she says quickly. His hand freezes half-way to her, then drops back to his side.

He does not seem bothered. His voice is lower than usual, heavy with sleep, but words still surprisingly concise. “Oh, okay. We should move on, then. Further north, away from the rivers.”

“That almost puts us in Freljord territory.”

“That's fine isn't it?” Ezreal asks, then immediately peels his shirt over his head. Lux looks away in a hurry, and listens to the sound of him getting dressed. She makes a face at the sound of his pants and belt, and wonders if he even knows what modesty is.

They pack up and leave in no hurry, but the route is decidedly changed. Lux feels the air get cooler and cooler as they travel on, until she is shivering and her skin feels dry. She does not complain. Ezreal does not fret for her.

Ezreal tells her they should be fine when they are only one day from the mountain-pass, but he is wrong.

The creature awaits them, lounging in the narrow pass as if the rocks are luxurious cushions. He is slimy and wet, like a frog or a fish. Not elegant and beautiful, like Nami, though he wears clothes as if he thinks he is. His eyes are wise and his humming is far too captivating to be normal. Lux knows better than to show her disgust at his form.

She recognizes something about him. The way he holds himself, the feel of the air around him. The way the magic of the land twists up around him in a gentle current. He is not of any faction. He is not mortal. He is old and he is magic.
“The river king,” Ezreal murmurs to her. The two of them stare him down, gazes unwavering.

This seems to amuse him. His voice is low and lovely, and he regards only Lux. “Dear princess, where are you going? Running from your life in the light?”

“I am no royalty,” Lux says, humble. She pretends not to know he is calling her a Lightshield.

“Just one marriage short,” the creature agrees.

Lux betrays herself; averts her eyes. She wishes she hadn't. All she catches is Ezreal staring at her, looking alarmed.

His voice is sing-song, too entertained by her troubles to be offended by poor manners. “Are you sure you're making a wise decision?”

She does not answer.

“Such a long way from home,” he continues on, patting his stomach. “I'm sure it's not too late for you to return. I can help you to become the young queen of Demacia.” Then a feigned look of realization crosses his face. He lowers his voice to an exaggerated whisper as his eyes dart back and forth conspiratorially. “Oh my. Dangerous to make claims to queendom this close to Freljord.”

Ezreal's silence makes her increasingly uncomfortable.

So does her own uncertainty. His offer is so tempting. She has only been gone a matter of days but in her mind the Laurent family is already laying claim to what should be hers. Possessive fire burns in her gut, and she wants to go home.

She avoids the subject. “Ashe has no competition.”

The river king's eyes sparkle as he laughs. “Just as she has no sister. But I suppose that's the way it goes – relationships must be sacrificed to take on such roles.”

Ezreal finally speaks up, snapping at him, “what have you sacrificed, to become a self-proclaimed king?”

This time Lux looks at him with alarm. He is the one to recognize this creature – he must know of his power. She can feel it in the air all around him. Can Ezreal not? Or does he simply have no sense of self preservation?

“So angry,” the creature comments, sounding ruffled for the first time. “I'm only here to offer my help, you know. Some wisdom. Some insight.”

“She doesn't need any help,” Ezreal practically growls. Lux is startled to hear him so angry. He always holds himself so above other people's problems, easily calling them petty and dismissing them. “She doesn't need to sacrifice anything, and she's not going to marry into royalty or whatever.”

“I can speak for myself, thank you, Ezreal,” she interrupts before he can continue. He shoots her a glare, but shuts his mouth.

“Lovers quarrel?” The river king asks. There is no sincerity in his tone. “My apologies. I wouldn't want to be the king to come between you.”
She has to grind out her answer, through irritation at being strung along by the both of them like a play-thing. A marionette, strung up by her family, strings tugged by everyone around her. “I appreciate the offer, but I'm going to decline. I follow my prince's orders, whether they pull or push me from home.”

“If that is your wish,” he concedes, voice soaked with disappointment. “A token of my kindness, some advice for the winged one. Stay far from the frost.”

Lux does not have time to respond, to ask if he means Quinn, before he leaves them. He does not need to step out of the way, he simply lets the ground swallow him up like the dirt is pure water. Then he is gone, nothing in his wake but the sound of the earth splashing unnaturally and the ringing in her ears.

She is hesitant to step over where he'd stood, but Ezreal storms past like it is nothing, footsteps heavyset with anger.

Ezreal keeps quiet as long as he can. When they finally speak, it is hours later, setting up camp in the cold of the mountain-pass. Lux imagines this is not because he is actually calmed, but because the necessity; he is terse with her, even as they sit by the fire.

She stares up at the stars in the quiet, filling her eyes with their brightness. She never realizes how much Demacian city lights dull the stars until she is out in the open like this. The Freljord skies must be beautiful. Piltover, she is sure, will be even worse than home. She knows the sky of Noxus. It is no different from home. She wonders what Zaun's sky is like.

She wonders what Icathia's sky is like. Now, and in the unknown past.

Lux shivers in the cold. There is an icy bite in the wind, coming down from the snowy mountain tops. Something up there is after Quinn. She does not think she really needs to warn her of this. Rather, there is finally some evidence to back up Quinn's constant unease in the area.

She scoots closer to the fire. Across from her, she is acutely aware of Ezreal, sitting with his knees pulled up like a defensive ball. Firelight tints the glow on his cheeks orange, and again she is mesmerized by the dancing flames overlaying his magic markings.

“Did you choose for those markings to be there?” Lux asks, breaking the silence. “You used to wear those red marks on purpose – do these replace them because you choose it?”

Ezreal stares at her, incredulous. His answer bursts from him, angry and heated. “That's all you've got to say right now?”

Lux's eyebrows furrow with her surprise. A genuinely incensed Ezreal is a rarity, and thus, wildly confusing to her. She does not know what the right answer is, so she remains silent as she tries to appraise him.

His eyes look her over like he is searching for something. He does not appear to find it, sighs, and relaxes back into his seat. He finally outstretches his legs, nudging at a twig near the fire with his shoe. “No, I didn't choose where they are. But it might be a chemical thing, like a reaction to the old markings and my skin oil or something. Could be drawn to areas that are often affected by other stuff, or places that blood rushes to like blushing... Or something.”

She murmurs, “fascinating. You think magic and science interact in such ways?”
He appears to relax into the conversation a bit, shoulders loosening. “I'm more into magic than tech, but from what I've seen, yeah. Jayce's talked to me about it a bit, but he gets really wordy, so.”

She gives him a gentle smile, encouraging. “So you don't really listen?”

He returns a resigned smile, but after a moment brightens more notably. Tapping at his cheek, he asks her, “wanna look?”

She is already at his side by the time she tells him, “I would love to!”

She leans in close, enthralled by the markings. They still shimmer and shift like the light tricks on the ocean. But these markings are from the magic of the desert sun. She cannot feel magic around them bending to him in any particular way. The magic he uses is all his own, perhaps amplified by the gauntlet, but not drawn from his surroundings.

Lux does not think much of it before she reaches out to touch, her hand cupping his cheek so her thumb can stroke over the marking. Even touching it, she feels no surge of magic. It just feels like his skin, surprisingly soft.

“I sometimes think there is something to the worship of the sun,” Lux tells him. She cannot tell if Ezreal's reddened cheeks are from the fire-light or not. “For multiple regions, so far apart, to come up with such similar ideology. The Solari, the old worshipers from Shurima...”

“Uh, maybe, I guess?” Ezreal offers. He does not sound even remotely like he agrees.

“Leona has the magic of the sun,” Lux reminds him. “Azir was deified, granted strength. The proof may be in their existence.”

Even this does not phase him. “Nah. People come up with their own explanations for weird stuff, but it's all just magic. Leona's people have magic inclinations like that. Could be the area they're from. Could be bloodline. But magic's magic. They would have the same magic whether they had their religion and those beliefs or not. Faith explains the magic that exists. Magic isn't made by the belief.”

She tries not to sound doubtful, “you think so? The same of Azir?”

“Well, yeah. Don't pretend magic always makes sense. It doesn't. It's weird and it does weird stuff, and sometimes there's not ever going to be an explanation for the weird stuff that happens. That's why it's different from tech. Sometimes the only explanation is 'this kind of magic does this weird thing.' Any expanded reasoning is just make-believe because people don't know how to accept things at face value.”

“I think it's more valuable to be able to analyze things.”

He cocks his head, leaning into her touch. For the first time, she realizes she has been sitting holding his cheek in her hand this whole time. It is somewhat strange to see him close his eyes, practically nuzzling into her hand.

His voice is, now that she is paying attention, much more relaxed than their usual banter gets him. She feels his jaw move in her hand as he speaks. “That's what I'm saying, though. There's a difference between analyzing and hypothesizing. You can witness and see, x conditions get y results. X magic makes y happen, or x area produces y magic. But when you try to go beyond that and say x magic is caused by a secret invisible god we pray to, that's when it's stupid.”
“But if those are observations of a pattern...” Lux protests, rapidly losing interest in Ezreal's manner of deciding himself an expert on any and all subjects.

Thankfully, he seems bored of it, too. His hand comes to rest over hers on his cheek, and he opens his eyes again. Crystal-clear, aqua blue, staring at her, unreadable.

She is startled that the way he kisses her is smooth. She has wondered how this will happen, run calculations and projections and estimations in her mind, like their relationship is a spell she cannot figure out how to cast. How she should look and when she should lean in.

Ezreal does not over think his actions. He leans in, pecks her light on the lips. He does not linger. He gently leans his forehead against hers for only a moment, an attempt at affection if she had to guess, then pulls back and stands to stretch.

She does not mind that he dropped their discussion literally mid-sentence, yet she is somehow disappointed to see him opening his tent.

“We can get to Piltover by tomorrow evening, if we get up early,” he says. She can't fault him for wanting to rush to his final visit home. He glances at her over his shoulder. “Got the fire?”

“Yes.” Her voice does not feel like her own. She is tempted to ask him to stay up with her. This is silly. They are on no shortage of time together.

She knows she should rest too, but she finds herself staying up, watching the night sky until the fire goes out naturally.
Chapter 7

Even having stayed up half the night, Lux still wakes long before Ezreal. This time she does not allow him to sleep in, still on edge from their encounter with the river king. His hair is messier by the day – he doesn't seem to bother brushing it on the road.

She doesn't comment on it, and in return he does not call her out for her perpetual yawning.

Lux flips a hood over her head before they enter the city, toying with the shadows cast over her face only lightly. Enough that she wouldn't be recognized at a glance. There isn't as much need to hide herself, yet, but she still doesn't want more attention than necessary.

Piltover's skies are dustier than she remembers, but she is relieved that it does not reflect the horrible warzone she envisions after reading about the bombings. There are fewer people in the streets than usual, and though she still sees smiles and hears small-talk all around her, there is an under-current of discomfort.

There are not even journalists clamoring over Ezreal. She is sure there are still some in town, there must be. Trying to make their living, or those with genuine journalistic integrity, reporting on the wreckage in the League of Legend's wake. In Jinx's wake. But they are in danger, as much as any citizen, and many have fled.

Of course, the damage is not everywhere. The streets they visit feel tidy and powerful, but Lux feels on edge knowing that Jinx's target locations are never meaningful. This illusion of safety is pure luck.

Ezreal, of course, seems completely at ease.

“A different hotel than the one you usually stay at, right?” He asks.

She is no longer surprised that he knows details of their stops and checkpoints. She just nods, and allows him to lead the way. It isn't as nice as the ones the military usually pays for on her delivery missions, but still nicer than what she expects to come. Nicer than sleeping in that tent.

There is a small veranda, where Valor sits perched on the railing as if he knew all along exactly which room they'd be assigned. Maybe he did.

Lux slides the glass door closed behind her as she steps outside.

“Is Quinn nearby?” She asks Valor. She is never sure if Quinn is pretending to understand the bird just to mess with the people around her, or if she is sincere, but she is sure that Valor understands her.

The bird's feathers ruffle and soothe themselves, beak inclining almost shyly. If that means something, Lux has no idea what it is.

“We'll have to overcome our awkward interactions,” she muses to the bird, “seeing as how you'll be my only contact with home.” Valor nudges himself closer, as if in comfort, and Lux laughs. “Only joking.”

She feels vaguely like a crazy person.
“Here,” Lux says, and helps slip the documents from the Institute into a small pouch around Valor. She feels ridiculous explaining, but somehow even more so to pass off such important files without a word. “These are the documents for Demacian ex-champions, save for my own. Are you in a hurry? I haven't written my report, yet.”

Valor flies up, a bit weighted by the package. He does a small loop in the air before coming back down to the exact spot he'd been awaiting them. He pecks the wood, two short syllables. Right here. The next leap into the air is harsh and sudden, purposeful until he drops a feather for her.

She thinks she understands, but is feeling increasingly insane. “When will you return?”

Valor does not answer before flying away.

Lux turns around and lets herself back into the room. She is immediately faced with Ezreal, sitting on one of the beds and struggling to hold back his snickering. She valiantly pretends not to notice the amusement in his eyes as he watches her.

“Have a good talk?” Ezreal asks. After a beat, in case she didn't follow, “with the bird.”

Lux rolls her eyes at him instead of responding. She retrieves her writing supplies and takes a seat at the table. So far they haven’t passed any of the military bases or checkpoints to be checking on. Still, it's worth telling Jarvan about the river king, though not of the exact dreams he tried to lure her with, and about the path they’ve taken to get here. About how the city looks, so far.

She writes a second letter to Quinn. She must be near. Lux does not doubt Valor could fly the distance on his own, but she doubts that Quinn would allow it. She writes the river king’s warning of Freljord. Advises her to stay away to stay safe.

She considers writing about how strange it feels to travel with Ezreal. Spending days and nights with him one after another makes her see the vast difference between that and spending a couple hours of a day together. She could even tell Jarvan about their fake relationship. Maybe the news would reach Jarvan. It would be for her own protection, after all, to publicly be kept further from the Lightshield family, and isn't that what this mission is all about? This ruse could be a military ruse, not a personal one.

She doesn't.

They grab lunch at a place Ezreal guides her to, hidden away further from the hotel than Lux would have opted to walk, had she known the distance in advance. Even so, It's nice to eat something prepared instead of rations for the road. Something warm, that smells nice.

It's nice to hear other people's small talk, a white-noise for the background as Ezreal rambles on and on over his own meal.

His to-do list for Piltover is surprisingly short. There is the obvious visit to Caitlyn, then a stop at his home. (On the other side of town, he explains, so they should really just swing by as they’re leaving town.) There is not much for them to check in on, here. Caitlyn will tell them anything they need to know, give them any documents. Piltover and Demacia do not have bad blood between them, but equally, it's just as Lux suspected. Piltover is a bit too preoccupied to help with their endless wars.

When they return to the hotel, Ezreal claims one bed as his own, immediately kicking off his shoes,
tossing his jacket on the floor, and immersing himself in a book. Lux is surprised, sometimes, by how much he reads. Given that he complains constantly about how boring it is and always waxes poetic about living it over studying, it's strange.

He lays on his stomach, arms crossed under his chin with the book in front of him. Lux observes the jagged cut of his shoulder-blades, his loose T-shirt heavy beneath them. He is tense, and she catches his eyes flit in her direction as she picks his jacket off of the floor.

She folds it and sets it by his travel bag, and wonders if he is only making himself busy to keep from bothering her.

If so, it works well. She reads and re-reads her letters to Quinn, rewords them and reworks them, well into the evening.

Before she realizes it, she is sitting in the darkened room. She had been lit only by the sunlight through the glass doors to the veranda. She tries to be quiet, setting away her things, Ezreal's breathing from the other bed quiet and even.

She pauses, standing between their beds. Her eyes adjust to the dark slowly. He does not look like he's moved an inch the whole time. His book is certainly opened to a further page, but his head is resting on his arms.

Lux wonders how long until they share a bed. It is bound to happen eventually. She wonders how long until they kiss more regularly. Until she is the one to kiss him. She thinks of the gentle way his fingers guided her towards him, soft on her cheek.

How long until he is not walking on egg shells to keep her mood soothed.

When she lays in her own bed, she turns her head and watches him for a shamefully long time, until her neck begins to ache.

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She wakes to the sound of pebbles against a window. Or so she thinks, until she wakes up and sees Valor, pecking at the door. He stops the moment Lux stands from her bed, and perches on the railing once more. The sun rises behind him, a slow ray of light barely glancing over the buildings.

Ezreal manages to sleep through it. Unsurprising, now that she knows he's in the habit of sleeping outside and sleeping past the early morning.

She passes her letter to Quinn and the report, two separate, clearly signed envelopes.

Lux does not miss the direction that Valor departs in. It is not far from the direction they came from themselves. Towards the north. Too close to Freljord, she thinks. Far from it, but close enough to make her apprehensive.

The next couple of days pass in a painful idle blur. Nothing much happens one way or the other. Lux hides her face, but Ezreal speaks with a couple of journalists as Lux ducks into nearby shops and back-alleys as if they were not together.

They ask about the disbandment of the League of Legends and what this means for citizens. If there will be another rune-war. For once Ezreal's answers are serious, if not presented far-too casually for
what they are.

He has no idea what is to come, he tells them. No one knows, really. But the League has shed light on far too much for the world to return to exactly what it was before. Whether that is good or bad is unknown.

“I know there's a lot of chaos right now,” Lux hears him say, tone no-different from a moment ago when he had told them he is disinterested in the political wreckage. “But the sheriff will catch Jinx, soon.”

So he is trying to comfort his people.

They are already on their way to pay a visit to the sheriff when they bump into Vi. Rather, she comes running like a bat out of hell, driven with the sole life mission of putting Ezreal in a headlock and ruffling his hair even further.

Lux is so startled that she drops her illusion. It was only a subtle refracting of the light around her cheeks and eyes, but it's enough that Vi stop, mid-noogie, to look at her in recognition. She does not let go of Ezreal, even as she greets her.

“Yo, Crownguard kiddo. Out on a date?”

“Yeah,” Ezreal says, sarcastically, “you can tell by the way she's all dressed up for an outing. The Traveling Warzone Tourist look is really in right now.”

“Ezreal,” Lux scolds.

He seems to speak Vi's language, though. At his words she gives Lux another once-over, watching the light illusions shimmer back into place. She sounds genuinely apologetic, and lets go of Ezreal to rub at the back of her neck. “My bad. I won't call ya out anymore.”

Ezreal choking, exaggerating his deep breaths. “Thank you. Now take us to visit Caitlyn.”

Vi snickers. “Lazy asshole,” she says fondly, then jerks her thumb over her shoulder. “Bike's this way, I'll give you a lift.”

Her motorcycle is just around the corner. Lux and Ezreal are both more interested in magic than hextech, but she gets the feeling it's a masterpiece even with her limited knowledge. She expects Vi to treat it like trash, but there is a certain way her eyes light up when she presents it to them.

She also coos, “my baaaby,” before climbing onto the seat. It seems to be a particularly big bike, bigger than the ones Lux usually sees. Perhaps because it's designed for her to be able to bring prisoners back with her. Vi is unconcerned by the space that is clearly only meant for one person. “I'm sure the two of you can squish on back. You're all tiny.”

Ezreal shows no concern either, easily climbing on behind Vi like it is practiced. Lux stares, unsure.

“I'm a good driver!” Vi assures her.

Ezreal's face is out of Vi's view, as he shakes his head rapidly at Lux, wide-eyed. Yet he is at her back without hesitation.
There is really no way around it. She climbs on behind Ezreal. She feels him scoot forward as much as he can. When her legs are at the sides of the cycle, Ezreal's hand rests on her thigh, nudging her to scoot closer. It feels strange to push her body flush against his back. She can feel her chest pressing uncomfortably. She wonders if he is aware of it. His eyes are resolutely watching Vi's hands on the grips.

The ride to the office is terrifying. Vi is the exact type of driver she must arrest for reckless driving on a regular basis. Lux finds her arms gripping tight around Ezreal's waist, much tighter than she planned. She gets the impression Vi is doing it on purpose when she winks over her shoulder before making a sharp turn, nearly hitting someone in the process.

Lux is exhausted when they get there, and her first steps off of the bike feel shaky.

The visit with Caitlyn is strange. Lux is used to business visits, where the two of them make polite small talk, exchange written documents, and say their farewells.

It is another beast entirely to see her smile so genuine, even as Ezreal throws himself down on the couch, knocking over a couple of books that were precariously balanced on the arm-rest as he does. Vi follows after him, nudging him up at the shoulders like a rag doll to sit down beside him. He falls back, leaning up against her shoulder and sprawling out even further.

“I brought you some kids, Cupcake. Congrats on being a mom.” Vi drawls. Then, under her breath, nudging Ezreal in the spine, “dude, make room for your girlfriend.” Yet she makes no move to scoot over, herself, and Ezreal does not either. Lux remains standing, awkward by the couch.

Caitlyn's smile remains on her face, even as she turns her head down, back to her paperwork. Lux wonders how often she lets herself relax from work, but these must be especially hectic times, with Jinx on the loose.

“Did I raise you well, Ezreal?” Caitlyn asks, playing along.

Lux has a lot of questions about Ezreal's childhood and family, but does not ask.

The boy just snickers. “Nope.”

“I hope you're at least treating Luxanna well,” Caitlyn says, more earnestly. Lux notices that she is not calling her by her last name anymore. Maybe this is as close to a family as Ezreal has. Maybe she is being welcomed into it. Lux winces at the idea. She had not considered what the fallout will be from Ezreal's companions. Break ups are messy. Messier still when there is no way to sever, to truly be rid of one another completely.

Ezreal's cheeks go red, and he doesn't answer. He just stretches out his legs, pushing his back harder into Vi until she is pressed up against the arm-rest, laughing at him and shoving back.

“I have two children,” Caitlyn explains to Lux, gesturing to the two of them.

“Maybe three,” Ezreal comments, almost off-handedly, but he is met with a tense silence. The air is different, and Vi shoves him harder, suddenly not laughing.

“We don't know that,” Caitlyn says, quiet. She sets down her pen, slow and deliberate, then crosses the room to set a hand on Vi's shoulder. “There's a lot we don't know. And it doesn't matter.”
“Like hell,” Vi mutters, but gives the impression of a dog that is all bark and no bite, instantly settling down at Caitlyn's touch.

Lux shifts her weight, uncomfortably out of the loop.

Caitlyn's fingers brush light over Vi's neck, strangely intimate. Lux feels like she is intruding, until the sheriff looks over to meet her eyes. “Do you think someone's past determines who they are?”

“Yes,” Lux answers, instinctively. Her mind floods with lectures and training, shouting sergeants and gentle speeches all the same. Her world has always been black and white. Demacia is the light and Noxus is the dark – nothing can change this. And if nothing can change this, nothing can change at all.

She realizes this was not the right answer when Vi's face contorts, and beside her, Ezreal buries his face in his hands. She hopes he is not going to want to have an argument about this later. It sounds more tiring than it is worth, and she doesn't understand his apparent exasperation when he agrees that Noxians are the worst.

Caitlyn's expression is hard to read, her eyebrows furrowed like she is angry, but her gaze lacking any malice. She almost looks sympathetic.

“Yes, well,” Caitlyn says airily, more dismissive than offended. It has the opposite effect on Lux. “I should have expected that answer.”

“I think people can change,” Ezreal says, apparently doing his best to mimic Caitlyn's casual tone. Probably to hide that he is saying something he considers tremendously embarrassing or unnecessary or both. His elbow rests further on Vi's lap, it seems another touch just to calm her. “I mean, Riven's not the worst, and she was Noxian.”

“She is still Noxian,” Lux points out, irritated at being so thoroughly outnumbered. She is not used to this. She wants to go home, to where she is a hero that everyone agrees with. Where people are not so caught up in humanizing an enemy. “Straying doesn't change where she came from, and further, I've noticed many are quick to forget the reason she defected in the first place.”

“I'm well aware,” Caitlyn interjects, terse. Lux does not argue, because that is a fair point. Of course Piltover is aware of Zauhn's actions.

After a silence, Lux continues. “She still holds the values that Noxus represents. Her complaint is not their evil, but that they are assisted in their victories. The same results if achieved by Noxian hands alone would sit well with her.”

Ezreal murmurs, “dunno about that.”

“I can assure you, I've spoken with her on the matter at length,” Lux snipes, crossing her arms over her chest. She is getting far too worked up, she knows.

He is sarcastic, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, I'm sure you listened real good.”

“Excuse me,” she begins, but is immediately interrupted.

Vi breaks her uncharacteristic silence, her hands clasped loose in her lap, still leaning her neck towards Caitlyn's touch. “Shut up. All of you. If you give me a headache, I'll spread the pain
Caitlyn seems to accept the threat with ease, and crosses the room back to her desk to lean against it. She sounds sincere enough, and nods to both Vi and then Lux. There is a brief silence, then, “apologies.”

Lux returns it with practiced ease. The slight hesitation to make it seem more earnest. “The same. I was out of line.”

“I'm sure you've read Vi's files,” Caitlyn ventures, continuing the subject carefully.

Lux tries to remember what was publicized by the Institute and journalists. It is hard to separate her official biography from the hidden files she has seen. If the Institute was not going to play fair, there was no reason for Demacia to. And if she was under orders to snoop through hidden archives, there was no reason to stop at only the files the military took interest in. Her response comes out noticeably delayed, voice dragging out, “Yes...”

The arch of Caitlyn's eyebrow is elegant, a silent call out. Vi's files. All of her files.

She does not know her past, and that is no secret.

But there are paper-trails, finger-prints, tips and hints and whispers to be heard. Something connects her to Jinx, something that someone, somewhere must know. Someone in the institute knew, but they were smart. She wonders how high up. She wonders how many menial workers in the Institute are scattered loose in the world, knowing so much more than they ever should.

“The truth's gotta be out there,” Vi grumbles. “Everything's gotta be somewhere.”

“Everything is probably in Zaun,” Ezreal offers, sounding noncommittal. Lux hopes he is not offering for Vi to join them. Blending in isn't as imperative this early, and in Piltover of all places. Zaun, she is not so sure. And Vi will do nothing if not stand out.

She doesn't seem to take it as an invitation. She just shrugs, like she doesn't care about it all, though the expression on her face reads otherwise. She still seems troubled, eyes shadowed, gaze low.

“Is that where you're headed next?” Caitlyn asks, her tone suddenly rather maternal. She changes the subject smoothly, regarding Ezreal. “I hope you'll be safe.”

Ezreal only seems annoyed by the worry, waving her off dismissively.

From there they make conversation that is much easier for Lux to follow along with. She does not make any further social faux pas, but Vi's expression hardly loosens. Even as they are leaving, her grin is shallow.

***

According to her initial dossier, they should be leaving Piltover, shortly. Yet when they have their things packed up, bags over their shoulders, approaching Ezreal's home for just a quick stop, they know they will make a change.

Valor is waiting at his window.
He spots them approaching, and as they come closer, swoops around to perch on Lux's shoulder. The small letter around his ankle with an unmistakable signature of Quinn's. “Stay near. Please.”

It is not an official military order. It is not a command, and Lux knows the please is personal. She has every right to continue on with her mission, to escape this city that could be bombed to bits at any moment.

Ezreal is too close, reading over her shoulder. She does not flinch away, and he does not take notice. He simply shrugs and says, “I thought so,” before leading the way into his home.

It's bigger than Lux expected. Not a mansion by any means, much, much smaller than the noble houses she's used to back home. But when she pictures Ezreal's home she imagines a cozy place, full of books and trinkets, over-stuffed to the brim. She imagines a small cottage, falling apart, as musty and old as the ruins he gathers from.

She isn't wrong about the artifacts, but their surroundings are nice. Not superfluous or decorative, simply spacious. If she had to guess, she would say this home was picked by someone else, without Ezreal in mind. Perhaps it is where his parents lived, and he simply never cared to leave. Then where are they, she wonders?

Or is this his home, chosen solely for location with no regard for design? Does he have further tastes and preferences she doesn't know about that this place suits?

Valor sticks with Lux, seeming to take in the house with equal interest.

It is dusty, but not as messy as expected. Shelves are lined, but with careful balance and organization. Everything that does not serve a purpose, everything on display, is set aside and out of the way. It is almost aesthetically pleasing. Almost.

There are not dishes in his sink, or anywhere. Cupboards are left open with reckless abandon, yet nothing is inside them. There are jeans on the floor, looking like they were taken off and tossed aside moments after coming in front door. There is practically a trail of discarded clothes, shirt after belt after pants after shoes from the front door down a hall to a bedroom.

The hallway walls are embedded bookshelves, over-stuffed. Like his clothes, he appears to be in a habit of setting down a book wherever he is when he stops reading it and never retrieving it.

“Sooo,” Ezreal begins, kicking some clothes into a pile, out of the way of a door. “I guess we're staying here since our reservation at the hotel is up.”

“That sounds best,” Lux agrees. She does not thank him for allowing her to linger for Quinn's sake, when she knows it has nothing to do with him. “I'll set my things away. And the guest room is...?”

Ezreal cocks his head to the side. “What?”

Lux rethinks her mental-map of the house she's just toured. Front door straight to a hall. Living room to the left. Bathroom, kitchen, dining room. The bookshelved hallway to the right. Bedroom. Office. Second bathroom, empty room – full of nothing but boxes.

“Oh,” Lux says.
Ezreal stares a moment longer before catching on. His whole face suddenly reddens, expression contorting. “I can, er,” he stammers, and turns around, suddenly a whole lot more invested in kicking around his dirty laundry. “I'll sleep on the couch.”

“Sure.”

She ends up setting her bag in the living room. Valor sticks by her a bit longer, but when he becomes antsy, Lux takes him out the front door. He lingers in the air, awaiting final instructions, and Lux almost sighs with relief. (She is taking permissions from a bird, she tells herself, distantly amused.)

“If you could get more information on what's going on in Freljord. I need to be educated to be of any use. And – I want to know what Quinn knows. I'm worried about her, in this.”

Valor circles until she finishes, and then he is gone.

She comes back inside in time to see Ezreal with an armful of laundry, apparently from the office, being taken to his bedroom. He looks at her like he's been caught red-handed, but isn't sure at what.

“You don't have to tidy up for me,” Lux assures him, feeling endeared. “Please make yourself at home. It is your home, after all.”

“I wasn't,” he denies, still carrying the evidence to the contrary.

When he is finished, he shows her around his collection. Tells her where he got things and why he kept them. Where their 'siblings' he calls them remain – museums and collector's archives. Some were even donated to the institute. Lux wonders what has become of such items. Who has them, now. The only artifacts the institute took interest in were those with power. Someone must have them, still. This is dangerous.

She can feel magic emanating off of some things, where others feel neutral. Some are even like a void, as if her own magic is weakened just by looking at them. She is amazed his house does not make her uneasy with its disarray of magic auras all mingling together.

But there is something cozy about the dust in the sunlight, and the way the hall feels like a too-small library. The wide-open door to the room full of boxes makes her think of Garen's room when he packed up his things to leave for the military. She had felt so abandoned, but in a room like this in Ezreal's home she only sees possibilities, vast and comforting in their openness.

In the evening, Ezreal scours his kitchen from top to bottom for anything to eat.

“I don't really keep food here,” he tells her, as she watches his back. “I mean, I'm gone so much that it'd mostly just go bad. And then when I'm here I don't really like cooking.”

“I'd offer to do the cooking for the night, but there's nothing to cook.”

Ezreal huffs, and snaps “my bad,” but still grins over his shoulder when she laughs.

He winds up going on a dinner run for them both.

Lux snoops while he is out. She does not think he is observant enough to notice if she leaves anything out of place, yet she is still careful to put things exactly as they were. She tip-toes over his new piles of laundry and slides hangers in his closet precisely back in place. She is mildly
disappointed that there is nothing of interest, hidden away in his home.

The worst she finds is a small stash of trashy romance novels shoved under his bed. At first she thinks he is secretly more romantic than she had thought. Then she flips through one of them, finds a raunchy sex scene only ten pages in, and changes her mind.

She is sitting at the foot of his bed, still reading it when he comes home. She hears the front door and knows she has time to hide it, but does not. She simply looks up to meet his eyes when he stands in the doorway. She watches them scan from her to the books beside her, his slightly lifted bedding, and then the book in her hands.

He tells her, “that one's not as good as that other,” completely nonplussed, then asks, “stir-fry okay?”

She manages to hide her disappointment that he was not more flustered. It isn't difficult, when their conversation veers far, far from the subject. The two of them sit beside each other at his dining room table, staring at a pair of empty chairs across. Four seats. She wonders about his family, but doesn't ask.

“I never trusted her,” Ezreal mutters gravely into his broccoli. “That witch.”

“Her aura was certainly... Off. Different from what she claimed.”

Ezreal only shrugs. “I didn't pay much attention to that. I'm not so great with auras or whatever. Reading magic’s hard.” Lux raises an eyebrow at him, and he hurries to continue, “but anyway... I didn't think much of it at first, but there's no reason someone who's sworn loyalty to Ashe would need to join the League for their own independent faction. Sejuani opposed her, so okay, it's understandable why she would seek the recognition and outlet for combat, but... Lissandra had sworn her tribe to the Avarosan. Then, what, a year later decided to go independent?”

Lux nods, feeling rather solemn now. “She's old, Ezreal. Her magic is very, very old. I could feel it.”

“Avarosans are stronger, I'm sure. What with Tryndamere's people,” Ezreal offers, but seems distracted. He begins, “Like...” but trails off into silence for so long that Lux figures he is not going to begin again.

Lux considers. It is sometimes hard to remember the politics of other areas, from before the League. Not only because it has been so big, such a change, but because back then they did not matter. They hardly existed. They were simply bullet-point lists to prove Noxian evil. Demacia had been all that mattered, all that existed to Lux.

Not anymore.

And now the game's changed. Everything is different, finally put back in motion after years on pause, now under new leadership and new rules.

“Do you think Lissandra might be siding with the Noxian invasion?” Lux asks. “I don't think she'd have any reason to side with Noxus specifically, but perhaps she would let them weaken Avarosa so that she could claim leadership?”

Ezreal shakes his head. “I don't think that's it. It's a good theory, but Noxus hasn't made much movement in that direction.” At her curious look he explains, “We're close by and have a lot of surveillance tech. Caitlyn knows things.”
“Is that so?” Lux frowns. There is no reason she can think of that they wouldn't return to Freljord. Perhaps they have simply abandoned that mission. That doesn't sit right. “It may only be a matter of time.”

“That's true. I think their military is probably floundering the same as any other with this disbandment. Or that Swain may have other plans, seeing as how he wasn't in control when those missions began. But my main point was that if there's conflict in Freljord now, we can rule out Noxus as a motivator.”

They talk politics long into the night, working themselves in circles around the unsolved mysteries of the ice and snow. The problem is that neither of them are terribly well-versed in Freljord politics or history one way or another.

Eventually they have to part for sleep. Ezreal starts stripping in the middle of the living room, and so Lux excuses herself in a hurry to his bedroom, discreetly peeking between her fingers as she passes by.

The smell of his bed is strange. Dusty and like perhaps he needs to wash his bedding more often. Less lived in than the hotel, but more personal.

She reads a bit of the book he had nodded to as 'better' than the first one she picked up. The writing is far too light-hearted for her tastes, without much prose or the lovely imagery that all the novels her mother kept around her home were filled with. Still, she can appreciate that there is a sincerity to it, and to the banter between the characters.

Ezreal's favorite novel is a story of a self-proclaimed journalist's torrid love affair with a married, world-famous violinist twice his age. Lux suspects that he would not have said a word to Lux about this book had he drawn the parallels for himself. Yet it is hard to believe something so overt would fly over his head.

This book is similar to the other. It isn't long before it gets to a rather crude sex scene. But she wonders if it is just to make sales - there are more, further in, much more passionate and genuine. Less fetishistic and more earnest to these characters.

It is difficult to read a romance novel without picturing her own situation. The violinist hosts such familiar sounding galas and balls.

She thinks of the last ball she went to, faithfully at Jarvan's side as his escort and his guardian all at once. Along with all the other Demacians, one step behind. But she was closer, and it was no accident. She was more important to their prince than her brother.

She longs to hold his arm again and follow his lead. To look up past his broad shoulders and be at home instead of in this bed alone. And it is so frustrating, because Ezreal is her friend, her closest friend. If they weren't dating, she might confide in him.

But because he is her boyfriend, she can never talk of such things.

Lux has never thought about her prince romantically. Even when it was no question that she would marry him, even when she took her mother's vintage bridal magazines from the shelves and spread them out in front of her, taking in the dresses and jewelry and venues with awe and excitement.
Marriage was still an abstract concept, far removed from romance. Much like dating Ezreal has nothing to do with love.

She falls asleep dreaming of Jarvan, wondering what he thinks of her. Remembering his kiss on her forehead. And, with worry, Quinn's hands holding hers.

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She wakes up first, early enough to get in a nice shower, dry herself, get dressed, and still find Ezreal asleep on the couch. He sleeps on his back, neck uncomfortably propped against the arm-rest and his eyebrows furrowed like even asleep, he knows it. Silly, for someone who sleeps outside so frequently to be bothered by a cushioned sofa.

She isn't sure what to do with herself, and so she sits on the floor, back up against the sofa, and delves back into the book.

She is thoroughly invested in the book when she finally feels Ezreal shift behind her. She awaits a greeting, and is startled when instead his arms come to drape around her. His embrace from behind is loose, and he nuzzles his face into the nape of her neck, yawning. She feels his eyelashes flutter against her shoulder as he droops further down, as if too tired to even keep himself at her neck.

She cranes her head to see what she can, only spotting his bare shoulders.

"Mrng," says Ezreal.

A quiet laugh bubbles from Lux, almost startling herself. It catches in her throat when Ezreal presses an idle kiss to the side of her neck. Then another, a butterfly-light trail to behind her ear.

Lux feels frozen with uncertainty, but shivers at the sensation. It is overwhelming. Her mind, which can remain calm and focused on a battlefield, short-circuits at the slightest physical affection. She is unused to this kind of touch.

Ezreal must feel the quiver of her shoulders. He chuckles, low and too close to her ear.

Lux doesn't like how weak it makes her body feel, the way she can feel her face burning up. The passages from the book are all too fresh in her mind; it falls to the floor as she abruptly stands up.

Silence stretches as she stares at the wall.

He sounds slightly more lucid when he finally offers, “uh... My bad?”

She has to grind out honesty, pulling the words out like she is pulling teeth. She keeps her back to him. “I'm just – not used to it.”

He is ruffling his bed-head messy hair when she does turn to look at him, looking somewhere between embarrassed and sulky. He sits up, unconcerned with the blanket dropping around his waist.

Ezreal is far less muscular than what she expects of men. He is shorter than her, lanky, dresses poorly, and has sloppy manners.

And so it is baffling that her eyes are drawn to his chest, to the dip of his hip bone into his jeans. That a part of her wants to feel his arms resting around her as she reads. Normalcy is the luxury she cannot
afford.

Ezreal stands up to stretch. He picks up his shirt from yesterday, about to pull it over his head until he sees Lux's disgusted look. He sets it down and picks up a different one, still off of the floor. “I guess that's not surprising.”

She does her best not to scowl. “What does that mean?”

“You're super uptight.” Ezreal tells her, gravely. “I know this comes as a shock to you, but it's true.”

Her attraction to him was fleeting, she thinks dryly. “Excuse me if I've been too busy with being a high ranking soldier to fool around with boys.”

Ezreal's face contorts. “I--” he begins sounding defensive as if she has accused him of something. She must look confused, because he shuts his mouth again.

She doesn't want to risk him opening it again. “Furthermore, even if I were not busy carrying the weight of my kingdom both before and during the League, I still wouldn't have the luxury of such relationships.”

He tries to interrupt, but by now she has worked herself angry. He should already know this – it was not a secret. Taric learned of Demacian matters just to keep up conversation with Sona. What does Ezreal know about her? Why does he think he likes her when he knows nothing? Does he even understand what she has passed up to be in this relationship with him? Does he actually think she loves him?

“Do you think the prince would marry a girl who wasn't...” She struggles for words, and decides to end that sentence there. “Do you think I have ever had a choice in how I live, spending my entire life preparing for my one potential future?”

Ezreal blinks at her, eyes large and owlish. He does not say anything at all. “What?”

“Nevermind!” Lux says severely. Of course he doesn't know. Of course he does not know the weight of this.

He tries, “I thought you were... Never mind. It's too early for this. I said my bad, and I was just joking.”

It's a poor apology, but Lux accepts it with silence just to end the argument. He should not have commented on something he is so clueless about. A rude comment is not any less rude just because it is a joke.

This time she is the one to volunteer to feed them, mostly as an excuse to briefly flee Ezreal's presence.

She seethes her whole way to the cafe. She passes food carts and sandwich shops, knowing that she is not ready to turn around yet, and winds up at a small place run by an old married couple. She eats there at a small table by the window, and stays for far too long just watching people walk by.

She leaves less for concern over making Ezreal wait and more out of embarrassment for how many times the old couple has come by to give her more water and make sure she's alright. They bring her
Ezreal's order to-go, and she begins her walk back.

Valor joins her half-way there. She is beginning to grow accustomed to this, and allows the bird to perch on her shoulder.

He has a note for her.

*Freljord. South East Avarosan checkpoint. Alone.*

It is unmistakably Quinn's handwriting. Despite the shortness of the message, the letters are not scrawled with urgency, nor does it demand it.

She still vows to head out first thing in the morning.

Quinn is getting closer and closer to danger. Even after Lux's warning, the warning from the river king.

They are not close. Not really. But she would like for them to be. Even if that weren't the case, Quinn is valuable to Demacia, incomparably useful and competent despite her brash attitude. Lux wants to help her however she can.

Just the thought of the cold helps cool her head. She does not get a chance to give Valor a return message before the bird takes flight.

When she gets back to Ezreal's home, he is hunched over the table with a map spread out in front of him. From what she sees of the markings he's made on it, it's nothing to do with their mission. She comes to set down his food beside him.

At first she thinks he is pretending not to notice her, but she remembers catching him reading in the Institute halls. He is easily absorbed in his work, tuning out the world around him.

She touches his back gingerly, feeling him startle before looking up at her.

“Hey,” Lux says, offering a hesitant smile.

Ezreal takes a moment to reply; she is worried he is still upset until he returns, “hey.” He sounds gruff at first, but seems to catch himself, and offers a crooked smile.

“I apologize for lashing out at you.”

“Was my bad,” he says, though he doesn't sound like he believes it. This is fine, Lux thinks, because her apology is not entirely sincere either.

Quinn's message said to come alone. Lux does not know how long the journey alone will take, let alone how long she will be there.

She shifts her weight. “Is the couch... Uncomfortable?”

Ezreal seems confused by the change in subject. “I guess? I'm pretty used to sleeping outside.”

“Would you rather sleep in your bed?”
He counters, “would you rather sleep on the couch?”

Lux stares at him meaningfully. When he only stares back, expression blank, she explains, “I'm asking if you'd like to share the bed.”

“Oh,” says Ezreal. He looks to consider it a moment, then returns to his map. “Sure. Yeah.”

Lux boggles at when he is flustered and when he is not. But she is becoming used to underwhelming reactions from him, and simply nods before wandering off to make herself busy.

The most she gets from him is pink ears when he starts getting changed right in front of her, and she knows it more that they are sharing a bed and less that he is half naked. She should change in front of him. She could be indifferent to it.

She changes into her bed-clothes in the bathroom. Ezreal favors the left side of the bed, closer to the window, and when she comes into the room he is drawing invisible points in the air with his fingers, muttering to himself. Still something to do with his map, she's sure. She climbs in beside him, honestly a bit relieved to be on the side of the bed that isn't pushed against the wall. This is lucky – she has no intention of sleeping as long as him.

It's not as uncomfortable as she expects. The bed is spacious enough, and it's almost relaxing. Like their conversations at the table or in the living room, they murmur about his maps and what he knows of Freljord and Zaun. She tries to be subtle, weaving her way through the conversations to get what she wants. The safest path to the South East checkpoint.

He motions in the air again, apparently something he does without realizing. “The eastern gates of Piltover have a better path there, even though the North is technically closer. One of Caitlyn's commissions was a trade route between 'em, so it's like...” He draws a line in the air, and Lux does her best to burn it into her mind. He is an idiot. She has no scale for what that path means.

She still nods along.

“Is there any Noxian threat there? Assuming they were to return to their invasion, couldn't they intercept? That would essentially put Piltover to be surrounded by enemies.”

He looks thoughtful, staring up at the ceiling. “Well, you have to get pretty close to Winter's Claw territory...”

“Who we still can't discern the side of.”

“Sej might not like Ashe's leadership, but it's because she wants to lead, herself. She doesn't want Freljord to fail. She thinks it's already failing and wants to fix it. Noxians don't fix things.”

Lux rolls onto her side to observe him. The lights are off, but moonlight still highlights his silhouette. She likes this, especially. Seeing the way the light paints in the dark. His cheeks still glow blue. She catches herself, hand half-outstretched to touch his jaw. “No. They don't.”

“I hope that Sej wants to repair more than just Freljord,” Ezreal says, at length, with a tone as if he does not care one way or the other. He glances over to Lux, but seems more interested in her eyes than her hand, still awkwardly between them. “They were sisters.”

“That river king mentioned that,” Lux recalls, “but their files don't say as much.”
“They used to,” Ezreal says, and the sheets drag lightly with his shrug. “Maybe not by the time you read them.”

She finally has an excuse to do something with her hand, and shoves him playfully in the shoulder. “When did you read them?” It is not unheard of for him to be sneaking through files he is barred from, even before she was helping him. She plays at being scandalized anyway.

He laughs, and scoots closer to her to give a light elbow to her arm. “Didn't read 'em.” She nudges him again, curious, until he says, “Ashe told me a long time ago. And I think Sej mentioned it once too.”

Lux wonders just how many outcasts Ezreal is friends with.

Their arms rest against each other, lined up parallel. It’s comfortable. Warm. She relishes heat while she can.

She feels his fingers nudging against her palm, and allows him to work them between her own. In the quiet of the night, he entwines their fingers like it’s natural, his thumb stroking over hers.

It is slow, and almost dizzying. She uses the motion to regulate her breathing; to relax her heartbeat. She takes in his profile as best she can in the dark, and for as long as she can, but her eyelids grow heavier with each circle he draws.

She almost thinks he is handsome. He could be handsome. He is not rugged and strong like she used to idolizing in men. He is not military. He is not trim and groomed like the nobles at fancy parties. He is not money.

But he is shirtless next to her, with a strong jawline and those ocean-blue lights along his cheeks. He does thoughtless things that make her feel light and airy, and does not push her when she is upset.

The fact that he is in love with her must be worth something. But in the face of her not returning the feelings – in the face of her future - it is hard to weigh its value.

It is strange that Ezreal, who trusts no one but himself, trusts her as she lies to his face.

She feels lucid in her mind, but her voice drifts, dreamy, “do you love me?”

His hand twitches violently in hers. It takes him a moment to relax, then longer still when Lux leans her head against his shoulder in wait. She can hear his heartbeat, fast and strong. She waits for it to even itself out, and almost forgets that he has not answered her. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

“Yeah,” Ezreal finally says, sounding thoughtful.

Lux does not reply, and the silence is comfortable. She lets his rhythmic heart lull her to sleep.

And she is gone before he wakes.
Chapter 8

It is easy to find her way to the trade route. It is hidden and unmarked, but Ezreal keeps all his maps in his home and Lux has a good memory for directions. She is amazed by his stupidity. He is away from home so often that it would be so simple for one to break in, learn important, dangerous secrets, and leave without a trace.

It is not unlike what she has just done.

She toys with her appearance more as she leaves the city. A different face, different body, different clothes. She knows there is surveillance enough for her to be tracked if she doesn't.

She does not set up camp in the night. As long as she eats, drinks, and does not hurry herself, she can go all night. Sneaking away would be pointless if Ezreal figured her out and caught up in a day. If he follows. Who knows what he will do. This is not his mission. This is not his responsibility and she will not risk that idiot catching his death in the cold.

After the first day, Lux rests. It's easy to hide her camp in the dark of night. There is so little light to manipulate, so little that needs to be manipulated until her tent is simply invisible. Yet not many caravans go by one way or another.

The journey takes her over a week, and the weather only gets worse. The slow fade from chilly mornings into warm days rapidly changes until there is no difference between night and day. There is nothing but icy winds whipping her hair across her face and yanking her hood down no matter how hard she tries to keep it up.

The outpost is out of sight one day, then in her face the next. Such is Freljord. Perhaps these conditions are why Ashe has such keen sight. One would have to, to survive.

Her illusions dropped long ago, and when she enters there aren't as many people as Lux expected. There are scattered few, wearing the thick, dark fabrics of Freljord. They huddle together, quiet, like they are conserving warmth in small groups. It isn't as bad within the walls of the checkpoint. At least the wind is blocked.

Valor is in the skies, albeit flying low. He leads her straight to Quinn.

It hasn't been that long, certainly not as long as expected. But it's the longest she's been away from Quinn until now.

Lux is surprised by her own eagerness as she falls into Quinn's open arms.

The older woman just laughs, the sound fractured. It's an unfamiliar lilt to hear from her.

"You didn't have to come," Quinn tells her as they pull apart. They stay connected at the hands, their arms forming a wide circle.

"Your note didn't give me much ground for a decision," Lux teases her. Then, with seriousness, "I won't risk you. I'll help you. With anything."

She doesn't seem to know what to do with that, shifting her weight and flushing. "I'm – maybe I'm
just being paranoid.”

“No,” Lux says. “We know that isn't the case.” Not with the river king's warning. There is no way that is meaningless. That Quinn's heightened senses make her anxious for nothing. “Tell me what's happening.”

“I – exchange letters with Ashe. It's a quick trip for Valor to run, and Ashe has her own messenger hawks. It's totally nonpolitical, like, small talk, you know?” Quinn says sounding nervous and oddly ashamed. “I mean sometimes politics come up, but we're allies anyway, and I'd never tell her anything classified. You believe me?”

Lux nods, slow. Quinn can be brash and has a sharp tongue, sometimes faster than her mind. But she never messes up when it counts, never takes her duties lightly. Demacia and Freljord are allies, but Lux knows better than to be as idealistic as Demacian teachers will boast to their students. There is bad blood.

There were fewer refugees from Freljord that sought safety in Demacia. Compared to Ionia, practically none. But even they were turned away, back to their homes even as Noxus stormed through.

Lux prays that Demacia's future will shine brighter. Brighter than her comrades think it already is.

“There was going to be a meeting for the tribes. They're still figuring things out – we all are. But Sejuani didn't show up. And she should have a straighter path than Lissandra, right? But the best tracking they could manage, she was heading away from the meeting grounds. Across the Howling Abyss, back to the Citadel. And then they got word from Lissandra that she wasn't able to make it for poor health.”

“Do you think they're planning something together?” Lux keeps her voice low. She does not know how much of this is insider information, does not want to alarm the others nearby. “Is Ashe in danger?”

“I don't know much,” Quinn says, equally hushed. “But I know something's wrong. She's being targeted. They're working together, and that's dangerous.”

“Why are we here?” Lux asks. What can they do? Who else will join them?

Quinn murmurs, “I asked to be. I begged for back up, I even begged you to come, because you're strong, and I need you.”

“Quinn.” Lux is not used to seeing Quinn like this. It scares her that she is not the only one who feels fear. Everyone else is so brave, so thoughtlessly strong, stupidly strong, but maybe they aren't.

“I like Ashe,” Quinn's hands squeeze Lux's, and her eyes scan her face imploringly. “I really like her. ” Pleading her to understand what she is saying. Lux is quiet. She forces her expression even, unresponsive, until Quinn finally mutters, “I'll protect her. I am her ally, whether the military will back me or not.”

“I will,” Lux whispers. “We will. I'm sure.”

She hopes this is true.
The travel from the outpost to Rakelstake goes smoothly and quickly. Quinn is faster on her feet than Lux, faster than Ezreal, even. But she is smarter about her paths, carefully choosing routes to make things easier on the mage she is with instead of only thinking of herself. Valor is useful in this as well, scoping out from above when the weather permits it.

The weather almost gets nicer, closer to the city. Still cold. Harsh. But sometimes Lux can see the blue of the sky between the blinding clouds.

Lux observes the city as they enter, and thinks the same of it. She thinks it has no soul. Demacia is bright and beautiful, with towering spires and high-reaching buildings made of nothing but windows. There are flowers and flags and every day looks like it could be a festival in the streets. They show off for themselves just as much as they do for others.

The buildings here are practical. Stable, but plain. The prettiest part of the city is the view of the trees and mountains past its borders, but the architecture has no artistry. Just surviving takes all their focus. Superfluous decorative designs would be a luxury that Freljord does not afford them.

The one statue they have, though, is beautiful. Lux almost mistakes it for Ashe, but knows it is Avarosa. She stands tall, a guardian on the city, even now.

They get stares as they march through the city, and Lux hears the whispers. Some excited to see two previous champions of the League of Legends. Others more focused on their colors, their kingdom. Two Demacians, striding with authority straight towards the palace.

The two of them have to wait to be seen, but instead of calling them into any sort of throne room, meeting room, anything, Ashe simply joins them in the castle's entrance. As if she is not royalty and they are not in her territory, she walks out to them with a strained, tired smile, then seats herself across from them on another waiting bench.

“I appreciate your presence,” she tells them. She wastes no time. “We're going to the Citadel.”

“You aren't,” Tryndamere's voice bellows from down the hall. From as far away as he is, Lux is impressed her heard them at all. He strides towards them. His form commands more power than Ashe's lithe body, but her presence still overpowers him.

Ashe only looks amused by his claim. “Of course I am.”

A man of few words, he grunts his annoyance. “It's a trap. You're the one they're after, so you should stay behind.”

“If I'm the one they are after, I am the one who needs to overcome,” Ashe snaps firmly. There is a shift in her tone, in her volume. There is an authority to her that overtakes her whole body and voice. “It's a trap? Let it be. They take such pride in fighting with nothing but brute strength, forgetting that this is something we share. I'm going.”

Tryndamere does not look defeated, nor does he looks like he's accepted this. He just scowls at her as if he is certain she will see things from his perspective in time.

“We'll depart in two weeks, giving us time to hear back from your prince.” Ashe says to them, smoothing over any awkwardness. To her this is a royal debate, a strategy meeting. It is not some
petty lovers quarrel. Lux admires this, and hopes to emulate it in what she's sure is an inevitable future for herself. “We go with, or without military backing.”

“As do we,” Lux says, feeling Quinn's adoring eyes on her. She puts on her brightest smile for show.

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They receive more military backing than Lux expected. Not a lot. One squadron, twenty men and women, total. But they are strong, she trusts. She knows it, when she gets a good look at them. They are big. Warriors. Much more familiar than Ezreal's more lithe body.

Jarvan apologizes, in his letter, that he can't send more. He sends his moral support, as well as a rather long-winded letter for Ashe. He wishes Quinn well by name, and Lux. (Though Quinn hadn't told him she was with her, she says. Lux wonders how he knows she would come. Perhaps her and Quinn appear closer than she realized.)

As Ashe said, they depart on schedule.

At first they are an organized, military march. Demacians in the lead, demanding to storm ahead and protect the queen, despite her wishes to be in front. Her complaints are polite, but ceaseless. It's only a matter of days before her persistence wears them down, and she takes the lead, Tryndamere at her side.

Lux knows that she and Quinn earn their place beside her through history in the League. The weather only worsens, yet Ashe and her forces know how to handle it so well that Lux almost does not notice. It is strange to speak almost casually as they walk.

The queen is clearly comfortable conversing with Quinn. They discuss a wide variety of things, birds at first, then hunting, forests, plants, gardening. Lux mostly listens, less interested in the subject and more in the fact that they are things Quinn likes. It's not unlike listening to Ezreal's ramblings.

She sometimes catches Tryndamere's eye, and he looks bored out of his mind by it. Equally, she sometimes catches him watching Ashe, eyes soft.

It is so obvious to her that she is confused to hear Quinn ask about their marriage. Her tone is more careful than Lux has ever heard the woman be, as she presses, “if you only married to combine your population for League representation... What do you intend to do now?”

Ashe's eyes are too knowing. Lux wonders if Quinn knows how obvious she is.

“Even without the League, we are stronger, together.”

“We could survive,” Tryndamere says, his gaze flickering to Quinn, then straight-ahead. Lux is surprised to hear him speaking just as carefully. As if he is trying not to be so gruff. “My men. We're few, but strong. But there's no reason to make a struggle. We can help each other. Unify.”

“I didn't mean any offense,” Quinn says, despite their acceptance of her inquiry.

Tryndamere's voice loses the little comfort it had. Lux does not think he is annoyed, for however roughly he says, “of course.” This is how he sounds when he is at ease, not walking on egg-shells. Strange to imagine someone like him so considerate for the feelings of a girl in love with his wife.
“Political marriages are still born of love,” Ashe murmurs. “Love of one's home. One's people. One's role and of one's willingness to help. It's a marriage for love of your potential to work together.”

Lux's eyes sting.

“If you had to choose,” Lux finds herself asking, face red from the cold and wind, “between a marriage for love and a strategic marriage, which would you choose?”

Ashe answers in an instant, “strategic.” Guilt washes over Lux for asking aloud when she sees Quinn wince. “I don't pass any judgment on the priorities of others, but I am more invested in my people and their futures than in romance.”

Lux watches the snow flurry in front of her eyes and loses herself in thought.

Jarvan, her marriage for love. Or Ezreal, for strategy.

But, a part of her argues, to marry her prince is no less strategic. Can she truly say her love for Jarvan is romantic? More romantic than her genuine friendship with Ezreal?

She can scarcely decide which is which. She feels like she is going crazy in this cold, and forces herself not to think of him.

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“The howling abyss,” Tryndamere tells them as they approach the bridge.

It looks run down, yet just as harshly sturdy as anything else in Freljord. A long stone bridge, spanning as far as her eyes can see. The mountains on either side stop the snow flurry from coming through, and the cold makes her vision crisp and certain. Yet the bridge goes on forever.

The fall over the edges is another eternity. Lux does not allow herself to peek over, even when she sees small creatures darting about like they're trying to catch her eye.

Their march had become loose in the travel, but with stone to walk on instead of snow and ice and sometimes even dirt, they fall back in line. Boots on stone, orderly, is music to Lux's ears. She feels her expression hardening, a feeling almost unfamiliar, now.

The rhythm makes time pass with ease. She does not grow tired, even after hours.

It feels like being yanked back from heaven when Ashe stops, sudden.

The queen bows to the empty space before her. By Lux's estimation, the half-way point of the bridge.

“Don't bow for me,” Lux hears, before she sees the ghost. He is translucent before them, like water half-frozen. Milky and unclear.

Ashe rises, smile soft. “Yet I must show my appreciation for your eyes., Gregor”

He looks downcast, the whole shape of him slouching like he might melt. “I watch over this place, aye, but my voice wasn't enough to warn you in time. The horn – she took my horn.”
“Then they’re here,” Ashe says.

The ghost nods, solemn. “The Watchers are here. The Avarosans are here. Serylda is the only sister absent.”

Ashe's eyes are no longer on him. They are trained sharp on the other end of the bridge, now, waiting for the enemy to make their appearance. How she manages such a fierce look with a kind voice frightens Lux, if she is honest. “I am Avarosan, but not Avarosa. You know this.”

“Of course, my queen. Ashe, I know. But the seeker is different. She isn't different. She's exactly the same! I knew her, then, and I know her now!”

Tryndamere cuts him off with a growl, “calm, Gregor.”

“Calm, he says!” The ghost continues, undeterred and driving himself frantic. “When his blood is anger, when his blood is fury! Cut them down, why don't you?!”

“Gregor,” Ashe snaps, hand reaching out to shush him as if she could hit him if she tried. He reacts as if he believes she could, immediately lowering his voice. “That witch, she took my horn. Avarosa tasked me with this, you tasked me with this, and I couldn't even warn of the watchers--”

“--Enough.” Ashe says, quiet. As if mirroring, the ghost goes silent.

Her eyes glow. At first Lux mistakes the bird overhead for valor, but it is white, pure white and magic. It does not return, only the color of Ashe's eyes does. She does not warn them with words. Her stance changes fast, dropping to a knee and pulling her bow out to point an arrow to the horizon.

The rest of their forces prepare themselves in her shadow, the sound of dozens of swords being drawn at once too loud to miss.

There are trolls behind her. At least thirty, their rows messy and disorganized.

And in the lead, Lissandra.

Wearing formal robes, unsuited to battle. Weak and defenseless. Unshielded, unarmed. She does not rush them, and Lux sees Ashe hesitate.

Lissandra stops a distance away. Not quite safe – distance is nothing to an archer of Ashe's caliber. She is an open target.


Ashe responds, her voice just as icy. “The Watchers are gone, Lissandra. They are gone, because they were weak then and they are weak now. I offer you unity and acceptance if you come peacefully and return my sister.” That's too forgiving. Lux wonders if it is a bluff.

“She's come to me willingly,” Lissandra says, waving a hand in air dismissively. She has to pull it back to her side quickly to avoid being struck by Ashe's arrow flying by.

“No,” Ashe says, rising from her kneel. “If she came to you willingly she would be with you now.
She wouldn't miss the chance to battle."

"You know her well."

"She is my sister. I know everything about her." Quieter, so quiet that Lissandra should not be able to hear her, "I thought that I knew you, too."

Yet her head tilts at the words, an amused smile tugging at her lips. "You know nothing. You are so young, so insignificant. You are nothing compared to Avarosa, and even she was so, so simple to kill."

Ashe is quiet too long, the pause tense and uncomfortable. Moments like these, Lux knows, are the calm before the storm. Moments like this are fragile, and erupt in chaos and war. It's only a matter of who deals the first blow, and Ashe has already fired an arrow.

"Thinking you're so wise," Lissandra says, at length, "when you are just a second iteration. You are just an echo of her death. But I've won this fight before, and I'll win it again. And your sister, so-called, will be at my side."

This time the arrow is straight for the ice witch's face. It makes contact with a resounding shatter, ice shooting up from the ground to catch it. A cage of ice surrounds her; Lux feels the vibrations of everyone around her. Anticipating battle.

They aren't wrong to. The ice wall melts around her and she is changed. No longer a pale iceborn woman, looking frail and small. Now she is of her magic. She is tall, taller than a human should be. Her skin blue as the mountains, hair snow-white and grown longer. Her dress seems to fall into the ground itself and her claws as she draws her hand over her mouth laugh.

She bellows, "I am so much more than you realize, Avarosa!"

The trolls charge.

It is chaos in an instant, as expected.

Lux is unused to this. Magic and battle, she knows, but not in such numbers. Infiltration, the fields of war, they have always been so much smaller. Demacia was at war with Noxus, but it was never – she was never in it like this. (Yet even this, her mind supplies, is nothing compared to their eternal battle.)

She throws her binding light as wide along the bridge as she can, but the light here is strange. It is frigid and sharp where she is used to warmth. She sees the trolls falter, sees them slow, but feels weak for the sweat already on her brow from just this.

She drops back, beside Ashe. The two of them have range, and the military forces surge past them protectively. They follow Tryndamere, swords swinging wildly. Lux's eyes hone in on him, watching his swings like a tornado to tear apart his enemy. Even his other barbarians beside him do not fight quite the same way, though they are winning. Sharp weapons, swords, axes, spears. They fare better than the troll's brute clubs.

She finds herself doing more to protect others than to fight, herself. They have enough fighters, they do not need her destruction. They need her help, her shielding. Slight illusions, clear views. She manipulates the light, gives Ashe clear paths to try to get to Lissandra, perched in the middle of her
trolls. Each arrow is caught by ice, new walls forming rapidly. As fast as Ashe can draw new ones.

Quinn. Lux feels dizzy with how fast she whirls, trying to spot the woman. She can't find her in the crowd, even as it rapidly diminishes. The trolls had them outnumbered but they had no finesse, no formation. Their inhuman screeches take a toll on Lux's ear – especially those who are pushed over the edge of the bridge.

Gregor is bellowing at them, war-cries without his horn, curses to the seeker.

The silence falls sudden, heavy like a thick curtain. Even from a ways away, Lux hears the sickening sound of Tryndamere's sword being pulled loose from the spine of a troll. She is used to the sounds of clashing weapons, the spark of armor and swords. The fragmented sounds of ice splintering. Not such a wet, bloody squelch.

Lissandra still stands tall, taller than her ice barricade, spiked with a hundred arrows.

Lux sees the light, the twinkle off the ice as a shadow shifts behind her. Quinn, somehow sneaking by for a vantage point this whole time. Weaving through the fight to get behind her. Lux does not let her eyes focus, lest Lissandra catch where she is looking. With that headdress over her eyes, Lux cannot tell who she watches.

Quinn raises her crossbow, slow and steady. She fires.

Another wall of ice catches the arrow midair. Lux isn't surprised at that, but there's a second, like a wave from the ground, shooting out.

“Quinn!” Ashe's cry drowns out the sound of the ice piercing Quinn through, pinning her in the air.

Lux sees red. Quinn's blood and – everything. She does not think. It is like when she was a child, not in control of her magic yet. Like a reflex. Pins of light draw in from everywhere she can find them, seeking out any heat around them until she feels out of breath, pulling tighter and tighter.

She's about to burn a line straight through the witch, straight through the bridge, too white-hot to be stopped by ice. She could burn everything in her path, but the seeker distorts.

In the pull of Lux's light, she flickers. Crystalline fragments of frost in the air give her away as an illusion.

Tryndamere's hand on her shoulder snaps her back to reality. Her vision, dark around the edges, comes back, and she exhales what little warmth she had stolen from around them. She feels too many nervous eyes on her back, feels the crowd parting around her as if she is a bomb ready to go off.

She doesn't care. Ashe rushes past, her cape billowing out behind her.

“I await you at the citadel,” Lissandra's voice says, displaced now. She knows she is caught. She meant to be. Ashe rushes straight past her image without stopping. It's clear her magic reaches this far, but she wants them to face her in person. And so, her likeness falls away into powder, as Ashe cradles Quinn, wrapping her cloak around her.

Tryndamere comes next, to carry Quinn across the rest of the bridge. They have to set up camp for the night, just past its posts.
Too many are injured. There are only four dead on their side. Two barbarians, one of Ashe's iceborn men, and a Demacian woman. Nothing compared to loss of the trolls. Even if Lux gets the impression they were merely fodder to begin with. There must be more of them, and stronger, waiting at the citadel.

At camp, she helps tend to the wounded, keeping her mind off the fact that Quinn has been under Ashe's supervision, hidden away from her. She tries not to remember how limp she had looked in Tryndamere's arms, her blood pouring over his hands and arms. He had been covered in blood. Some his. Some of the seeker's army. And now, Quinn's.

She heats water to help wash wounds, bandage them, and to clean the blood off of everyone. She takes care to clean armor until it shines, and wring the red from cloth again and again. It's important to look dignified.

There are so many volunteers to take watch that Lux almost gets to sleep the whole night. The only interruption is Ashe, in the middle of the night. She lets her know Quinn is alright, and lets her into her tent to see her.

She has to rub sleep from her eyes when she sees Quinn. The woman looks tired. She has lost blood, and her injuries are worse than what Lux has been treating all day. Like she's bragging, Quinn lifts the blanket to show her the wide bandage at her side where she barely missed being impaled, already soaked crimson.

Lux forcefully pulls the blanket back over her before laying down at her side. She sleeps there until morning, and even as they march on, she walks beside Quinn to make sure she is alright.

“T'm glad you didn't bring Ezreal,” Quinn mutters, her arm heavy over Lux's shoulder. “He's – young.”

Lux does not point out that she and Ezreal are the same age. She knows what Quinn means.

She cannot imagine Ezreal in this situation. Ezreal has been on the fields, and has died a hundred times over. He knows pain, yes, but only in a sterile, fake war. He's never killed. Never fought for his life, completely.

He could die, here. Or kill. She does not know which is scarier.

Quinn is bleeding again and the whole group has to stop to redress her wounds. Lux does it for her. Ashe assures them that it's a needed break to gather themselves. They're almost there.

Lux has blood on her hands.
Their footsteps echo across the citadel's interior. It is eerily quiet, aside from them, and Lux scans the area with bated breath. This is where all of Freljord's unnecessary beauty is. The spires and towers are beautiful, winding ornaments. There are flags and thick crimson curtains over the stained glass windows. The morning light is painting rainbow pictures underfoot, and their forces step over them without a care.

“Upstairs,” Ashe murmurs, and everyone follows, obedient. The stairs creak underneath them, but Lux has no delusions that they have snuck in. It's all a matter of when Lissandra wants to reveal herself.

At the top of the stairs, Ashe leads them to a room, further back. It is spacious, almost like a throne room. As if the citadel is a small castle, not a church. A potential center to the city, if the watchers have their way.

Sejuani is seated on a throne at the far end of the room. Her head is hung, unconscious, and instead of the thick furs for the cold she looks to be wearing practically nothing. Lux sees the shimmer of frost over her abdomen, and inhales sharply. Immediate guilt – shame – for having ever thought she would take this side.

Ashe lets out a quiet sound, wordless. Thankfully her hesitation, a potential fright to her forces, is masked. Lissandra interrupts, her inhuman claws coming to rest at Sejuani's shoulder as she steps out from behind the throne's large backing.

“You see? She's joined me.”

Sejuani's head lolls to the side at the brush of Lissandra's fingers. Her eyes are glassy and vacant.

“I'm sure,” Ashe says, not hiding her disbelief. More importantly, “where are the rest of yours? The trolls? Surely their king wouldn't send so many of his men to die without him?”

Lissandra laughs. “You know nothing of the trolls. Of what their king has done for them. What they owe him.”

“You sacrifice your own followers! How can you disregard the lives of your own allies?!”

There is the distinct sound of the windows, splintering high above them. “Because I do not need them. You want to unite? Of course you do!”

“And what does the king think of how you treat his kind?”

“Of course, he feels the same as me. They are here as a plea for his forgiveness. This is their retribution.” Windows are shattering, glass sparkling its way down to the floor and snow blowing in, the tension of Lissandra and Ashe's magic distorting the weather and temperatures until their surroundings can't take it any longer. “Myself,” Lissandra continues, voice louder to reach them over the whistle of the wind. “I just enjoy an audience.”

“What have you done to Sejuani?”
She must be under some sort of spell, but even Lux can't read it. Even the magics of other worlds are easier for her to understand than ancient ones like this. She thinks of Ezreal's markings and has to admit that perhaps there are for more kinds she can't read than she had thought.

Lissandra shows no interest in answering the question. Instead, she attacks. She surges forward like a slow-rolling wave of ice bringing her straight to Ashe. She gets an arrow through her stomach for it, but with how close she is, Lux can see it on her face that it was nothing to her.

The citadel is an awful place for a fight. There are more rooms than Lux expected, too many doorways. It it cramped and tight and the trolls seem to pour in from any opening, screaming and flailing.

Lissandra is fast, gliding out of the way of arrows and sword-strikes alike, but the trolls are clumsy and slow. The armies can hold them off, but it is only that, with how many keep coming, with how much sheer space they take up around them.

Lux lets herself fall back into a more passive role, eyes trained on Lissandra and Ashe's battle. The two of them make circles around the room, watching each other. Spikes of ice are shot in half before they reach Ashe, just as Ashe's arrows are caught in walls that melt instantly, dropping the arrows on the floor like nothing.

Even the hits that make it through, don't phase Lissandra. Like she feels nothing at all.

Lux hears the cry-out from all directions. She has to step over bodies to keep close enough to provide Ashe back-up. She can slow Lissandra down, make it harder for her to dodge. Her head aches with the strain, trying to watch her own back and line up to snare Lissandra where she stands.

Tryndamere is barking orders, demanding they barricade the room to try to prevent more trolls. It will be easier to fight their way out when the real threat is taken care of. She hears the slamming of doors, the pounding of trolls trying to break through. Wood splintering, and the quiet splash of blood under her own feet.

Lux has seen Ashe fight before. She is used to the way she does not warn, does not speak, before taking drastic actions. Maybe she had no other choice. She is up much closer than she should be, firing point-blank at a target that does not appear to mind even when she hits.

She hears the familiar crystalline sound as she sees Ashe's fingers pull back an arrow that isn't there yet. It is still shimmering into existence, large and magical, even as she lets it go. Lux knows this; she draws in as much light as she can with a deep breath in preparation.

Lissandra's wall flies up, but the arrow shatters straight through it, only slowed. Lux wishes it had impaled Lissandra, but instead the walls grow around it, belatedly catching it in place. Only the tip of the arrow, hardly larger than a regular arrowhead now, is piercing Lissandra's chest. It is only enough to stun her in place. Briefly, the witch stares down at her chest in disbelief.

Lux exhales, shooting her spark ahead to take advantage. She hears Lissandra cry out in pain, this time, and watches the ice walls melt. But Ashe's arrow melts, too.

The banging on the doors is growing rhythmic, a war-song, a unified effort to break them down. None of their forces left can leave the doors to help; even Quinn, weak as she is, helps hold them shut.
Ashe has to shout to be heard over the pounding. “Lux, help Sejuani!”

Lissandra recovers, and this time Tryndamere replaces Lux as Ashe's back up. He throws himself into the fray as the witch circles around. He and his wife have her flanked, weapons drawn.

She does not seem afraid of the attacks from either side, but it takes her all to block the sword-swipes and arrows at once. It's easy to get to the throne with her so occupied.

Lux rushes ahead, masking herself invisible as she goes. She still sees Lissandra's head turn in her direction. It is slight, but Lux knows her illusions, knows her own skill. Lissandra does not see with her eyes. Perhaps for the better. In her distraction, Tryndamere strikes her hand clean off.

It does not bleed. It simply fractures and falls, solid and loud.

Now that she has a wide view, she can see the give of the doors, barely holding back trolls. She can see just how many bodies there are on the floors. All for this, she thinks. For an immortal witch with a body made of ice.

She has focus on the magic.

Lux tries to feel it. The way it moves. It is so different from the heat of light. Her light is fast-moving particles, small, smaller than dust, that she can twist up. Sometimes it feels flat, like a glass window only a millimeter thick, that she can slide in place over things.

But this magic of the ice is dark and cold. It feels like a barrier is keeping her from the core of the magic – the part she would be able to use. Chipping away at it is freezing. It makes her muscles ache, but she draws from her light as if she could melt away the protection.

When she gets through, it all pours out. Like a landslide, it overtakes her. Lissandra's power, malleable in her mind.

Tryndamere's roar is deafening, and Lissandra is finally bleeding. But Ashe is on the ground, struggling to pull herself up. Her arm guards are shattered and her own blood coats her hands. Tryndamere rushes to her side, ready to be her shield.

The pounding of the doors are like war-drums.

Lissandra moves to attack, but freezes mid-strike. Her mouth gapes, spine arcing.

Behind her, Sejuani drives one of Ashe's discarded arrows through her side. She keeps her fist clenched around it, pushing it deeper.

Tryndamere takes the opportunity to lunge, one final time, stabbing straight through Lissandra's chest. His sword comes out the other end, giving Sejuani new cut across her shoulder. Even as the thin line slowly beads across like thread before starting to bleed, Sejuani does not waver.

Lissandra's voice is an echo that does not come from her lips. It echoes across the room, loud over the troll's, but wavering. Weakened. “This is not the end of the seekers,” she states.

But Lissandra crumbles.

Lux hears the falter in the rhythm of the pounding on the doors. She doesn’t think they could have
held them shut much longer anyway, but Sejuani strides past Lissandra's remains and bellows, “let them in!”

Her step falters. Ashe does not move to catch her, though she looks desperately like she wants to.

Her body is weak. Lux has felt first-hand how draining the spell cast on her had been. Yet somehow she is fierce, drawing incredible power in her voice. “Trolls! Return to your king! The queen you sought to follow is dead!”

The militia step away from the doors. The trolls are furious, angrily yelling like they may fight without a leader. Their rage carries them into the room to see for themselves that what Sejuani says is true. There are grumblings of battle, as if it would somehow be more honorable to returning alive to serve Trundle. The grumbles pass.

Sejuani holds herself up in the large doorway as she sees them off, betraying her weakness in her lean. “Tell Trundle that your kind aren't welcome in Winter's Claw territory! We have no use for such weak forces and we are no replacement for the Watchers!”

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Their camp is much smaller, on the way back to Rakelstake. The warriors are quiet, and Lux does not miss the way the campfire crowds are divided by faction. On the way here, Demacians and barbarians had mingled freely. Now they are separated. Perhaps seeking solidarity with their more familiar comrades in mourning.

She eyes the Demacian groups and catches Quinn's eye, but remains where she is at, seated beside Tryndamere. Across from her, Sejuani and Ashe sit side-by-side in complete silence. Ashe has already tended to Sejuani's wounds, they were admittedly minimal compared to her own.

Sometimes one of them takes in a deep breath, as if about to speak. The other will immediately give them their undivided attention, until the exhale, and the quiet continues.

Tryndamere looks irritated out of his mind by it, but Lux understands. This is how it is. She has had a dozen dinners with Garen spent much the same way. There are things she would want to say, as a child, as his sister. But she would always catch herself, because they are more strangers than not.

The first thing Sejuani says since yelling at the trolls is a furious whisper, “I didn't go to her.”

Lux is almost worried Ashe will not answer, for how long she is quiet. “I know.”

“Your arrows are weak. You can't rely so much on magic and enchantments.”

Ashe makes a face, but tries to take it with dignity. “Yes, yes.”

“How can you lead when you needed another to strike down your enemy?”

“We are married. We are one.”

“Not that barbarian,” Sejuani spits, much to Lux's confusion. She has always felt that Sejuani and Tryndamere are similar – it's a surprise to hear her distaste for his ways and his men. “You needed me to save you.”
Ashe opens her mouth, then closes it. Lux watches her expression go from annoyed to resigned. She does not point out that this was Sejuani's rescue mission. That it had been a small army to free her, and Lux in specific who had lifted the spell that froze her. Lux does not mind. She is not after recognition.

Sejuani comes with them all the way to Rakelstake, despite constant protest. She travels with them, insistent on her own strength.

Yet once they reach the city, Ashe is firm in getting her to the hospital. It's almost like watching her handle a child, the way she has to convince Sejuani it's only for a check-up. That, yes of course, they all know that she is fine.

After she sleeps for three days, Ashe calls Lux in to make sure it isn't a lingering effect of the spell.

While Lux checks her out, Ashe admits, “the medics said it's just exhaustion, perhaps because of the spell. They advised for her to just sleep it off, but... I just wanted to make sure it isn't still in effect, somehow. None of us are as good with spellcraft.”

“She's fine, there's nothing to worry about” Lux assures her, drawing back. “Your medics were spot-on.”

Ashe smiles, soft. Her fingers come to brush light against Lux's arm. “Thank you.”

“What will happen, now? Within Freljord?”

The queen lowers her voice, as if worried Sejuani would hear her. “It would be naive to think this is an end to anything. I'm sure she still intends to contest my rule. And I'm sure this is not the end of the Watchers. But they are – she is weak. For now, the rest is between the two of us.” She gives a slight nod towards her sister's body.

Lux is quiet, because she does not know what to say. It isn't her place to offer further assistance. Not only because she is not in charge of the military deployments, but because of the implications. Ashe can take care of herself. Her alliance with Demacia needs to be a last resort.

Quinn is in the doorway; Lux is not sure how long she has been there, but Ashe does not look surprised. “Hey, I'll handle all the reporting on this, so... You can head off whenever.”

“You're also free to go,” Ashe tells the older woman, polite, not dismissive. “We're happy to host you as long as you like, of course, but Anivia will be arriving soon. We'll have all the protection we could need, with her. And I'm sure she can explain... Many things of the past and present.”

Quinn shrugs, and looks at Lux just so she doesn't have to meet Ashe's eyes. “I could stay a little longer. I think it's just Lux that's got somewhere to be. Or, you know, someone to get back to.”

“Oh, yes,” Ashe hums, a slight bounce in her step as she leads them from the room. “I believe I've heard rumors to that effect.”

She cannot even focus her mind enough to think about it. She is briefly worried she will be anxious for seeing Ezreal again but the thought flows easily in and out of her mind. She is too caught up in this, numbed by the familiarity of war. This is what the world was before the League of Legends.

She still manages a smile, because she knows she must. “I'll depart in the morning.”
She thinks of Ezreal's warmth when they kissed, and shivers in anticipation of being anywhere warmer than Freljord.

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The trip back to Piltover is uneventful, but does nothing to regain her energy after what she's just been through. She is still exhausted when she enters city limits.

She meanders a bit, taking her time before heading towards Ezreal's home. She doesn't even make it there before the unmistakable shape of Vi's motorcycle zooms past her, then swerves around to cut off her path.

Vi motions for her to get on, wide-eyed and hair tousled by the wind. All the woman says is a drawn out, “jeeeeeze,” as if Lux should know what this means.

She climbs on behind Vi, holding tight around her waist. The trip is long, and she has to keep her face buried in her back, eyes clenched tight to keep them from stinging. They must be getting further and further from the outskirts, probably headed towards the station.

The one time she looks up, it is painful. She feels her stomach drop at the wreckage, new. She was just here. It begins with a corner she recognizes, but then the jarring, gut-wrenching contrast to what she expected. There is still smoke, the ground still hot with embers. Firefighters are still lingering, at this point mostly sifting through the remains of the buildings, seeing if there is anything to be salvaged for the business owners. If they still live.

Another bomb must have been dropped. Small, only three shops on the street – and a chunk of the street itself. Vi steers around the cracked cement with ease. Does not say anything.

At the station, Vi ushers her through the doors, tells her to head straight to Cait. “They're expecting you – we saw you on one of the facecams.” She speeds off before Lux can ask any questions.

No one stops her in the station. She wonders if she will even need illusions to trespass. People see her, now, and assume someone of her importance, fame, ranking, is exactly where she should be. She can only hope it will be like this in Zaun, but knows better than to hope for it as they get close to Noxus.

She knocks, and Caitlyn calls for her to come in.

The sheriff is seated at her desk, like always. There is a suspicious lack of paperwork, and in their place, four cans of vending machine coffee. She has a small white bandage on her face, but she is so pale that Lux nearly misses it.

On the couch is Ezreal, sitting in an awful slouch, head resting on his arms over the armrest. His injury is much more apparent, he sports a black eye. Thankfully it looks dulled, almost healed. He must have gotten it days ago. He looks just as tired, like he's about to fall asleep where he sits.

The presence that surprises her is Janna, seated beside Ezreal. The air is displaced around her. Her hair and the cloths of her clothing lift, but hover. Lux can feel the way her magic is being held. It's a conscious effort for Janna to keep the winds around her still, to a rather strange effect. She has a bandage around one thigh, a thin red line of blood stained through it like she's been grazed by something.
Lux seeks the familiar spot beside the couch, and ventures, “what... Happened?”

Ezreal scowls, resolutely facing away from her, and does not answer despite Caitlyn's expectant look in his direction.

At his silence, eventually she speaks up. “We were able to apprehend Jinx. She's in custody, right now. Solitary confinement while we figure out what to do with her.”

“She should be put to death, obviously,” Lux say, without a second thought. Jinx has killed, not for any political reason, not in self defense, not for anyone. Just for the fun of it. In Demacia she would be killed for lesser crimes.

“Perhaps,” Caitlyn murmurs, and nothing more.

“I don't know about that,” Janna says, just as quiet.

The silence stretches, the subject matter too daunting for anyone to speak up. It is difficult to even debate something of this nature.

It's only broken when Vi enters, slamming the door behind her so accidentally that even she jumps at the sound of it. Now that Lux gets a closer look at her, she's got some scratch lines down her neck, like fingernails.

It's a miracle none of them are dead. Magic can do a lot, and four people against one is nothing to scoff at, but just one bullet can do more than you'd expect. Especially, she thinks, her eyes drifting towards Ezreal's form, when you are not used to a real threat of being killed.

Maybe it wasn't just the four of them. She can't say for sure. The city kept progressing while she was gone. Just like the rest of the world kept spinning while they dealt with Jinx. Everything is moving on.

She wonders how much the dust has settled in Noxus. What decisions will come of Swain's leadership, and how soon.

Lux shakes her head. There is a time and place. “May I know what occurred? I'd like to be able to report on it.”

“I intend to correspond with Jarvan as well,” Caitlyn assures her, then before she can worry, “but I assure you, I have no secrets. Vi? I believe you've mastered this tale.”

Janna giggles, arching her back as she leans forward to look up at Lux. It is a manufactured movement. She knows how to be pretty, the same way Lux knows how to be happy. If Lux were more interested in women, she's sure she'd appreciate the arch of her back, the view down her top. (She does not miss Vi's gaze wandering there and back.)

Janna enthuses, “she's been a big hit at the tavern!”

“Pun,” Ezreal comments, still not looking back. He raises his fist in the air, and Janna bumps it before giggling again. As unsuited to Janna as the action was, it was natural. Maybe Ezreal is not just friends with a random assortment of people, Lux thinks. Maybe Ezreal simply likes older women.
Vi pushes her way onto the couch, clearly not meant for more than two people. Through a series of squirms and snickers, she winds up in Janna's spot, with the blonde sitting on her lap, legs stretched out across Ezreal's lap.

Vi spins the story loud and proud. The bomb went off, and they were able to trace where the command came from. With help, Vi says, but does not name names. Lux would have thought perhaps one of the yordles, but the way Ezreal silently prickles with annoyance says Jayce.

Caitlyn interjects that surely there are ways Jinx could have set them off even without leading them straight to herself, but she isn't that clever. Her bombs are always put together a bit haphazardly, like all she really knows is gunpowder, not wiring or programming.

Vi waves away these technical details, then goes on to explain the way they boxed in the area. The way they used Ezreal to scout ahead, blinking through each room of the building she was in quickly. The plan had been to get her exact location and have Caitlyn's sniping take it from there.

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Jinx has no magic of her own. She is made of chemical and hextech explosives, but perhaps her time in the League has gotten her used to magic. Enough to sense it being used. She sensed Ezreal coming, and the minute he phased into her room she had a gun pointed to him.

If it weren't for Janna's protection, he would have been dead. Her bird talisman channeled her magic to him, a shield of wind deflecting the immediate onslaught of bullets. But the wind was too intense for him to keep his eyes open and get a good look at her. It was even strong enough to deflect his own magic, leaving him standing in the chaos, knowing he could not attack.

Janna flew to him, fast as the wind could bring her, Vi at her side. They rushed to him, all but smashing through the wall to get in.

Even Jinx had been thrown off by the wind, her braids whipping wildly. The ricochet of her bullets almost more dangerous than helpful, now that Vi and Janna were in the room to face them. Realizing Ezreal was a hopeless target for as long as he was shielded, Jinx whirled to face the other two.

Caitlyn's voice came over the speaker at Vi's hip, shouting at them, muffled commands. For Vi to listen to her, for once. But Vi only grinned, toothy and excited, before lunging. Her first swing narrowly missed – on purpose, Vi insists as Janna snickers – but knocked the gun from Jinx's hand.

The wind in the room died down, Janna hurrying to Ezreal's side. For a moment the two of them could only watch as Jinx struggled at first to grab her gun back, until Vi kicked it away.

Sneering, the smaller girl reached behind herself, trying to pull out a second gun, but by now the motion was familiar to Vi. When it comes to brute strength, she will always be stronger than a thin girl with a shit diet, and holding her arms was too easy. Jinx could reach her gun, but not pull it front to fire.

Too bad it wasn't enough to dissuade a crazy girl. Jinx fired at the ground, and the surprise was enough to make Vi loosen her grip. Enough to help Jinx wrench free, swinging her arm out wildly in something that was surely not a slap or a punch, but pure panic. Vi's neck bled under her nails, red stripes across her tattoos.

Vi flinched back a step, but stumbled over her own mess, the remains of the wall she'd knocked
With a high pitched shriek of a laugh, Jinx aimed her gun – until Ezreal fired, concentrated energy at her wrist. The burn on her skin was immediately visible, a small patch of her skin even bubbling under the heat. She dropped the gun, hissing in pain.

He blinked in and out of her vision, across the room then right in her face, fist wound back to swing at her. The magic hot from her wrist burned even him as she blocked the hit, and in the opening knocked him down with a swift head-butt.

Her laughter filled the room, even with a red forehead and searing burns on her wrist. Vi struggled to her feet, practically using Ezreal as an armrest to push up off of on her way up, but in the same time, Jinx was reaching for her gun.

Only for Janna to hurl herself towards the girl, making herself the eye of her own tornado and flinging the second gun away, as well.

Jinx had shoved her off with ease. Janna caught herself mid-air instead of falling, immediately reaching down to help pull Ezreal up. The three of them stared her down, cornering her in the room, but knowing that they were also blocking any good angle for Caitlyn to shoot. Any movement could give her an advantage to escape.

Jinx reached to her hip for a grenade, but her hands closed on nothing but air. She glanced down, startled, then back up to see Janna holding them in her hands, beaming.

A pickpocket learns to work fast to survive.

Vi had started spouting off police phrases. The usual 'we have you surrounded' bullshit, her smug claim to victory, only bits and pieces of the full spiel.

The movement was fast. Jinx had one more gun.

Three shots.

The first, towards Ezreal, straight for his heart, deflected just as fast by Janna's winds. The bullet's path strayed with the sharp winds, streaking instead across the edge of Janna's own thigh. The sudden burst of pain made her fall from the air, scraping her knees on the shattered glass and splintered wood on the floor.

The second bullet was Caitlyn's, straight through where Janna had just been, just over her head, now, knocking the gun out of Jinx's hand without so much as a scratch on the girl. Rendered meaningless as the second shot, piercing like a line being drawn through Jinx's leg.

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"An' after that, locking her up was hella easy. Not like she could run."

Vi grins, looking proud, not of herself, but of Janna.

Lux smiles. "It sounds like Janna was quite the hero."

Janna takes it politely, her voice airy, "oh, nonsense," but does not offer praise to anyone else instead. The way she leads conversations is different from the rich nobles at parties. She is a hostess,
a charmer, but in a different way.

Instead of needless preening and flattery – smalltalk. It feels strange. Janna carries on conversations with ease, drifting them away from the dilemma at hand. Lux supposes with her background, with her job, you would have to learn to keep people entertained and keep secrets all the same. And she is not as vapid as the nobles.

She even manages to draw an occasional comment from Ezreal, determined as he seems to be to shun Lux.

Caitlyn eventually shoos everyone out except for Vi, insisting that they have a lot to discuss on what to do with Jinx. In the end, it is police business. Whatever influence the others had as champions still does not give them authority in this. Though, she concedes, they’re welcome to pay her a visit in the St. Jenson’s Ward she’s being held in if they please, as long as they don’t incite anything.

They see Janna off, and spend a long time in the sunset-light just watching her leave in silence.

Ezreal walks, and Lux follows.

The moon shines down on them as Ezreal lets them into his home, entering the threshold with the door left open behind him, as if he has merely forgotten to shut it.

Somehow, though she knows he is smaller than her, his frame seems large, almost intimidating. She watches him strip his shirt off, feeling uneasy. But she is not afraid of Ezreal. She cannot imagine being afraid of him.

She realizes – she is afraid of him being angry with her. Not fearful of his anger, but not wanting it, guilty for having earned it.

She has not looked away from him changing, and he has noticed now, too. He finally breaks from his act that Lux does not exist, and crosses his arms over his bare chest, quirking an eyebrow at her. His pants hang loose at his hip, and she just thinks again, helplessly, he is so small, he is no soldier.

It is not so much that the line of his sides are interesting to see, or that his collarbone leads to his shoulders in a way that is fascinatingly boyish. Lux does not want to meet his eyes.

The air in his apartment feels stagnant, and in its stillness she feels the subtle vibrations of magic all around her. They are dizzying, if she focuses on them, like too many perfumes all around her.

She wants to apologize, and she would mean it, and he deserves it.

“I helped Ashe,” is what comes out. That is not what she wanted to say, and she sees his expression darken. But she cannot go back now that she’s begun, and blurts out, as if it might tip him from anger to respect, “and Sejuani as well, and Quinn...!”

Ezreal is clearly unimpressed. He snaps, “Yeah, and I got shit done, too! Great.”

They had just been debating Freljord’s leadership, and now she can tell him. She can answer his questions, maybe, and he will be happy to learn so much from her journey and have his theories proved and disproved!

She is confused by her own desperation, and cringes that she hears it in her own voice, “I can tell
you everything – about Lissandra!”

His expression changes, but now how she was expecting. His anger gives way to a slight confusion, head tilting ever-so-slightly to the side as he looks at her. Like he is trying to figure her out, and having no luck.

Eventually he heaves a sigh, and buries his hand in his hair. He looks incredibly weary, like he hasn’t slept since she left. She knows it is not the case. “Look, can we just... Sleep? For now?”

She nods, chest tight.

Lux showers before bed, the lukewarm water feeling like it could scald her skin. It's a welcome feeling. The Freljord is beautiful, and its starry skies clear and vivid compared to Piltover, but it is cold and harsh. She is not used to such rough civilizations.

She changes into her bedclothes, and makes her way to the bedroom, where Ezreal is already in his bed, facing away from her. The blanket rests low on his hip, and she stares at his back muscles in the moonlight. After traveling through midnight mountains, a house with all the lights from the edge of the city spilling in through the window is as clear as day.

The bed dips as she climbs in beside him, and she sees him trying to pretend his shoulders didn't tense.

Ezreal rolls to lay on his back, eyes pointedly trained on the ceiling. But he takes her hand in his, again.

Her heart races just as quick as his. She tries to even her breathing, but there's no decent rhythm for her to focus on. Ezreal's pulse slams in his wrist, fast and uneven.

He sounds profoundly more angry than she can wrap her head around, for how quiet he is. For how gently he holds her hand. But his cheeks flicker as his emotions flare, and he has to bite out the words, “look, I know you're going to lie to me fucking constantly. I get that.”

She blinks at him. Her hand twitches in his against her will. “I'm not,” she protests.

He looks at her long enough to show his disbelief, but can't seem to hold the gaze. How much does he know? How well does he see past her ruses? She knows she lets her guard down around him, but not that much. There is no way he knows as much as he thinks she does. Perhaps he thinks she is more clever than she seems. Perhaps he realizes she is not as one dimensional as the Light of Demacia. It is impossible that he understands just how calculated her personality is.

He is scowling now, jaw clenched like its tightness will keep his anger at bay. He opens his mouth, after a moment manages, “at least – never mind.”

Lux waits in the silence for a long while.

Ezreal rolls to his side, staring at her. His eyes droop sleepily. His magic markings aren't moving nearly as quick, now.

She wonders if he even realizes that his thumb is still stroking over hers, circular and soothing. She wonders if he realizes that she does not need his approval, and she wishes the tight coil in her gut
would realize it too.

In the quiet, she reaches out with her free hand to run a thumb along his face. He does not flinch when she brushes over the bruise. He does not stop her hand when it roams, curious, along his jawline. Butterfly-light down his neck to his collarbone.

Sometimes she is curious about these things. But when her palm reaches his chest he catches her. His fingers are tense, both hands entwined with hers. It's too tight. “Lux.”

“You have no right to be angry with me!” Lux finds herself insisting. She feels childish and her cheeks flush with the embarrassment of it.

The argument seems to wake him up. Their quiet moment is shattered, and he sits up quickly, pulling away from her to hold himself up. “No, I do! You just disappeared!” His voice is over-loud in the night's quiet.

“I serve my prince and my people, Ezreal. Not you.”

“No shit, but I don't know how you missed the memo that I'm on the same mission as you under orders of your prince!”

She turns her head to look away. “I can't help that something came up.”

The whole bed shifts as he holds himself over her to look her in the eye. He has her trapped, one arm on either side of her, leaning over her and forcing her attention on him. She does not think he realizes how close they are.

“It's not like I wanted to come with you,” he snaps. “I just wanted to know where you went! Or when you'd be back, or if you were okay!”

She finds her own voice rising, arching off the bed to get back in his space. If she stays down it's like he's winning, somehow. “You can't tell me what to do!”

“I'm not *trying to*! Are you being obtuse on purpose? I know you're not this stupid!”

Lux shoves him off of her with all her strength. His surprise alone is enough for it to work, and he falls back to his side of the bed. He is scowling when she catches a glimpse of him, face all scrunched up as he glares into an empty corner of the room.

He is quiet as she storms into the living room with a blanket and pillow in hand.

Lux has slept on a hundred rocky grounds and concrete floors. Military mattresses one inch thin, and rotting wood in abandoned houses that smell like death and blood.

The couch hurts her back so much that her shoulder still aches in the morning.
Lux brings breakfast back for Ezreal in the morning, and leaves his share on the table. She does not mention it, and he does not thank her when he finally wakes up and sits down to eat.

They head to Zaun.

Her arm feels sore. She must have slept on it wrong, and she rolls it uncomfortably. Ezreal's eyes flit in her direction, but he does not say anything.

It is the longest they have gone in silence. The whirs and chirps of the robot s of Piltover fade into a quiet, but ceaseless buzz. The air of Piltover had felt thick to Lux, but even Ezreal coughs when they pass into Zaun territory. It's worse, here. The sky is clouded and she can barely see the mountains that she knows lie beyond the cityscape.

There is a Noxian checkpoint at the southern border of the town. Supposedly there are Demacian spies within – a letter should be delivered by Valor in the morning to advise her where to meet them to gather their reports. It feels like the first part of this mission that has mattered. To learn what Noxus is doing now is invaluable information.

They're to stay in a hotel just on the cusp of the city slums. Lux expects it to be worse than it is, but despite looking a bit run-down, it's clear the owners are putting their all into running the place. It is small, and the lobby seems to double as a recreation room for how busy it is.

But it is warm, and the woman who hands them their keys has soft hands and assures them they can let her know if they need anything. With Lux's light-bending, it's no surprise not to be recognized, but the woman doesn't even bat an eye at Ezreal. Lux is familiar with fame, and all the variety of reactions to it. This woman is not pretending not to recognize him, or treating him as if he were not famous. She does not recognize him.

It is hard for Lux to see a tired, over-worked woman her own age, and to recall that she is from Zaun. She always pictures people like Singed. Like Warwick. Disgusting, vile men, who would do anything to satiate their curiosity. No matter who it hurting. No matter the scars they leave on the planet.

Even a Noxian had been disgusted with them.

But not, she reminds herself, with their cruelty. Riven had hated being outdone. Surely, she thinks, dismissing Ezreal's previous argument on the matter.

She pictures a place like Piltover, technology around every corner. Hextech conveniences she can't begin to imagine needing. But now that she is here, she sees that there is not that much hextech, and the magic in the air is spread thin. The hotel does not even have a visiopathic crystal in the lobby, let alone in the individual rooms.

On the way to their room, Lux catches a glance of her reflection in a window. Her illusions are thicker, here. Her hair is black, longer and thinner, and her outfit dyed to match the clothes she sees around her. She looks like a stranger.

Ezreal catches her staring, and manages a crooked grin, tentative, “feel weird?”
Lux shrugs, and stares at his reflection, over her mirror's shoulder.

It is strange to move, and see a stranger who does not exist make the movement in real-time reaction. It is strange to force light to hit what isn't there. But this dark girl staring back at her is no less a stranger than the Lux who is so far from home, so aimlessly. Who is dating a boy she probably doesn't love.

She shakes her head and makes her way towards their room, trying to clear herself of such melodramatic thoughts. The petty relationship troubles of other girls her age have always irritated her, but now she can only over-think the same things all day.

Ezreal shuts the door behind him after he enters, then leans against it as if he is exhausted. Lux feels much the same. Fighting is exhausting. Both giving each other the cold shoulder and refusing to budge an inch.

She approaches him, trapping him in the entrance.

“I want you to kiss me,” she tells him.

His eyes dart quickly from her eyes to her mouth, then back, narrowed. He shifts in place as if he wants to back up, but she has him cornered. “No,” he tells her, his voice harsh, “you don't.”

Lux crosses her arms over her chest, leaning her weight to one side. She tries to keep irritation from her voice, but she is not used to being disobeyed. “And what makes you say that?”

He steps towards her so quickly that she startles, taking an awkward step back. She feels as though he is towering over her, as if his indignation gives him the extra couple inches he would need to surpass her height. His eyes flicker with recognition. She realizes, belatedly, that her flinch was exactly what he was looking for.

He repeats, “No. You don’t.”

Her frown deepens. “Then I want to kiss you.”

He sounds unconvincing. “Sure.”

There is a long moment, awkward and tense. Ezreal looks no less sour. She has never been intimidated by him before. Or perhaps she has never cared if someone was angry at her, before. Never had to admit that maybe, perhaps, she is in the wrong.

She should have told him she was leaving. She is not sure why she didn't. She is just so accustomed to traveling alone, so used to keeping everything personal a deep, deep secret. She was not helping Ashe for politics, but for friendship. For Quinn, and the older woman's hopeless affections.

Can a kiss qualify as an apology?

Ezreal's affections are just as hopeless, and is so strange to think that he actually likes her. Or his idea of her. Things will be strained if she does not fix their fight, soon.

This is strategic.
It feels logical to press her lips to his. Before closing her own eyes, she watches his flutter shut – sees his expression relax. She feels his whole body loosen, hands coming to rest at her hips. They do not wander, just sit, comfortable.

When she pulls back, Ezreal's voice is breathy. “Drop the illusion. It's weird for me.”

She complies with ease, her body instantly feeling lighter with the relief of letting her magic go.

She leans back into him, herself now, and more comfortable for it. He squeezes her hips gently, tilts his head just-so. She does not want to pull back from him, even when she feels short of breath. Her face is heated from her cheeks to her ears, and the same warmth emanates from his chest where she rests her hands.

She does not pull her hands away, when they finally part again. His hands stay at her waist. Their faces are close. She feels ridiculous, like the noble girls her age that used to try to gossip with her about boys. It had been so scandalous to set up private dates and hold hands. Let alone kissing alone in a hotel room.

Lux shifts her weight, and Ezreal reflexively lets go of her.

She has to take his hands in hers and put them back. To her relief, he snickers. Good. At this rate she won't need to apologize.

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They share the bed. There is just one. It isn't as comfortable as Ezreal's, or her own, but it isn't as bad as the couch, or the ground.

In the dark, they are comfortably quiet. He is always shirtless when he sleeps, and she allows herself the curiosity of running her hand along his abdomen. She pretends not to notice his slightly uneven breathing.

She sleeps well, and comfortably, her head rested on Ezreal's shoulder and his hand around hers. They are back on track to seem functional, and she is eager for morning. Eager to feel useful again. To actually accomplish something for Jarvan, something real.

Lux wakes with a jolt in the middle of he night, alert. She strains herself to hear something, feigning sleep. Ezreal is still asleep, curled away from her. She feels his chest rise and fall, still under her palm, too even to be faked.

The run-down inn works to her advantage. Slow as the footsteps are, Lux still hears them. The door creaks open; she sees the dim hall light behind her eyes. Bated breath as they approach the bed, and the too-familiar sound of a dagger being drawn from a sheath.

She waits until they are close, and in one movement shoves Ezreal off the other side of the bed and rolls over into the open space.

The blade stabs into the mattress where she had been laying. She ignores Ezreal's startled shout as he crashes against the hardwood flooring, and conjures light from her hands to the attacker. It stuns him in place, binding him, and illuminating an entirely unfamiliar face.

Her illusions were not enough to go undetected. How attentively are her assailants watching? Are
they worth using from here on out? Is he independent? Military? She does not recognize the man, but can only assume he is Noxian. He looks young – her age, but his face is aged and tired. Scars line up the side of his face, each one a different shade of crimson, burning up under her magic. But he does not cry out.

Ezreal manages his first coherent words, a furious, “what–” to the intruder. Lux catches his scramble to stand on the edge of her sight. The distraction is enough that she doesn’t react in time to her snare falling away.

There is another spark of light in the dark as Ezreal is suddenly in front of her, taking a fist to his face. His magic fades, and she throws more light almost blindly, just for vision in the dark. The heat of it misses the assassin, a useless attack, but she can’t waste the weight of his swing. Ezreal stumbles to the side, clutching his nose with a groan, and Lux takes the opportunity to lunge at the stranger, knocking him to the ground.

He swings at her with the dagger, snarling, and she catches his wrist with both hands. He still manages to slice a thin line across her collar. Sharp pain shoots through her chest, but she only grips tighter. She twists herself to press her knees down, heavy on his stomach until his hold loosens and the dagger drops from his hand.

He scrambles for it, groping along the floor wildly. Her light is close to his face, blinding him from what he is reaching for.

Lux snatches it up from the floor. Without hesitation, she plunges the blade into his gut. Words flash through her blank mind, robotic lessons she knows as well as breathing. Don’t aim for the heart. You’ll probably just hit the ribs. Stomach is more reliable.

She pushes deep with the palm of her hand on the hilt, watching him bleed. Watching him cough up crimson onto her nightgown skirts. His arms reach for her, so weak she does not even stop them before they fall, limp.

She checks his heart, his pulse. They are still. This is good luck. Stab wounds can take far longer to kill a man, but he didn’t hold much time.

Lux stands up, steady, the dagger still in her hand.

Ezreal’s nose is bleeding. He is wide-eyed, staring at her. She cannot read the expression on his face. It looks familiar. She cannot feel anything at all, except for the sting on her collar, the heat of the blood on her hands, and the cold of its stains sticking her skirts to her legs. She is not thriving in this chaos.

All she can think is that Ezreal is being so loud as he stomps over to her, grabs her wrist, and pulls her to the bathroom.

She allows him to lead her, and obediently sits on the edge of the bathtub as he damps a towel. He takes the dagger from her gingerly, only to toss it to the floor. He kneels in front of her, and washes the blood from her hands. He tries to do something for the blood in her skirt, but all it does is smudge and smear.

And then they are still. Staring at each other in the bathroom. Ezreal’s nose is still bleeding, red dripping down his face. He does not seem to notice.
There is a knife by the door. A dead body in the next room. Lux feels nothing at all. But as she stares at him, she slowly recalls how to at least read his emotions.

“You're scared,” she observes.

Blood catches Ezreal's teeth when he opens his mouth to argue, indignant as ever, “I'm not.”

She does not press his lie.

Eventually he says, “you killed that guy.”

She does not bother affirming that she had to. This should be obvious. She nods.

“First time seeing it. I mean, seeing it – be permanent. Uh. This close up, anyway.”

No revival. No magic fountain.

She does not know what to say to that. She does not want to point out that this is far from her first kill. “Your nose.”

“It's not broken.”

He should at least do something to stop the bleeding, but he does not. She watches red pin-points drip onto the tile floor from the steady stream down his face. It is fascinating.

She does not know what to say, and knows that he does not either. So she says nothing, standing up and heading back to the bedroom. She kneels by the body, and tries to keep her hands clean as she rummages through his clothing. She had hoped to be more polite after Ezreal so kindly cleaned her up, but she still winds up with blood on her all over again. She does not find any identification, but she does find a Noxian military emblem.

She isn't surprised, and shows her findings to Ezreal.

“Thought as much,” he says. He wipes at the blood on his face with the back of his hand.

“This doesn't tell us much, though,” Lux murmurs. “Someone independent could be framing Noxus. He could have done this without orders. And if it is on orders, they could have come from anyone. Who knows how high up. Or how low.”

“But why would they even target you to begin with? You're not royalty. You're not... In charge of anyone.” Ezreal is blunt, but Lux doesn't mind. She's too numb to be offended by the easy dismissal of her nobility, and what precious little Ezreal knows of her spying missions is more than Noxus should.

“The primary motive I can think of is very simply – to send a message. Fame is as worthless as you think it is, but to extinguish Demacia's brightest light would be a declaration of war. Second to that, fame could lead to fear. Eliminate me quickly and quietly, to avoid facing me on a battlefield.” She sits on the bed, pausing for a moment. She almost does not mention it at all. “Maybe they want to strike as close as they can to the prince.”

Ezreal is scowling, but does not try to fight her this time. “Those all make sense. It'd be easier to tell
the motive if we had proof of who really sent him.”

They are quiet.

The room smells, and there is no getting back to sleep, now.

They wait until sunrise, shooting theories back and forth. Lux pictures Noxus military men storming in and filling the room and arresting the two of them. No matter this man's origins, there's no way she can get the body downstairs, let alone hide it in complete secrecy. Even with clever illusions, it would be too big a task.

She imagines being jailed, or even put to death, but when she voices as much, Ezreal just shrugs. “This is Zaun, Lux. No one is going to ask questions.”

She quirks an eyebrow at him. “We can't just carry a body down the stairs and dispose of it in broad daylight without repercussions.”

“No, that's pretty much exactly what we can do. We're right by the slums. Shit like this happens there, no one cares enough to ask questions. Won't stop whoever sent him from figuring out something’s up when he doesn't come back, but onlookers are fine.”

Lux is unconvinced, but has to admit that there is no way no one heard the struggle. The walls are not well insulated, here.

When Valor arrives, she sends him off again with a quick, coded explanation. They only have to wait an hour for the reply. We'll take care of it. Followed by directions for the meeting place.

She is apprehensive to leave a dead body in a hotel room, but obeys none-the-less.

She does not bother with her illusion in the morning. The woman behind the counter seems oddly unconcerned by the night and day change in her appearance overnight. Perhaps she does not notice, with how quickly her eyes dart away from her, how suddenly she finds herself needed in another room.

She must have heard the commotion. Lux leaves a do-not-disturb sign hung on their door before they leave.

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Their contact seems to know something of what occurred. Lux can see it in his expression when he sees her. Confusion, at first, with her disguise. Then recognition and concern. More concern than is needed. This is why she cannot die. She is a figurehead of hope to so many people from her home. More now than before the League, despite that they should know she's strong enough to take care of herself by now.

He is a muscular man, like she expects to see in soldiers. Twice as big as her, armor pristine and shining, though its style is all wrong. It is not shining, golden, heroic. It is rough and spiked and frightening. His eyes are dark, perfect for his role here, but she worries for how easy it is to read his expressions.

Still, he is professional. His gaze darts to Ezreal inquisitively. Lux nods.
“He can be here. He's with me.”

“So I've heard,” the man says. His voice is harsh, and Lux feels herself prickling. She hasn't read the Journals in a long time. Are they still in them? Even now, with so much else going on?

She brushes past the subject – reminds herself to buy a journal later and that this man is living as a Noxian and must adapt to their impolite ways. She tries to be sympathetic for the sacrifices he must have made to be here. “I've been advised you'll be remaining here until further notice. I can't send anything personal in writing, but I could pass on a verbal message, when I return home. Though I can't say how long it will be.”

He arches an eyebrow, skepticism in every inch of his body. “You think you will?”

“In time,” Lux says, becoming brusque. He is not doing much to lighten her poor mood.

There is quiet, for a moment. There are civilians passing by the alleyway, around a corner. Sometimes it is safest to be in plain sight, and the slums are the easiest place to blend in. Lux listens to the sound of them. It sounds like market street, back home, and she suddenly feels homesick.

His expression does not soften, but his eyes are intent on a grimy wall. “My only message is for my flower. Laurent. If you could report the same of me. That I'll return, in time.”

Lux does not understand for a moment. “Laurent,” she repeats.

He doesn't hide his shyness well, but there is something endearing in the way he rubs his cheek like he could wipe away the blush. “Never mind. I just... Never mind.”

Lux hesitates to let it go, interested not in Fiora's love life, but in the idea that she might have one. Someone besides Jarvan.

Lux nods, and ignores Ezreal's quiet snickering. It is strange that just as she becomes aware of him, he slides his hand around hers. It is strange that he seems to do this with no ulterior motive or reason. She does not let it distract her.

“There's not much change to how things are in Zaun. We still get a lot of visitors from scientists. We haven't been deployed anywhere, and from the sounds of it, we won't be. It sounds like our base is less military and more research, right now.”

“That sounds about right, for Zaun,” Ezreal chimes in.

There is an awkward beat, wherein the soldier looks at him as if just recalling his presence. Then he looks back to Lux. “I think there's... Something. Something happening here, but I don't have the authorization. I'm no scientist, so I can't – I don't know how to...” His voice cracks almost helplessly, and he trails off. Runs a hand through his hair.

“Do you think it requires observation?”

“I don't know. We're in Zaun for a reason. I think this base is... Protecting someone. Someone has a pet project big enough to need a Noxian army covering it. If we have the resources, and if it's not beyond my place to suggest it – we could use another undercover. Someone with the knowledge and a background to get into whatever experiments we're guarding.”
It sounds like he has more information. Lux imagines he doesn't want to say all of it out loud. “Have you written a report?”

He nods, and opens his mouth, only to be interrupted by Ezreal. “Do you think it's something like Zac?”

The man scowls, but after a moment of consideration, admits, “it is a possibility. But I can't say for sure. I do know that most of the scientists involved in that project haven't been heard from, but they also haven't turned up dead.”

“Not saying much, here,” Lux comments. She thinks of the dead man in their hotel room. Will his death be reported? Are any?

“Or,” Ezreal muses out loud, “could have more to do with Jinx.”

Lux feels uncomfortable, but cannot place why. “Perhaps. Or it could be unrelated to both.” She pauses. “On another matter, what do you know of my assailant?”

“Nothing, but this doesn't surprise me. With out focus on defense, I imagine an assassin would come directly from Noxus. Do you want me to look into it?”

She shakes her head. There's no point.

He gives her the few reports he have, for her to pass on to Valor. She slides them down her shirt and into her bra. It will be a long a time before she can pass this on. They will not want to be seen near Valor in Zaun again. Perhaps they can see him somewhere between Noxus and Zaun. Knowing that Noxus is their next stop tightens her stomach uncomfortably. It has been a long time since she has been there. And Lord, Noxus is not even safe when she is in disguise. It is a perilous place for anyone.

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The body is gone from the hotel room. There are blood stains in the flooring and none of the staff will meet her eyes.

There is a boy, sitting in the windowsill, watching the two of them enter like a hawk. He was not there when they opened the door, but he is there by the time Ezreal closes it behind them, by the time Lux has dropped her illusion.

His skin is dark, but his eyes light like his hair. He keeps a knee pulled to his chest.

Lux stills, her hand instinctively reaching out in front of Ezreal, magic flaring in preparation to protect them both. She eyes the hourglass shape drawn on his face, but cannot sense any magic from him. It is drawn on, not magic, like Ezreal.

The boy waves a dismissive hand, as if to tell her he is no threat. She trusts him, for some reason, but still does not relax.

“I heard you talking,” the boy announces, sounding rather indifferent on the matter.

Lux furrows her brow. It's impossible. She would have sensed someone. Even Ezreal would have
sensed someone. She feels unease in her stomach, the instant wave of self doubt and too-late
solutions to prevent the situation they are already in. But despite herself, this child seems trust
worthy, to her. She can't place why.

“Did you, now?” She asks.

He cocks his head to the side, then nods. His eyes rest more on Ezreal than her, with an interest that
is turning less suspicious and more curious by the second. He is starting to sound more childish by
the second when he asks, “you're famous, right? A pitie in the League.”

Ezreal shrugs, steps past Lux, and takes a seat on the bed casually. If that isn't an invitation to danger,
Lux doesn't know what is. But with that small motion, the other boy looks to relax as well, sitting in
the windowsill as if it were simply for lack of another seat. Lux stays by the door.

“Are you here to threaten us?” Lux asks, because he is being rather roundabout if that's his plan.
Furthermore, he looks rather... Young, for that. Somewhere close to her own age, perhaps a couple
years younger.

He frowns. His hands are clasped around his raised knee, and he inspects them. “No. I mean,
maybe.”

This feels like babysitting a shy child. If she were not carefully keeping note of her surroundings in
case they need to fight, she might try a kinder tone. “What interest did you have in our talk?”

“Not much,” he says, and grins. The way he leans back against the open sky is carefree. He is not
any sort of trained soldier, Lux can tell. Just a street boy. He hardly recognizes Ezreal, and does not
see through her disguise. “Don't care about the military junk. I mean, kind of interesting, but not by
area.”

“Then...?”

“Jinx. What do you know about her?”

Lux blinks. She imagines by now it is public information, so she does not mind telling him. “She's
being held by the Piltover Police Department for her countless acts of terrorism, final judgment
pending.”

He shakes his head. “I know that. I mean – the experiment. Back there, in the alley, the guy said
there are experiments going on, and Pitie here said 'like Jinx.' ”

“How did you go undetected?” Lux asks, stalling for time. She cannot recall if what little they know
about Jinx was ever made public by the Institute.

The boys weakness – his pride. He beams at her, and hops off the windowsill to turn his back to her.
There is hextech glowing at his hip, strapped around him haphazardly. “I wasn't undetected the first
time. Heard you talk, then you chased me off. So I hopped back to before I was anywhere near you
and kept my distance.”

She does not understand hextech well enough to ask questions. Does not believe him enough to ask
for more details. But there is something undeniably familiar about his machine. It tugs at her the same
way Zilean's magic had.
“How’d you find us after that?” Ezreal asks.

The boy seems proud of this, too, and spins back around to face them. “I asked around about you with the other kids. Annabelle's mom runs the place, so she said you'd been staying here.”

“Ah,” Lux says.

“I'm Ekko, by the way,” he finally offers, then goes as far as holding out a hand to her. Though Ezreal was the one he recognized, he's picked up that she's the one who does the talking. It's surprising for Ezreal to be so quiet, but Lux imagines he already feels uncomfortable being so involved in military arrangements, let alone immediately getting caught conspiring with a spy in enemy territory.

She has to cross the room to take his hand, but he waits patiently, and grins wide when she does. She tells him, “a pleasure to meet you,” and he does not question that she hasn't given her name.

He makes himself right at home, plopping down on the bed beside Ezreal and ignoring the blond's look of irritation. Lux sets a consoling hand on Ezreal's shoulder. This boy is strange, but he is giving them information with ease, and not threatening them with what he knows from them.

“How are you asking after Jinx?” Lux asks. “Do you know more about what Zaun is doing?”

Ekko rolls his eyes at her. “It isn't like it's all of Zaun, lady. But if you wanna know what the scientist weirdos are doing, the best I can tell you is that it's nothing to do with Zac. You mentioned him, right? But that's why I want to find out. If it wasn't him, it probably is Jinx, isn't it? She wasn't always like this.”

Lux comes to sit on Ekko's opposite side. Perhaps a nurturing persona is better, after all, and it doesn't hurt to have him surrounded. She looks over his head to exchange a look with Ezreal, who appears to be fighting off boredom.

“What do you mean?” Lux presses.

The way he looks up at her is endearing. He has intelligent eyes, but a childish face. His cheeks are round, and his easy smiles give him cute dimples. It is hard to place his age. Her age? Younger?

He shifts in his seat. “She used to have pink hair. Like that other piltie from the League – Vi. That color. And she used to... I mean, she was always thin. She was a street kid, like half of us here. But not sickly, you know? I saw a couple of fights when she was in the League. I tried to watch more, but I only saw a couple. We don't have VCs in our house. Anyway, she wasn't always... Crazy.”

“You knew her.”

Ekko shakes his head, but admits, “a little. Not very well. But I liked her.” After a moment of thought, with reddened cheeks, he corrects himself, “we got along, I mean.”

“I wish I had more to tell you.” Lux says, startled to find that she is being sincere.

Ekko is still blushing faintly when he grins at her, and reaches across her lap to take her hands in his own. She hears Ezreal make an indignant sound, but does not look past Ekko to see his expression. “That's okay,” Ekko says with sincerity. “I trust you.”
Lux blinks. It is a strange thing to say, but she gets the impression that is simply the type of boy he is. Ekko continues to watch her fondly, bowing his head to stay beneath her, but peering up through thick eyelashes. His smile is soft.

“Oh,” Lux manages, surprised by how easily she is charmed.

“...There’s a festival soon,” Ekko says, abruptly. “The Glowlight Festival. In a week. I helped with the firework finale. Me and my friends. You should watch it.”

“Perhaps,” Lux offers. She cannot say for sure if they will be here that much longer. Not when someone clearly knows it. Then again, by her calculations, there has to be a delay between word of their assassin’s death and sending another. Unless they were prepared for that. Thinking about it is dizzying.

With Lux’s mind on murder, Ezreal clears his throat. “Wanna quit hitting on my girlfriend?”

Ekko laughs, pulling away from her with ease. “Nope. But I will.” There is a dissatisfied grunt from Ezreal, but Ekko brushes past that just as smoothly. He stands up and waves goodbye. Thanks them for the information and says, “I’ll look into things on my end.”

Then he lets himself out of the room, out the door like he belonged here to begin with.

Lux stares at the expanse of the room in his absence. His presence had filled the room, like sunshine through the window. The sun is setting, now, and Lux murmurs, “I don't think we've seen the last of him.”

Ezreal’s hand rests on her arm. It’s nice just to be touching, and she is tired.

After letting the silence settle, letting the tension of an intruder fade away with the daylight, Lux begins to speculate, “do you really think the experiments might--” before she is cut off. Ezreal pushes her backwards onto the bed in a gentle, but deliberate movement.

Lux allows it, and stares up at him as he holds himself over her. The room is getting dark; they never turned the lights on after entering. It is a comforting sort of darkness, with how close their faces are. She feels his breath on her lips.

“Stop thinking,” Ezreal tells her. “For like, five minutes.”

“Alright,” she lies. She knows it isn't convincing, and so she arches off the bed to kiss him. The way their lips slot together feels natural. She knows, now, how to tilt her head. How he will tilt his.

Their kisses are soft and careful. Familiar, but equally unsure. She wonders if his hesitation is a kindness to her discomfort or a fear of her cruelty.

It is a comforting constant warmth they can leach from one another. His hair tickles her cheek, and she feels her lips curling against his in an uncontrolled smile. Being pinned by Ezreal is reassuring, somehow. Because it is him. Nonthreatening. She even feels the slight tremble of the arm he has himself propped up by. She likes the way his jacket falls past his sides and touches her own.

He pulls back from her, and his uneven breaths are cool against her wet lips. Her fingers brush his thigh, not wanting him to move away, yet. “What're you giggling at?” He asks, playful. He bows his head, and presses his mouth to her jaw in butterfly-light kisses down to her neck.
She would point out that she had only smiled, but his tone really does make her laugh. The kisses to her neck feel strange. They send a shiver up her spine, make her fingertips tingle as she raises her hands to run up Ezreal's chest for familiarity. It's another overwhelming sensation, new to her, but she tries to obey. Tries to stop thinking.

She hears herself gasp before she entirely comprehends his teeth grazing her neck, quickly replaced by light sucking. Unwillingly, she lets out a quiet moan before biting her lip to keep quiet. She hooks her fingers in his belt loops just for something to hold on to.

She feels his lips, still soft to her flesh as he murmurs “sorry,” before doing it again an inch higher.

Her voice is uncomfortably breathy, “I'm... Nn. Not sure I believe you.”

Ezreal doesn't reply, his mouth otherwise occupied.

Her whole body feels hot and she is not sure what to do about it. She tugs weakly at his belt loops. He understands, somehow, and kisses a line along her jaw before capturing her lips again. Lux whimpers into his mouth, somewhat disgusted with herself, but still tugging harder until his body is flush against hers. Until there is no room for her to pull back from kissing him, even if she wanted to. She does not want to.

Now that he is hardly supporting his weight, his arm shifts. She lifts to make – whatever he is doing – easier for him, allowing him to slide his hand under her neck. He is mostly just resting there, but sometimes his thumb strokes the side of her throat, still sensitive from his bites. It is alarming that the hurt of it only makes her press against him harder. She too short of breath and dizzy to question herself.

Apparently Ezreal is not. He draws back, and presses his forehead to hers. The room is quiet, save for both their labored breathing. It is a comfort that his breath is just as shallow as hers.

“Are you, uh. Are you alright?”

“Probably,” is the best answer she can manage. Her body is still burning up. She does not want to stop, but in even this small pause, she knows she should.

“You know, Janna says,” Ezreal tells her with a crooked grin, “that having sex can temporarily increase your magical aptitude.”

This makes it easy to grab a pillow from beside her and swing it against his head.

He takes the hit and rolls off of her, laughing. His cheeks are glowing bright as ever, as red as they are blue. Lux finds herself turning her head just to stare at him, enamored by the color just as much as the heavy rise and fall of his chest, as his breath still comes in pants. She reaches out to hold his hand, soothed by the way he rhythmically strokes his thumb over hers.

They watch each other for a long time in the quiet, not wanting to break the silence. Their body heat slowly cools with the breeze from the window. Pink cheeks lose their tinge. Breathing slows. She is starry eyed in the silence, listening to the cricket songs outside and the occasional clatter and chatter from the hall and neighboring rooms.

Ezreal is the first to speak. “We could stay for the festival.”
She would like to. She was invited, after all. It's only polite. Yet she knows the dangers, and all she can answer is, “perhaps.”
Chapter 11

They meet with their contact a second time, the day of the festival, though it is entirely by mistake. He is roughing up some street boy, voice two octaves lower than it had been when he spoke to them. His eyes are sharp, different from the soft look in them when he’d talked of his “flower.” His gaze flits to them, then immediately away.

If Lux were not in disguise, she might make a show of defending the child. As things are, it’s just unwanted attention – for both of them. His reports are still tucked in her bra for safekeeping. She cannot risk them being snatched from the room, or from her purse or pockets if she's mugged.

She tries not to think about it, even when she feels the paper crinkle uncomfortably against her chest.

It is amazing the way she can be a part and apart from things. She thinks of Freljord, and the war she swung in Ashe's favor with her magic. The way she left, immediately after. She thinks of Ezreal, capturing Jinx in her absence. Then leaving. She thinks of their spy's request for an undercover scientist in Zaun, and wonders if she will ever hear the outcome of the situation.

This mission has made her nomadic, like Ezreal always has been, but all she wants to do is go home and settle down.

If Ezreal were not himself, it might have been a nice date. Instead Lux spends half the day annoyed out of her mind and listening to him fail to explain anything meaningful about the celebration. Aside from his pretentious and condescending rambling, the day is nice.

The weather is clear and there is a cool breeze running through the city. Lux is impressed by how well the city is decorated. It isn't as lovely as Ionia's festivals with all their paper lanterns, or even the every-day sights in Demacia, but it is nicer than she expected.

The streets are lined with shallow candles. There must be thousands of them. The wax drips down outdoor steps, messy, but glowing from the flame light.

Lux follows the lights, more invested in the curious paths they weave than Ezreal's boring talks. The two of them walk aimlessly, through the upper city. It is rundown. If Lux didn't know better she would think this was the slums, but the further they go, the worse the buildings are. Holes in the roofs, thicker air, leaking pipes along the walls going – God knows where.

They find Ekko, deep in the lower side of the city, lighting candles in front of a mural. He is surprisingly slow to notice them, and even when he does, spends a long moment to recall who Lux is past her illusion. He'd only seen it for a second, before.

He stands up carefully, like he cannot so much as disturb the air near the candles. “Hey.”

Lux is hyper-aware of Ezreal beside her, how relaxed he seems today, as they approach the younger boy. His hands rest loose in his pockets, elbow nudging hers. Even as Ekko holds out a hand for Lux to take, as if he were going to lead her somewhere. The younger boy just holds it up, her palm on his.

“Did you draw these?” Lux asks, taking in the faces painted in the mural. It's not hard to guess why they are there.
Ekko scratches at his cheek with his free hand. His hand is clammy under hers. “No. I mean – some of them.”

She looks at the mural carefully, taking in the different art styles more attentively, now. Paying attention makes it obvious how many different people must have drawn them. Some even have signatures. Other times she gets the idea that it’s a name to replace an artist’s rendering. Friends to those without the skill or talent to honor them.

She feels Ekko’s hand, the way he shifts uncomfortably without letting go.

“I’ll, uh,” Ekko stammers, but she does not think it is just from embarrassment. He looks like he wants to leave. He looks young, vulnerable. “Show you the sights?”

Lux smiles, gentle for him. “Sure.”

Ezreal follows behind them, and when Lux spares glances back to him, he looks surprisingly at peace with it. Maybe he’s a bigger softie than she thought, setting aside his jealousy for the understanding that Ekko is just a child seeking comfort. She blows him a kiss over her shoulder as a joke, satisfied with the way his surprise turns to amusement. The way he turns his head down to hide his snickering.

Ekko leads them through town, seeking out the biggest festival displays. There are sales booths all done up with streamers and flowers. A group of children put on a play. He buys Lux a fresh flower broach to clip on her shirt, and waves a dismissive hand to Ezreal.

“I’ll take it from here,” Ekko is saying.

Lux hears the play-along indignation from Ezreal. She does not make out his words.

She sees Malzahar.

The idea crosses her mind that it has been a long time since she saw him. The institute. Since then their time on the road, in Piltover, in Freljord. It feels like forever.

He is sitting on a rooftop. She would think he was watching the sunset, but their eyes lock. He sees through her illusions, she knows.

She does not think about how meaningless it is to see him. About how dangerous. Thought leaves her altogether. Ekko’s hand drops from hers. She drops magic just as fast, twisting light even harder than before until she is invisible.

This time Ezreal’s frustration is real as he calls her name.

_Idiot_, she thinks. After she has been using illusions everywhere they go, he would so easily shout her name in a crowd. She feels her own annoyance swelling, like it’s feeding off of Malzahar’s presence. He puts her on edge, in a way that makes her quick to anger, as if she is working off nothing but instincts.

She has to scope out a way to that roof. It doesn’t take long to find a potion shop with a fire escape. Buildings are so close together in Zaun, it is easy to hop from roof to roof. Her disguises may not
work on Malzahar, but being invisible does. She knows this from the battlefield.

Too bad for her noisy landing. The prophet's head turns in her direction, just slightly. She lets her illusion give way, flicker enough to show she is not trying to hide from him. He turns back.

“You're in Zaun,” he observes. His voice sounds so strange. Sound always echoes oddly when he is near. It's enchanting, dizzying.

Lux comes to him and takes a seat facing away. She lets her weight fall against his back. He feels like an immovable wall behind her. This is strangely soothing. As is the way her guard cannot drop. It makes her feel whole.

Taking comfort in being unable to relax makes her acutely aware of how broken she is.

She tries to distract herself. “Did you foresee all of this?”

He shifts. She feels his bare arms against hers. “Yes.”

Lux pulls her knees to her chest. “Then why do any of it? I'm certain you participated more than was necessary just to gain followers.”

She waits for explanation, but none comes. She does not press him, because she knows it is only a waste of effort.

“You've been near the rift,” he says.

Lux tilts her head to the side, inquisitive. She does not think of the way this rests her head on his shoulder. “Pardon?”

“One of them,” he clarifies, as if it is of no interest to him. “There are more. There are many.”

She tries not to think of this. Of the void creatures that now have no regulation, no institute to keep them. More will come. Even having seen them, the monsters, it feels like an invisible enemy. It is hard to think of them as a real threat. In concept, the void is far more terrifying, more unstoppable than petty stalemate wars.

But now the sunset is beautiful. Lux relaxes. C loses her eyes and hears the murmurs of the crowd below them, only growing louder and louder as time passes. It sounds like home. She takes in the cool evening air, trying to soak in the lingering summer warmth. First Freljord, next autumn, then winter.

Malzahar's skin is as refreshingly cool as the breeze.

“Are you here just to watch the sunset?” Lux asks. Then, teasing, “or are you just people-watching?” Somehow she doubts he is here for the fireworks.

The thought sobers her. She needs to get back to Ezreal and Ekko.

Malzahar is leaning back, upper body turned to watch her over his shoulder as her invisibility falls away. She thinks she reads amusement in his eyes, but it might be her imagination. She cannot see if he smiles, and the sunset directly behind him shadows his face.
This whole meeting feels pointless and scandalous all at once. She does not say goodbye.

The orange of the sky fades dark much quicker than Lux anticipated. She must have been on the roof longer than she thought.

She feels frantic to find the other two, retracing their steps through the city. Ekko hadn't brought them to the 'perfect spot' for seeing the fireworks, so she cannot just meet them there. She can see the way people are beginning to separate into small groups, beginning to scatter from the business and residential districts. More and more people are seated on rooftops and front lawns. She is even invited to join a couple picnic blankets by friendly strangers.

The last place she can think of is the mural.

She is not there yet when she hears someone calling to her. “Lux!”

She turns reflexively. Ezreal had slipped up earlier, and she will scold him later for slipping up now, but at least she has found him.

No.

The stranger catches her by the wrist, his grip tight. She feels her wrist bruising as she tries to wrench away, but he is stranger than her. Escapes are not Lux's strong point. Not getting caught is supposed to be.

It is dark in the streets, too many high walls for any festival goers to be lingering. He pushes her into the wall, her back slamming into it so hard she loses her breath. She coughs, desperately trying to get air back in her lungs. His hand leaves her wrist but it's not enough time before it's his arm pressed against her throat.

Her vision goes spotty. She is weak. She tries to throw out her magic, but it misses, sparking weakly. Her illusion flickers away against her will and the hair that falls in her eyes is blonde and real.

If he wanted her dead he'd have a weapon out by now. Disgust congeals in her gut as his eyes rake up and down her body. She struggles against him, her panic quickly changing from one kind to another as his free hand snakes up her thigh, along the curve of her hip. Over her breast.

He grabs her collar and tears. She feels the night air on her chest.

“Thought you'd be better at this,” he whispers, leaning in too close. She feels his breath, thick and heavy in her ear. It makes her shudder, which only spurs on another coughing fit. She wishes she had the energy to spit on him. Screaming wouldn't even be worth it; she hears fireworks.

The letters. The reports tucked in her bra. He grabs them out. There are two flashes of light, smaller than the sky lights. He yanks back his hand with a pained hiss. Color lights his face, and fades. There is a sound like a loud crack drowned out by the explosion of the fireworks.

He collapses, and she falls with him.

He lands flat on his face, and Lux catches herself on her knees. She feels the scratches bleed from the rough cement on her palms and knees. She is sputtering, gasping for breath, and even so she forces herself to drag her heavy body to his and snatch back the documents.
There is blood on the envelopes. Blood pooling around the man's head. She is grateful for the way his hair covers the wound. He is still breathing, weak.

Her vision still blurs in the dark when she looks up. Ekko is behind the man, chest heaving with exhaustion, some sort of bat in his hand. There is blood on it, and the machine at his hip is glowing and whirring.

Something drapes over her shoulders. A jacket. It smells like Ezreal. It takes her a moment longer in her oxygen-deprived state to understand that he is beside her.

“Sixth time's the charm,” Ekko manages, between pants.

Ezreal is scowling. He does not sound nearly as tired. “If you say so.”

Ekko offers her his hand. Lux is not sure why she shakes her head at him. Ezreal helps her up instead, one hand resting on her shoulder, the other in front of her. He holds her hand too tightly; his sweat stings the fresh cuts on her palm.

“I'm sorry,” Ekko says, at length. “I know this place. We couldn't get here faster. Tried. This could have been a lot worse.” The silence broken by fireworks and muffled cheering in the distance. His eyes wander to her torn blouse, then immediately dart away, guilty. She is beyond caring, but he still says, “I mean... Rewind. Scratch that.”

She is short of breath, but for fear he actually will rewind just to try sound more sensitive, Lux forces out, “it's okay.” Her throat hurts, like she has to rip the words from her lungs and pull them all the way out.

They leave the body. He may even survive if someone finds him. It's a risk that crosses her mind, but she is too frazzled to act on it, and instead lets Ezreal lead her away. They should be checking his body. Now she cannot use that particular disguise. Making another is not so hard, but now it's plain to anyone that Ezreal's companion is Lux. No matter what she looks like. Perhaps she can drop the illusions completely. They just have to be careful.

At the mural they sit down, Lux between the boys. It is uncomfortable the way they both walk on eggshells, and though it is not cold, she pulls Ezreal's jacket tighter around her. In fact, the candles around them almost make it too warm, especially for how late it is. She wants to take a shower.

They can barely see the fireworks over the high walls around them. Sometimes there is a boom, and color paints the faces on the walls. The smog in Zaun is thick in disgusting, but the colors catch it in the sky, like a rainbow caught in mist. Ekko does not complain that they are missing his show.

Lux murmurs, “do you think he was another assassin? He knew about the reports. Maybe a soldier from the base.”

The younger boy does not reply, slouching with his arms resting on his knees.

Ezreal looks at her like she is insane. “You want to talk theories now? Now?”

She is quiet. It's undignified to argue in front of acquaintances. But she knows this is exactly the same thing she did to go to Freljord, that he will be upset about all over again. “They know we're together. Everywhere you go, they'll know I'm there.”
“Yeah, well,” Ezreal mutters, resigned to the fact that this is the conversation they are having whether he likes it or not. “We can take care of ourselves.”

Ekko clears his throat. “She was hurt pretty badly. And he got away with your stuff.” When they turn to look at him he clarifies, “five times out of six. That's not taking care of yourselves.”

After a moment of consideration, “we need to go to Noxus. It's probably the most important stop on our journey.”

Ekko comments, “ew,” and Lux smiles before continuing.

“... If we're caught there, or hindered – even just expected – it'll make the whole trip pointless. It's our biggest priority, but as we are, it's useless to go there.”

Ezreal looks to be mulling it over. She rests her hand over his, and tries to convey her meaning through a silent look. At first he does not catch on, and she enjoys the way he turns his hand under hers until they are palm to palm. It still stings. Her blood is getting on his hand.

Eventually he catches on. He squeezes her hand, tight, painful. “You're not going alone.”

She tries to explain to him, logically. Surely he can appreciate logic. He has always favored rational thought over emotion. “It's safer. I've infiltrated before and I could do it again. It's easier when you're alone. And with my spells, you're our biggest give-away. It's hard to disguise two people, Ezreal. Maintaining it would be impossible.”

“You don't have to go alone,” Ekko offers lightly. “I could come with.”

“We don't know you,” Ezreal snaps. “We can't just trust you.”

The boy shrugs. “But you do, don't you?”

“That matter aside,” Lux interrupts, “in what way would that benefit you?”

Ekko hunches forward. Instead of spreading out he curls himself tight. “Noxus isn't Zaun's future.”

Of course. He is from here. Wants the best for his home. Just like in Freljord. Lissandra is not their future. But this does not directly benefit him, benefit Zaun. If anything it will only hurt things. In the short term, perhaps. She tries to consider longterm effects of Demacia's victory against Noxus, for Noxus' allies, but it is difficult. She has known nothing but this endless war. It is impossible to predict the ripples of it ending.

That is far too optimistic, anyway.

She feels nauseous.

“You would only be helping an enemy of an enemy. Noxus isn't Zaun's future – is Demacia?”

“It's not happening,” Ezreal insists, before Ekko can answer.

“Correct,” Lux agrees. She was really only showing the downfalls in his plan, not entertaining it.

Ekko is unbothered by being shut down. “I'm not gonna force you. Just thought me and my zero
drive might be a nice back up. If you won't take me with you to Noxus, I'll just head to Piltover, instead.”

“Heart set on adventure?” Ezreal asks. A smirk tugs at his lips.

“Something like that,” Ekko says. Then, so quiet Lux can hardly hear him over the fireworks, “yes on the future.”

They are nearing the finale. The three of them are quiet, heads craned back to see what they can over the rooftops.

In the dark of the night, the two of them walk Ekko home. Lux is a bit surprised he has a home, with how street savvy he is. How he seems to roam the city freely. His house is in a better state than the inn they've been staying at, even.

But it is after midnight, and the lights are still off.

Ezreal meets her gaze over Ekko's head. His expression is blank, like he thinks nothing of this. Lux supposes she shouldn't expect someone with no family to be concerned by another person's.

They watch him let himself in, watch lights flicker on throughout the house.

On the walk back to the inn, Lux watches Ezreal's shoulders. The way he scans their surroundings. He seems on edge, like he is expecting another attack. Maybe he is just cold. She still has his jacket, held shut over the tear in her blouse.

“Relax,” she tells him, softly.

He only grunts in response. She has grown used to following him around, but today they are side-by-side. She looks at him sidelong, taking in his jawline. The way his collar bone leads into his shirt. How the T-shirt falls on his body without his outerwear.

She tells him, “I'm fine, you know.”

“I'm glad,” he says, terse. “But I'm pissed off at you right now.”

“I wasn't sincerely entertaining the idea of Ekko joining us, you know,” Lux assures him.

Ezreal throws his head back in exasperation, sighing loudly. “I'm serious. I can't tell if you're just screwing with me or what. You're not stupid. I know that you aren't stupid. In fact, I don't think anyone could be fooled by that act. Not with who you are.”

He is quiet when they enter the inn, and up to their room. She is surprised – she doesn't take him for someone concerned with making a scene. Or someone thoughtful enough to think so carefully of how much attention they're getting under threat.

In the room he starts to strip off his clothes, voice coming out muffled by his movements, by his shirt peeled over his head. “If we're going to split, like you apparently really want to do, we need to agree on it first. You don't just run off for no reason. Where did you even go?”

“I saw Malzahar,” Lux admits. It is uncomfortable to tell the truth, and she kicks off her shoes just to have a reason to be looking down. “I wanted to visit.”
Ezreal is down to his boxers, halfway into the bathroom. He stops, hand on the doorknob, and looks over his shoulder to raise an eyebrow at her. “Malzahar,” he repeats. “The void guy?”

Lux takes a moment to reply. Her eyes drag up his body, taking in every detail like she'll be tested. When she meets his eyes, he does not seem concerned by this. “Yes.”

“I think we should make checklists of ‘people you will ditch me for in two seconds,’” he says. He is more concerned by her leaving than it being Malzahar. This is a relief, somehow. He closes the door behind him, but keeps talking. His voice echoes, losing its bite as he is lost in his own wit. “So far we've got Quinn, Ashe, Sejuani, Malzahar, Jarvan...”

She hears the shower turn on and steps closer to the door, raising her voice, “my prince should be at the beginning of that list.” After a pause, “or, perhaps he shouldn't be on the list at all. I'm here now, aren't I?”

“As opposed to?”

She feels hot steam on her feet.

“Marrying him.”

She hears the water hitting his body. Silence stretches on as she stares at her bare feet. She watches the steam swirl out, observing the way even dim light catches over it.

Eventually he says, “I thought so. The River King mentioned it. I think Taric had mentioned it before. Fleetingly. I kind of just ignored it. Just chatter.”

“It's the only future I've ever planned for.”

She is not sure why she is telling him. It's nauseating, nerve-wracking. She doesn't want to be standing here staring at a closed door, and so she slips out of her pants. She slips off Ezreal's jacket, then her torn blouse.

She is not necessarily comfortable having been seen in her bra, but when it comes down to it, the documents – and being assaulted – are a higher priority. After Ekko and Ezreal both seeing her in that state of undress she is numb to it.

She pulls Ezreal's jacket back on over her underwear. It isn't as though he smells good. Usually he just smells like dirt and sweat and a little bit of magic. But it's comforting, like military men and uniform marches. Like knowing what to do, even though it only reminds her that she has no idea.

“Yeah,” Ezreal says, “I kind of figured.”

She pulls the jacket tight, again. She doesn't like how weak her voice comes out when she is trying to speak with authority. “Noxus is too dangerous for you, right now. Or for us, if we're together.”

His tone is guarded. Flat. “Right.”

“Let's leave Zaun. Meet with Valor and wait for contact in Piltover.”

The shower knobs squeak, and the water comes to a stop. It's still a moment before Ezreal exits,
sweatpants hanging off his hips. Steam pours out of the room with him. His eyes are shut as he towels off his hair, dripping messily all over the floors.

“Wait for contact? We’re not going to see through the whole scientist situation, are...” Ezreal trails off when he opens his eyes. They scan up and down her body, this time. She doesn’t know how he took it so blandly when it makes her insides coil tight.

She realizes, after a moment, that his eyes are lingering on her jacket. Not her chest, not her thighs. Not her underwear.

She takes a deep breath and hopes she is not making a mistake. “To see if my idea is acceptable. Spend time in Ionia. I’m sure we can be of use there. And it’s far, and it’s safe. Then head for Noxus when things quiet down. The journey wouldn’t be far.”

Ezreal crosses his arms over his chest, frowning. “Who knows how long that would be? The things we could learn in Noxus are what’s most important, and finding out quick would be the biggest strength.”

“Yes,” Lux agrees. It's not the best plan, but it's a plan. It can't hurt to share the idea with Jarvan. Maybe he'll have a better idea.

“... Okay.”

He is staring at her again in the quiet. She shifts her weight, awkwardly tugging the hem of the jacket down. It does not pass her hips. She has never really cared about her body one way or the other, not really, but suddenly she feels aware of her curves. Or, compared to so many women Ezreal is close with, her lack there of. She thinks of the way he sits so close to Sona and Janna, to Vi.

She must look silly.

He is closer, when she looks back up. He reaches out to cup her cheeks. Maybe he thinks she looks silly too. He snickers, but she doesn't mind. She enjoys the way his eyes scrunch up with his grin, the way her cheeks feel under his palms.

The way his fingers slip easily down to cup her neck and guide her toward him for a kiss. She leans her head into it, at the same time, shrugging his jacket off of her shoulders. She hears it hit the floor as their bodies press together.

Even when they share the bed, she is in nightgowns. This is the first time this much skin has touched, as their stomachs and chests are pressed together. It feels soft and warm, the comfort of kissing amplified. His hand is at the small of her back, drawing her ever-closer.

She pushes back against him, acutely aware of her breasts pressing into his chest. Of her bra, slipping with the movements. Ezreal makes a laugh into her mouth.

When she draws back, curious, he tells her, “your bra. The... Lace tickles.” His fingers slip between the strap and her back, not unhooking or snapping it, but toying with it.

“I need to shower,” she reminds herself, out loud. Ezreal blinks at her until she kisses him again, arching towards him in a motion that she hopes helps him to unclasp her bra.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was not any fear of the unknown or any sense of shame that had made Lux stop him, though it would be a lie to claim she wasn't terrified.

Rather, it was a thought that popped into her mind and refused to leave - that she could never marry Prince Jarvan if she weren't a virgin.

Stupid. An easy lie to make, if it came down to it. All for a future she is less and less sure she will ever pursue.

Ezreal had been flushed, looking at her more intently than he has looked at anything before. Her mind supplied that he looked a bit ridiculous with tousled still-dripping hair and bright red-cheeks. But it was still – something. It was still something, she just isn't sure what.

Something she wanted.

When she said stop, he had. When she had finished showering, when she had climbed into bed beside him, he did not sulk or get pushy with her as she had expected from a boy his age. He just held her hand like always, leaned over to kiss her shoulder, and launched into an obscenely boring lecture on Piltover's air filtration systems. She supposes this is more apt for Ezreal. He is strange for his age. Brilliant in some ways, stupid in others.

She is not sure if she is disappointed or not. There is a small part of her that she fights vehemently, suggesting that if he were pushy, she wouldn't be at fault. If he were forceful, it would not be her responsibility. But she knows better than to think this way and banishes the thought. Ezreal is not the type. He is bossy but does not feel anything strong enough to be desperate. This is something of a comfort. Maybe she is not taking advantage of him. He cannot truly care about her so much.

Besides that, she could fight him with ease.

No.

She thinks of the assassin, tearing open her shirt. Something in that had frozen her in place. Something in that was different from the violence she can so easily defend herself from. The memory makes her shudder with discomfort, earning a sleepy-eyed curious look from Ezreal beside her.

She just shakes her head, and allows herself to fall in rest beside him.

It is their last night in a bed for some time.

They share his tent on the journey back to Piltover. Ekko uses Lux's, though it takes some fussing for him to allow it. Some form of chivalry, she thinks. The conversation is an annoyance, but somehow Lux finds herself giggling throughout.

At first Ekko insists he is fine to sleep outside. Lux protests. Then he says he does not mind sharing a tent with Lux. Ezreal protests. Lux suggests the two boys share a tent, but of course, both protest to
this as well.

She reminds herself that this is not so different from sharing beds at the inns, that it is not unusual to sleep beside her boyfriend. That he is her boyfriend. This thought should not still be difficult to swallow.

He doesn't make any moves beyond kissing her more easily, now. She isn't used to wanting things, then getting them so thoughtlessly. It's such a small comfort, but somehow awe-inspiring that she can have it without even asking. Kissing him is a purely physical comfort, growing more and more familiar. She does it with guilt for taking advantage of him, then guilt over how easily that worry fades away.

Sometimes Ezreal opens his mouth, like he wants to ask her something about this. But he changes his mind, each time. She is glad. She is afraid of what he wants to ask. She thinks there is only so long she can fool him, only so long she can play-pretend lovers, especially now that he is more well versed in what her life was supposed to be.

The trip is tiring. She feels the ache in all her joints as her pretenses slowly, slowly, drain from her body. Her will to be the image of herself and her boundary for where she ends and where the fake happiness is are blurry.

Ekko checks in on her often, and she is not hiding her distaste at it. She knows that he worries, not because she is a girl, not even because of the attack, but because he simply has no frame of reference. He is tired, so he worries that she is.

Ezreal does not check in. He continues on through long, grimy, muggy days. She appreciates this even more, eager to reach Piltover. To rest

They stay at his home in Piltover, and on their first day back, Caitlyn agrees to send someone to help with security.

Heimerdinger has already set up four cameras by the time they realize he is even there at all. It is not even his work that makes enough noise to catch their attention. It is Janna's honey-sweet voice flowing into the house. Lux opens the living room window, peering outside curiously in time to catch a glimpse of Janna's feet and feel the gusts of air that keep her floating above. Almost comically, Ezreal and Ekko crowd beside her, the three of them spilling out the window as if the door were not beside them to step outside.

Janna smiles down at them, looking amused. The sunset lights up her hair like a halo around her. Ekko is awe-struck, and Lux does not blame him.

It takes her a moment to realize that he is near-climbing out the window not to get a better glimpse of Janna's legs and stomach. Over Ezreal's complaining and Janna's laughter, over the sound of Ekko's boots in the window-sill and his fingers in the vines on the wall outside, Lux realizes what's piqued Ekko's attention is Heimerdinger's cameras.

His enthusiasm can't win against the yordle's condescension. It isn't long before he is seated in the window-sill, conversing with Janna as naturally as anything. His feet kick a solid rhythm into the walls outside. They talk of cameras. Hextech.

Lux tries to listen from the couch, keeping up a smile through the frustration of not understanding. She wonders why she struggles so much. When magic and technology are so inherently linked,
when she is brilliant at interpreting and copying, analyzing and understanding all magic around her. Technology must operate on similar rules, and yet it eludes her.

Ezreal meanders to another end of the house to bury himself in books. She is jealous that he cares so little about appearances. She is tired.

Janna is in the midst of narrating Heimerdinger's wiring to Ekko, drawing lines in the air to illustrate, when she interrupts herself to tell Lux, “you have a visitor.”

Ekko scoots to the side of the window sill, giving Lux room to come lean outside.

Janna points to the sky, dust and pollen and leaves all stirring up to follow the motion in a puff of air. Lux has to squint to see Valor’s shadow, above. He circles without coming down.

“Tell Ezeal I'm contacting home, would you?” Lux asks as she steps outside. Ekko gives her a playful salute as she departs.

She follows Valor's shadow through the streets, and is unsurprised that he leads her to the Piltover Police Department. It's a secure location. With Caitlyn around, probably the safest in the city. No one questions her stepping inside, though without Valor's guidance she isn't sure where to head.

Caitlyn is her best bet. The door to her office is already open, and Lux raps politely to get her attention. The woman takes only a brief look at her before saying, “down the hall. The key is next to you, room 5C.”

Lux is bright as ever, pretending this is not baffling or frustrating. “Thank you!” Obediently, she locates the correct key hanging on the key rack beside the door before heading down the hall.

Her stomach is in knots. Somehow such small things, just not having directions, are more nerve-wracking than infiltrations. She has loved this mission, for the freedom, for being able to relax, even if not completely, in solitude with Ezreal. But she has hated how aimless it has been.

There are voices on the other side of the the door to room 5C. Familiar voices.

It is much less an act when she bursts into the room, losing etiquette in favor of enthusiasm. “Quinn!”

She would be more concerned about military protocol and public appearances if not for the way Quinn rushes up to meet her, scooping her up in a strong hug that lifts her off the ground. Somehow this persona of hers feels a fraction more real when Quinn is nearby.

The other woman in the room is a yordle, standing proud. She is small, and quiet. She keeps to herself, dignified and meek. Yet somehow her presence still fills the room.

“Poppy,” Lux says, and curtsies.

“Howdy Lux,” Poppy replies, her shy nod coupled with a tentative smile. She motions for Lux to take a seat at a round conference table. Resting at its center is a packet, sealed with the Lightshield family emblem. When Lux meets her eyes to confirm it is for her to read, Poppy nods again.

The letter is succinct. Brief. It is a bit painfully matter-of-fact, and a way that makes Lux's stomach clench.
Noxus has the prince's blood, drawn from him during his captivity. There is reason to suspect it may be being used in experiments within the Zaun laboratories. Further, with a war against Noxus returning as a potential threat, and with Zaun's involvement in their past attacks on Ionia, surveillance is invaluable.

The anxious coil in her gut only worsens.

Jarvan will be joining them on the mission, personally.

It is wrong, Lux thinks vehemently, for a prince to be so directly involved. In a system like the Institute, where he was to do what a prince should do, and represent the kingdom, that was one thing. This is another. This will be a blatant offense, a preventative measure easily twisted into its own declaration of war. She doesn't understand why he would choose this. Even if he did not trust her – an awful idea in itself – surely there are teams he could send to avoid coming himself.

He must trust her. The Crownguards have always served the Lightshields, and served them well. Without question. Lux folds the letter back up, slides it tidy into its packet, and sets it down.

Maybe it is just so that someone trustworthy knows where he is. Maybe it is an alibi. Knowing what she does about his judgment, or lack thereof, it is sounding increasingly important to know exactly where her prince, her true prince, is.

Quinn's eyes are sharp on her. When Lux checks, Poppy's eyes flit away. It is too easy to forget the way she is always being watched. She composes herself, scolds herself, a thousand verses of Demacian codes and scripts flashing through her mind with practice. Practice. Practice. She knows who she has to be.

“This isn't an infiltration mission,” Quinn says, determined fire in her eyes. “It's brute force. We're taking everything they have from them.”

The next two hours are spent going over the plan. Going over the maps, how to get in, when to meet. It's easy to relax into. It is in missions like this that Lux is allowed to focus, to show smarts over smiles. No one questions her seriousness here.

There will be allies joining them along the way. They are left rather ambiguous, but Lux trusts that she must trust. Ezreal is not listed as one of them, but with how closely they have been involved, this is not ambiguous. He is not joining them.

She feels a sense of relief, leaving the building. This mission, with how vague it is, is uncomfortable. Plans, chosen by someone else, are so soothing. As long as it is someone she trusts, someone admirable, who she knows will make the right decision. Lux loves to follow orders. She tells herself this every day.

The sunset-air is cool as she makes her way down the front steps, a pleasant breeze floating through her hair. She can feel the tingle of her presence in it before she spots Janna approaching. The woman is leading Ekko, floating backwards as she faces him to talk.

“Ekko here wanted to pay a visit to Jinx,” Janna explains, looking over her shoulder. She only whirls around to face Lux when it is Lux's turn to speak.

“Do you think that they'll let him?”
Ekko's expression falls, and Lux immediately regrets her words. Then he mutters, “they can't stop me.”

She pretends not to hear him.

“I thought I'd accompany him here and walk you back home.”

The way Janna sees Ekko off with a hand pushed gently against his back makes Lux think of a mother seeing their child off to school. She wonders if she should come with him. She's sure her request would give more weight to his, and besides that, she wants to keep an eye on what he may do if he's turned away.

But as they watch him head inside, Janna murmurs, “I'm accompanying you in many things.”

Lux trusts her.

They walk slowly through the streets, largely led by Janna's guidance. Lux waits until they are in residential streets, surrounded by quiet and no one, still far from Ezreal's home.

“Actually, I have something to ask you,” Lux ventures.

Janna is a small ways ahead of her, and stills until Lux catches up to close the distance. “Ask away.”

Lux still hesitates, trying to word it out in her head. She does not want to offend Janna, and does not want to embarrass herself. Then again, it's all for a relationship she is only in for appearances. Being embarrassed by being public with it goes against her own purpose. It only supports her image if she is recognized as being shy.

“A long time ago,” Lux begins, cautiously, “there was an article in the Journal about you. A scandal.”

Janna's smile does not falter, but she looks at Lux side-long and her eyes are icy blue. Her voice stays as light as the breeze. “Oh, of course. The lingerie photographs. Quite a bit of fuss for something so trivial.”

When the article came out, Lux had agreed with all those silly letters to the editor. She had thought it was disgraceful. These days she is grateful that she had kept her mouth shut. She cannot imagine looking at Janna this way, now. She cannot imagine blaming her for wanting to share photos with someone, or for that person not being trust-worthy. Why wasn't the one who leaked the photos frowned upon? How can anyone judge Janna for it?

She is ashamed of how long she had looked at the incident from the wrong perspective, and almost rushes to defend herself, now, “I agree! It was – it was silly. For anyone to make such a fuss, and to knowingly invade your privacy.”

Janna seems to brush this off. Though not visible, her mood still soured enough to make her curt. “What did you want to ask me?”

Lux feels her cheeks heating. She is ashamed of the way she had looked at this in the past. She is more ashamed of the question she wants to ask. The fact that both exist together is dizzying. “Well... There was a letter published that mentioned a theory. That you can... Um. Briefly raise your magical aptitude.”
Though her hands come to cover her mouth, Lux can see Janna's cheeks puff up from her smile. Through held-back laughter, she says, “ah, yes. It isn't proven, but it isn't disproved, either.”

Lux is grateful she didn't have to get more specific. “Do you think it's true?”

Janna's amusement fades away into a more thoughtful expression, a genuine interest in the subject. “I think as long as it's a positive experience, yes. There are all kinds of chemical reactions that are triggered that work to positively influence the mind and body, so it only makes sense this would extend to your mana as well. Even if it doesn't, there is a psychological component. Relaxation, relief, happiness, love. Those things are very strong motivators, and mood will always influence your performance, magic or otherwise.”

Lux blinks. “You are too smart for your own good.”

“I've considered going to school,” Janna says, conversationally casual.

Lux does not think she needs it. Still, for a girl who raised herself on the streets – it would be a nice way to spend her new-found free time. As if she is too shy to face Lux with the admission, as if somehow saying she wants to go to school is more awkward than Lux asking about sex, Janna hovers forward again.

With her back to Lux she says, still with a falsely relaxed air, “you're a prodigy, Lux. You don't need to rely on ulterior motives. So don't.”

Lux raises an eyebrow, though she knows Janna cannot see it. “Are you implying that I'm not ready?” Ridiculous. She is legally an adult. If she is old enough to be a soldier, there is no reason to talk down to her as if she is not 'ready.'

She thinks of the near panic as she pushes Ezreal away at every attempt at physical affection, but dismisses the thought just as fast. She thinks of the man in the alleyway and feels nauseous, but pushes past this as well.

“ There's nothing wrong with playing pretend,” Janna says. “There's nothing wrong with deceit.” Lux wants to protest, but knows Janna sees through her too well. She wishes this weren't such a common trait. “People can take comfort in an act, knowing that it is an act. Essentially, this is what socializing is. What I'm saying is that you should not convince someone the boundaries are anywhere but where they are.”

Lux makes a quiet sound of affirmation. She feels sick and does not want to call it guilt.

“I like you, but I am not your friend,” Janna says, just as practiced at fake smiles as Lux. “I am Ezreal's friend.” Lux opens her mouth, not sure exactly what she wants to say, but certain she wants to defend herself, wants to tell Janna she understands, she does, but she is not going to hurt him. Ezreal is strong enough to take care of himself. He is weird, but not stupid. Before she can get a word out, Janna turns to face her, bows, and says, “ farewell for today .”

She leaves Lux in silence, seen off with just a rustling wind through the leaves overhead. Lux stares down at the specks of light that make it through the trees, reflecting on her hands.

Ezreal is half-way through dinner when she gets back to his home. There are two more boxes of
take-out beside him on the table, and with his mouth full he just motions at them for her.

He barely finishes chewing his mouthful before asking, “where's the kid?”

She sits down beside him, but doesn't have an appetite. “Visiting Jinx. Unless he broke the law to get to her, in which case I've no idea where he went. Didn't he tell you?”

The bridge of Ezreal's nose crinkles as he snickers at her. “Nope.”

She watches him eat, idly propping up her cheek on her palm. He is messy. He eats like no one is watching, and often talks with his mouth full. He asks her what she is up to, but easily accepts her non-answer before returning to his own interests.

Ekko returns just before midnight, and thankfully had been able to visit Jinx briefly, with Vi's supervision. He is too emotionally drained to enthuse on the parts that excited him, or to huff at his disappointments. He eats his cold take out, and Lux's share as well while the two of them sit beside him and pretend it is not weirdly parental of them to be supervising his meal.

“S he barely remembers me.” Ekko says, towards the end of the evening, his voice quiet. “She's – different. She's different.” Then, even quieter still, “she doesn't belong locked up in there.”

Lux tries to speak to him softly, but knows it comes out harsh. “S he certainly can't have her freedom. You may think she's cute, you may have known her when she was younger, but she's got a lot of deaths on her.”

“I know,” Ekko mutters. “I don't – she's not cute. She looks awful. Like she's not eating.”

“She probably ate like shit until recently,” Ezreal comments. “At least jail food is three meals a day.”

He sounds skeptical. “I guess.” After a pause, “three meals? You have to eat that much?”

A long discussion about nutrition later, led by a largely frustrated Lux to two idiotic and probably very unhealthy boys later, it is time for bed.

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The week goes by smoothly. It is relaxed. There is certainty in Lux's future, instead of a mystery. She knows when her mission is, and is able to keep calm until then. Ezreal does not pry into what is happening, trusting that she will tell him.

But she does not.

She is going to meet the others in the morning, and head for Zaun. Ekko is asleep on the couch after another visit to Jinx. Ezreal is nose-deep in one of his trashy novels, apparently lacking all shame, but his free hand still holds hers as they lay down beside each other.

Lux turns onto her side to face him. His eyes scan the words on the page, then turn to look at her with interest. Just as easily, he returns to the book.

“How much of this do you think is real?” Lux asks, horrified by her own words as they leave her mouth.
His gaze is resolutely on the book. “Not much.”

She thinks, *this is a turning point*. Demacian action in enemy territory is against any Sanctum Calamitates. Any illusion of peace being held after the Institute's closure will be shattered. Her entire journey with Ezreal, though brief, roundabout, and practically meaningless, will be over.

No, not meaningless.

Ezreal squeezes her hand, idly, as if he has not just admitted to knowing their entire relationship is a farce.

It is not meaningless, Lux clarifies for herself, feeling a strange ache in her chest, because this mission comes from the information that they had scouted out to begin with.

“There are parts that are real, and parts that aren't,” Ezreal says, his voice hoarse in an attempt to stay quiet without really whispering. “You over-estimate how much of you is an act, though.”

Lux stares at him. “I – pardon?”

His hand on hers is somewhat clammy, she realizes, though his expression doesn't change. “No one ever believes you're stupid, and I don't think you expect them to. But it's part of playing happy. I think you trick a lot of people with that. I think you trick yourself into thinking you're always tricking people.”

It is far from a seething rage, but she feels irritation deep in her gut. She tries to suppress it. “I'm afraid I really don't follow.”

“No,” he murmurs, suddenly sounding profoundly tired. “You really don't. Look – no one is happy all the time. Just like no one is on their guard twenty-four seven. You've just got yourself convinced that you are. So you go on thinking how tragic it is that you're so deep and layered and ignore all the times that the way you act isn't an act. People pretend to be how they want to be.”

Her face feels hot. Her muscles feel tense even as she tries to relax. “Quite the analyst,” she tries to joke, but it comes out acidic.

“You're not stupid, Lux, you're just a liar. And good liars fool themselves all the time.”

“Thank you,” she snaps, “I'm sure you're the absolute expert on what goes on in the minds of others. Perhaps you should have been a Summoner!”

He blinks at her, as if her anger comes from nowhere, unjustified and mystifying.

When he eventually opens his mouth to reply, she cuts him off. “Ah, but then you would have needed to actually care about any of this. Even as a Champion, you were only there out of convenience and self interest.”

Ezreal's expression grows increasingly bewildered. “But it was all bullshit,” he points out, as if this was the point. She takes note of the past tense. She recalls when he first fell into the League of Legends, egocentric and disinterested in all the 'petty politics.'

“And now?”
“Uhh, everything was more fucked up than I thought,” he says, still sounding confused. “Why are we talking about this? Why are you even mad?”

Lux sits up now, her whole body burning up angry. The bed creaks, as loud as she wants to shout at him, but she keeps her voice lowered for Ekko's sake. She lets go of his hand, and wishes she could not spot the flicker of his eyes in that direction. “You can't just sit around as an outsider and make what you think are observations. You can't just decide you understand things from where you stand!”

His expression contorts, for the first time his confusion falling away to annoyance. His eyes narrow in a fascinating way, his jaw clenching tight as he sits up to match her. “You know most people would get offended if someone said they're a huge faker, but you're getting pissy because I implied that maybe you aren't fake every waking moment of your life.”

She doesn't even like to admit she is pretending to begin with. It only annoys her further that he has a good point. That she does not entirely understand why she is so angry. She tires to think back. From the day they began their journey – no, even before. From the day they became a 'couple.' There was nothing to make her think he did not believe everything she presented. Yet she knows he cannot have come to all these conclusions only since hearing about her future with Jarvan.

This thought only churns fury in her stomach even hotter than before. “Why do you think you can see past the illusions that you are outside of? Why do you always thinks yourself an expert of matters you know nothing about?”

“Look, fuck it, okay?” Ezreal growls, an unfamiliar sound from him, and Lux's heart drops, her chest feeling hollow at the unfamiliar sight of his glower. “Does it matter? Fine. You're fake, this is fake, we already know that, it's pointless to fight over it.”

“It's not--” Lux catches herself beginning, but snaps her mouth shut immediately.

The silence is far, far more tense than the vehement whispering.

Ezreal looks uncomfortable.

“Are you fake, too?” Lux ventures. She pulls herself up to sit on her knees, feeling the sheets pool around her legs. Her bedclothes are not modest by any means, but they are not any more revealing than usual. She feels strangely exposed.

He shrugs. “Does it matter?”

This time she is confused. “Does it not?”

Ezreal scoots up to rest his back up against the headboard, closer to eye-level with her. “No.”

She wants to hold his hand. She looks at it, then back up, flushing guiltily when she sees that his eyes never left hers. “So you just... Don't care?”

“I don't care about very many things,” he says, and shrugs. She finds herself giggling at the habit, then harder as he arches an eyebrow at her. “I thought that was obvious. I'm - w hat's the word? Egocentric.”

“But you came on this mission. With me, but not for me.”
“Yeah, turns out a runewar would have a more direct affect on my life than some corrupt politics and royals killing royals.”

Lux is quiet. This is fair. Sometimes it is easy for her to forget that cities and kingdoms and factions outside of Demacia are involved. But that's the danger of Noxus. Their invasions of Ionia and Freljord were paused by Sanctum Calamitates, but now they may resume. Their influence bleeds into Zaun, which stains the edges of their eternal conflict with Piltover.

Noxus can do so much harm, by itself. Further still, she knows that everywhere is suffering their own internal strife. Zaun's youth seek a better future, she knows, from Ekko. She is not naïve enough to think the war between queens is resolved in Freljord. Shurima is rising with no restrictions, no law, only one leader, and she wonders how long before it turns into a danger. She does not know as much as she would like to, but she knows that Diana's defiance of the Solari is not over, yet.

And then there is the void.

Lux shivers. The memory of Malzhahar's back against hers brings back a tense coil as if she were still fighting with Ezreal. She shakes it off.

Ezreal holds his hands out for her. She thinks she should be embarrassed at having been caught longing to touch, but instead it just feels convenient. Being understood and responded to, catered to, without so much as having to speak.

When she reaches for his hands, he pulls away, and snickers. His hands are raised in the air, still ready to be held, but to his sides. The only way to reach them is to straddle him, and so she does.

It is not awkward. Just warm, almost comfortable. She knows he can handle her weight on his lap, and focuses on feeling his fingers between her own. She explores his hands with interest, practically giving him a finger-by-finger massage. His hands are calloused, like hers. There are small spots with peeling skin she resists picking at, instead tracing out his lines and joints.

“Tell me something true,” she commands.

He does not even hesitate. “Your political mind bores me to death.”

“Your archeology bores me to death,” she counters.

He laughs, his head falling back easily until he bumps against the headboard. She stares at his throat and wants to feel that, too. She keeps her focus on his fingers.

“I had a government appointed guardian starting when I was like five,” he offers, after a moment. He says it casually, like this is nothing new. It is not terribly exciting, but there is a shiny wonder to it, being the first she's ever really heard of his childhood.

“Really?”

“That's not the game.”

She has to think for a moment. “I'd like to have short hair.”

“Really?”
Lux knows that she should parrot him that this is not the game, but instead she explains, “long hair is so lovely, but mine is a boring, average length. Even so, it gets in the way already. It would be easier to keep it short.”

“Her name was Pearl. She would basically trade off with my uncle, when he was around, to take care of me. Make sure I was eating and going to school.”

“Were you?”

“No. She just gave up eventually.”

Her own laughter startles her. So does the way he smiles at her, as if she were the one who had said something amusing.

Her own admission following is, “I genuinely don't recall any of my nanny's names.”

“I didn't make any friends in school,” Ezreal deadpans. She knows this is not a tragic admission. She is sure he was too bratty, too self-centered, too cocky.

Lux cannot think of another admission. She has massaged his fingers so thoroughly that she is surprised he has not complained they are sore or tingly. She moves on to his palms.

He does not complain, but does not offer up another truth, himself. She listens to his breathing, almost even, but given slight hitches. She is not sure if it's because she is tickling him or if it feels nice. Certain spots on his palm make his whole hand twitch. Sometimes he snickers.

He does not question when her hands come to his throat. He does not even tense. She traces lightly, carefully, the shape of his adam's apple. The curve from his nape to his shoulders, his collarbone. She does not squeeze, but even with her hands resting around his neck, he just stares at her evenly.

The marks on his cheeks are dancing like light on the ocean.

“I find you fascinating,” she murmurs. “And I find that bizarre, for how simple minded and crude you are.”

“Thanks,” he drawls. She feels it ripple through his throat beneath her fingers and startles away, drawing her hands up to his cheeks. She strokes her thumbs across the magic glow. His hands are on her thighs. She does not know how long they have been there.

“I remember the other girls my age sneaking around to be with boys. I was happy to be left out of that nonsense.”

“I remember sneaking around to be with boys,” Ezreal says, at length. This takes Lux a moment to process.

She blinks. There is still something uncomfortable in this, but she fights it. She wants to fight it. “Oh. You – I see.”

He shrugs, and so she does as well, smiling softly. Ezreal leans his head to the side, pressing his cheek into her palm on one side. His eyes are still on hers. “So I'm nonsense, huh?”
“Yes,” she breathes.

The best truth to tell him would be that she is leaving in the morning. Instead she uses her hand on his cheek to guide his face closer to her's.

His hand on her thigh twitches as their lips slot together, easy and familiar now. She drops her other hand to rest on his chest and feel its rise and fall with his breath. It is dizzying when he squeezes more pointedly, almost guiding her to grind her hips down. She can feel him under her, hard and warm.

There is a soft thunk as the back of his head knocks against the headboard. She realizes that she is on top, she is in control. She is the one that leans closer and closer to him, harder as they kiss, until he is literally backed into the wall.

She has always let him lead. This way she could tell herself she was indulging him. As if she were innocent.

Lux's mind is foggy, and distantly she scolds herself for wasting so much time up until now. She is flushed, her whole body heated, and she shivers when he does. When she makes him. It is easy. Her mouth on his, her fingers light on his abdomen. And small, tiny rolls of his hips that make his breath hitch in her mouth. Make his hips stutter in place, hands gripping her tightly as if he wants to hold her in place or prompt her to move again. She gets to decide which.

She has to draw back from kissing him to bite her own lip as his fingers slide between her thighs. It is embarrassing to face him, his expression wide-eyed and intent. The same way she traced his shivers to the rolls of his hips against his, he watches her every shudder at his hands.

It is a long evening. Neither speaks another word all night, afraid to ruin the spell, both embarrassed and shy and knowing that it will hit them full-force if they pause. Lux tells herself it is so that Ekko does not hear them.

They move slowly, Lux riding Ezreal at a slow, languid pace. She wraps her arms around him tight as she can, nestling her face into the crook of his neck. She likes the hammering of his heart against her chest, likes the raspy breathes and grunts so close to her ear. She likes the salty taste of his skin as she presses kisses into his shoulder. Likes the flex and tense of his back muscles under her palms, and the feeling of his hands holding onto her hips encouragingly.

Afterwards they are still entwined, sweaty and tired, breathing heavy. They stay that way for a long time, foreheads pressed together until they can't stand the grime anymore without grimacing. They still do not speak, but sneak across the hall to the shower, snickering like children playing hide and seek. If Ekko wakes to the sound of the water running, he is back asleep by the time they are finished.

Her legs are weak. She wonders if Ezreal feels the same. She had not even taken off her nightgown, but now it is hard to feel self conscious of her body. She is more discreet in staring at him. He is still shameless and expressionless when his eyes take in her whole form.

They hardly wash off, just rinsing off sweat and musk. She is tired. She is exhausted and sore in a pleasant way. She is grateful to collapse back into bed in one of Ezreal's shirts, its shoulders already damp from her dripping hair. With her eyes closed, the sound of the bed creaking under his weight is a comfort. His body heat beside her. His hand in hers.
She wishes she weren't leaving in the morning, but each time she opens her mouth, on the verge of telling him, she just closes it again, and eventually sleep comes.

Chapter End Notes

I'm just going to throw out there that I thoroughly reject Taric's lore update. They wanted to fix him being a homophobic 'joke' character so hard that they dismissed everything about him from before, as if he didn't have stuff going for him beyond 'haha gay lol.' I'm down for a celestial protector against the void and all, but the whole gem knight concept is gone. Now he's just a gem... guy? Only all his powers are celestial and not gem based, so, why?

Why give him lore ties to Garen, who already has so many lore ties? Are we to believe a Demacian noble so close to J4 would really be a good friend to a man who shirks his military responsibility? Are we to believe a character whose lore was originally "learned traditional healing magics, got brought from another world, decided to help how he could," is an irresponsible character at core? Does saving one Demacian from many Noxians make him worthy of defending t entire world? It's good to have characters who oppose the ideals of their home, (Ekko, Riven, etc) ie: if he were shown to not be biased against Noxus enough to be an unbiased defender of the entire planet including them. But they don't really go into it at all. In fact, shouldn't he have a bigger grudge after his squadron (which, why did he still have one to be in charge of AFTER countless demotions?) was murdered? And Garen captured?

It's not unbelievable to have multiple harsh, cold, snowy mountains, but when your world is so small, and the revealed points of interest so few, why make it so similar to Freljord? Really? It used to be described as a sun-baked place. Home to the sun worshippers. Worshippers of the sun.

And if you're going to have an 'exile' character from each faction, why not draw parallels between them? Riven and Yasuo are exiles with intertwined lore, and I'm not asking for Taric's to tie in to them, but there are certain niches that just didn't need more characters shoved into them. It's just... Bad writing... And it's so strange to take a character as compassionate as Taric and make him like... Irresponsible to an unbelievable degree, in a culture that doesn't cultivate it or really allow for it, with friends who should hate it, and have him maintain authority he should no longer have.

I'll make it work. I'm sure I'll wrap my head around it in a way I don't hate, in time. The comic was lovely and I'm happy that his character model looks nice and his skills are fun and his voice is sounding fancy. Bah!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The morning air is overwhelming and refreshing to the same degree. Lux shivers, walking through the mist and squinting her way to the meeting spot. Today is the day. She is not sure if she is more nervous of the mission, its repercussions, or just seeing Jarvan in person after so long.

It feels strange to be wearing her armor again, to be dressed for battle instead of travel. She can see puffs of her own breath ahead of her, and the whole world is quiet. The calm before the storm, she supposes. These clothes feel unnecessary. They will still have a ways to go. Maybe she has just been spoiled by traveling light.

She is almost to the meeting place when Ekko asks, “where are you going?”

There is new white-noise all at once, his breath, his footsteps, the small clicks and whirs of his machine. It's glow is slowly fading as Lux turns to face him. She takes a moment to calm her racing heart, to release the tension that had been ready to burst the light where he stands. She exhales. Lets her nerves dissipate with his machine's light. She sees his body, brittle and uncomfortable in the middle of her magic, slowly relaxing with her.

“I have a mission,” Lux says. This is true, but she follows up with a lie, “you can tell Ezreal I'll return shortly.”

She can tell from his face he doesn't believe her, eyebrows furrowed, his mouth a tight frown. He crosses his arms, setting his disbelief on her. His weight is set firm on the ground; he has no intention of returning home.

“You can't come with me,” she tries, gentle. He seems to react well to maternal tones.

He wears her betrayal on his face, plain as day. “I can.”

Punctuality is important. She shifts her own weight impatiently, quickly giving up on sweet-talk. She is harsh and perhaps too cruel, but she needs him to leave. “Ekko, you are a child. You are not involved in this and you cannot involve yourself so casually. We should not have even taken you from your home. Think of your parents.”

It is, if she is honest, the first time she has really thought of them. She thinks of the house they had dropped him off at, back in Zaun. They are just an ordinary, working family. And their son is missing. She won't drag him into danger, won't lead him towards never going back. She wonders if they are worried.

She thinks of her own parents and immediately feels nauseous. “Turn around. Go home.”

“You can't stop me,” Ekko tells her. “I'll just go back and try again. I'll just follow you, quieter. Wouldn't you rather know?”

Her discomfort is icy pin-pricks on the back of her neck. For a street boy, younger than her, to have the upper hand is frustrating. The weight of his presence is worrying enough that she is not angry,
just afraid for him.

He closes the distance between them, stepping up beside her and knocking his elbow against her arm as if to nudge her into resuming her walk. “In fact,” he says, “I woke up and activated my zero drive when you were heading out. That's how far back I can go.”

He could delay her. He could wake up Ezreal before she even made it out of the house.

She really has no say in this. She returns to her path, walking beside him to the rendezvous point. Her voice is heavy with resignation. “You can't go back. I'm not telling Ezreal.”

Ekko faces forward. “Okay,” he says, though he sounds displeased. She steals a glance down, at the childish curves of his cheeks, at the cut of his silhouette. He is resolute. “Why?”

She is quiet for a long moment, trying to word a proper answer. Trying to find a good balance between tact and honesty, and enough details spared to keep her comfortable. It's complicated. It's complicated and exhausting, and eventually so much time passes that she admits to herself that she is not going to answer.

Ekko's shoulders slowly unwind. He switches his zero drive off, looking up to meet her eyes.

“I'm with you,” he says.

She does not understand how he can be so firm in this. “Okay,” she tells him.

She fills him in on the blanks of their mission. She is concise, and she is authoritative. He will follow her commands, he will take care of himself. Those are his priorities, and unfortunately they are in that order. If she is honest, having his machine on her side is a bit of a comfort. Especially knowing that he has used it to protect her, before. It's something of a trump card.

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Convincing Quinn to allow Ekk to tag along is easy. She supposes she has done the woman enough favors that she is too indebted to question it. After hearing about the zero drive, though she seems confused by the details, she agrees this is a big safety net that she is happy to have.

Poppy is less pleased. She is demure and knows her place, and keeps complaints to herself. Buy it is not hard to read her silence, to see the uncertainty in her eyes as they stare Ekko down. Janna is happy to welcome him, or at least, Lux convinces herself so until the elf shoots her a look of cold disapproval over her shoulder. Nevertheless, she happily sets a hand at Ekko's shoulder and keeps his attention as they march on. Lux wants to tell her she didn't mean for this.

When they get a private moment, she blurts it out, shamefully hurried. “I wanted to leave him – safe at home.”

“Who's home?” Janna asks, and does not let her answer before returning to the others.

Lux does not recall when she began calling Ezreal's house her home. It is barely even Ezreal's home. It is not her home. More importantly, she knows it is not where Ekko belongs.

Traveling without Ezreal is still nothing unfamiliar. She has done enough missions alone, and even
separated him as recently as the trip to Freljord. There is no newness to it. No strange discomfort.

She still catches herself spreading two bedrolls in her tent, without thinking.

Poppy and Janna have already agreed to share a tent, so Ekko and Quinn play rock paper scissors over who gets to share with Lux. For how long the stalemate has been going on, Lux would think Ekko is cheating with zero drive.

"Wouldn't you rather fight for the tent alone?" Lux asks, amused.

Quinn feigns offense, raising a palm to her chest as she gasps.

"No," Ekko says without looking, then "that's paper."

Quinn's other hand flies to join it, this time sincerely startled. "What? No! Flat vertical is not flat horizontal! I was going to be rock!"

Ekko stares forlornly at his own rock-formed fist. After a tired sigh, he mumbles, "okay, rematch. Again."

"I could sleep alone," Lux offers, blithely. "Further, one person is going to be up to keep watch. You could even trade off."

They ignore her, and return to rock paper scissors. Perhaps it's just Quinn's way of taking care of him, or even giving Janna a break from playing babysitter. Eventually Ekko wins.

They eat small meals of military rations for the road. Around a campfire, they each divide small parts from theirs to make enough for Ekko, and no one complains; not even Poppy. Ekko does not apologize. He is too dedicated to his decision to feel guilt for small things.

She sends Ekko to bed early, and he scowls but does not complain or argue. She has no misconceptions about this keeping him from hearing their conversation, but even so, it is better to have some semblance of privacy as the adults discuss the mission.

Lux is not surprised that he is still awake when she comes in to sleep herself. He is sitting cross-legged, his zero drive between his legs as he uses a pocket knife to screw shut the outer casing. Its glow puts her on edge, but he is quick to tell her, "it's not active or anything. I just need to see."

She gathers light in her palm, then concentrates it towards the top of their tent, careful to regulate its temperature.

Ekko grins at her, and with the flip of a switch, his machine powers off. He uses her light to finish up. She faces away from him to change into her bedclothes, but manipulates the light in their enclosure so that he could not see if he tried. She can hear from his tinkering that he does not so much as glance in her direction.

She dims the light when she is changed, climbing into her own sleeping bag. Obediently, Ekko sets aside his machine and climbs into his sleeping bag.

She lets out her light.

"That's cool," Ekko comments in the dark. "How do you do that?"
“It’s a bit complex to break down for you.” Lux says, and laughs.

“Yeah, I don’t really get magic anyway. Its rules don’t make as much sense as tech.”

“If you say so,” Lux murmurs.

It is quiet for a moment. She thinks he is going to sleep. Then he asks, “what about your family? You aren’t even that much older than me.”

“My family put me here,” Lux says, shortly.

Ekko just says, “huh,” and then ponders this. She hears the quiet intake of breath as he opens his mouth to ask another question. But nothing more comes, and eventually his breathing evens out. He snores, but even so, she is able to fall asleep with surprising ease.

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They meet with Jarvan in Zaun. Lux’s illusions keep everyone masked, perhaps not perfectly, but enough to not arise suspicion from those who didn’t already hold it. In the basement of a front-inn owned by the Demacian military, she drops the spell and salutes. Quinn and Poppy mimic her salute, a step behind her. Janna bows. Ekko just stands, expression defiant as if he is ready for a fight, ready to be told all over again to go home.

Jarvan simply returns the salute. His eyes dart in Ekko's direction, then back to Lux questioningly. She nods, and that is enough for him.

They wait for Vi to come down the stairs, too loud and too obvious, but her strength is still necessary. It really can't be helped, and they all accept that it is worth it. They go over the maps and plans together one final time, the date set for tomorrow.

Lux does not know exactly how the rooming breaks down. Her mind shorts out after she hears that she is staying with Jarvan.

She waits until she hears their doors close. Waits until Jarvan shuts their room door behind him. Then the illusions are gone again.

She is just Lux, alone in the inn room with her prince.

She does not know what to do. She does not recall what she does when she is alone anymore. She does not know what he does when he is not working.

Maybe he never stops working. Jarvan takes a seat at the small table in the corner of the room, and begins filling out what are probably mission reports or orders for other squadrons he is supervising.

Lux hovers uncomfortably, taking in the nape of his neck. Jarvan is more attractive than Ezreal. His body is large and strong and masculine. He is powerful where Ezreal is only boyish. She watches the minute flexes of his muscles as he writes. His hands look like they could swallow hers up.

“Relax,” he says to her, gently. He does not even look up.
“Yes,” she blurts out, obediently, reflexively. She is not any more relaxed, but he allows her to stand tense without another word. The only thing she knows how to do in the presence of her prince is guard him. This used to feel natural. He used to be a soothing presence.

She cannot place why it is different, now. Or, she does not want to.

Eventually she takes a seat on the bed, the only bed in the room. It is cushier than the other inn, noticeably cleaner. She wonders if this is due to it being a better neighborhood of Zaun or due to poor research by the ones in charge of design.

Time passes slowly. With a dangerous mission looming in the future, this may be a blessing. Lux sits at the edge of the bed, then eventually moves to lay down. She is not tired, but closes her eyes to focus on the sounds around her. The sound of parchment and bustling throughout the building. She can even hear Vi's boisterous laughter through the walls, sometimes. Ekko's enthused shouting along with her, that seems to fluctuate between excitement and anger until a much quieter murmur from another reminds the two of them to be quiet.

“How was your journey?” Jarvan's asks. His voice is a low rumble, soothing and rough all at once.

Lux hesitates. “While I don't want to minimize the importance to simply knowing what other factions are going through and how they are reacting to the Institute's disbandment, it feels as if I haven't done enough. I don't want to disappoint--”

“I've read your reports. Relax, Luxanna.” He sounds patiently amused, before trying again, “I hope it hasn't been terribly lonely to be away from home for so long.”

She has not missed her family once. Not her parents and not her brother. She is not sure she wants to say this out loud, and admittedly, she has felt homesick for Demacia more than once. It's a difficult balance to strike. “Yes,” she replies, noncommittally.

He is quiet. When she opens her eyes, she catches a glimpse of him, twisted in his seat to look at her. Ah, she realizes. He is asking about Ezreal.

“Unity is important,” Jarvan says, meeting her gaze, unwavering.

Lux agrees, quietly, “yes.”

She does not want to talk about Ezreal.

“Noxus has been sending ships to Ionia,” Jarvan says. “They are already on the offensive. We cannot risk whatever strength they are hiding in Zaun. Though since you left, there has not been further word from Freljord or any witnessed movement. With luck, their attention has been refocused, perhaps military forces weakened during the stasis.”

“I'm hesitant to count on it,” Lux admits. This is comfortable. This conversation – the type she is always trying to have with Ezreal. She has not seen Jarvan for so long that it is still somewhat tense, but she knows that she can voice her thoughts freely. She knows that she will not influence him more than is healthy for her ranking, knows that he trusts her not to resent decisions and thoughts contrary to her own. “I think the best we can hope for is that they are resuming slowly.”

Jarvan let's out a long 'hmm,' considering this. “We'll certainly need heavy surveillance.”
Lux feels guilty for saying it, but thinks of Ashe and Sejuani and the uncertainty of Lissandra. “Freljord is not inherently Demacia’s responsibility. The alliance treaties with Ionia hold much more weight, and have held longer. We may not have the resources to help anyone else. Just because we are the mightiest kingdom does not mean we can defend everyone. That isn’t justice – it's heroics.”

“We are not closing our gates again. There's no honor in that.”

Xin Zhao. She sees the way his expression goes taut, the way he looks back to his reports. This is not up for debate. The thought feels dirty in her mind, blasphemous, but she wonders if Jarvan's compassion that she has always thought is so good for Demacia may be its undoing.

“They welcome those who flee.” Lux says, with caution. “But there's no honor in spreading ourselves so thin that we aren't able to protect anyone. Aren't able to protect ourselves.”

Sometimes it is overwhelming, how powerful Noxus is. Lux cannot wrap her head around it. She has tried to tell herself of Demacia's might, but does not always successfully convince herself, these days. Demacia requires military time from all residents. There are no citizens who do not have some background in battle. In healing. Everyone is useful, could be useful. They are strong, they are honorable.

Yet they struggle to keep up. Noxus had been invading Freljord, Ionia, protecting their home, and even making moves directly against Demacia. Help from Zaun isn't enough to explain the disparity in strength. Lux doesn't understand. Their culture is based on survival of the fittest, on the honor that lies in victory, but their populations counts do not differ so wildly.

“We won't,” Jarvan says. “However, in the face of Noxus' alliance with Zaun, Demacia must also show alliance. The Institute may be gone, but their rules were self imposed. There was nothing to stop them from being ignored. Many of their rules were. But the fact that they continued as they did means that many others wanted more peaceful resolutions. We can't turn our back to other kingdoms, cities, left vulnerable. And to Noxus, they must see the strength of our bonds.”

Lux wants to run away. This is good, she reminds herself. This is so good compared to what Demacia has been in the past. But it is irrational, and she does not want to get her hopes up. She would think Jarvan is more reasonable than this, but the words just spill from him. She would never have pictured him as one so caught up in loyalty, and to his own servant of all people.

“We are not just coming to the aid of others. We are seeking their aid as well. Their honor used to come from brute strength, self sufficiency. With the help they get from Zaun, this is no longer the case. Equally, we can no longer treat Noxus as if they are only a threat to Demacia. And we cannot treat helping others as if they will not be helping us in return.”

“To be allied with so many,” Lux murmurs, “seems impossible to imagine.”

“It isn't going to be easy.”

She knows that many factions view Demacia as simply a lesser of two evils. They are not all as vocal about it, but it would be impossible not to know. She does not really blame them. She is bitter, and even Jarvan's high hopes and morals are not enough to stop it. They almost make it worse. The world is not so shiny and good. Demacia is not and cannot be. It is not a matter of ease, it is simply impossible.
Even so she just affirms, “ah... Yes.”

“We need to present a unified front,”

Lux sits up, slowly, looking over his form. He sits up straight at the desk, his papers tidy. Eyes on the wall ahead instead of her direction. She knows what this is about. “Unity is – important, yes.” Already at a murmur, Lux grows quieter still, because she does not really want to be saying it, “sacrifice is important as well.”

Jarvan stands. He takes up so much space, like all military men. He is large and imposing and impressive. Not like Ezreal, who makes himself too at home in any surroundings. He looks at her, and his smile is forced. “I know that I can count on you.”

There is hesitance in his steps as he crosses the room. It is dark outside, Lux realizes.

He does not look tense, changing into bedclothes. They are still so formal compared to even her own, and Lux is used to the clothing of nobility. The embroidery is beautiful, all gold and black and intricate. Lux knows that they are frivolous, but she loves such things. The unnecessary prettiness of being a noble has always been her favorite part. These are the kinds of clothes she was raised to wear.

She stares at his naked back. It is marred the marks of whips and cuts. They are pale scars, mostly, healed and faded. Some are a deep red, and she knows they are old, yet as vivid as Ezreal's magic markings. Her heart aches, but she doesn't get to stare for long before he pulls a shirt over his head.

He climbs into bed beside her. He is not casual. He is a prince. Yet she feels that she is the only one who is nervous, who is uncomfortable. She knows he is trying to make it less so.

The last time she shared a bed – Lux bites her lip and tries to shake the thought. She shouldn't think of impure things beside her prince. She should not be thinking of Ezreal. Not given what they have been skirting around, tonight.

Lux forces herself not to peek in his direction. She wonders if she should be prepared for the same things.

Yet eventually her eyelids grow heavy in the darkness. It feels like hours later when she hears the creak of the bed, feels it dip as he props himself up. His hand cups her cheek. She feels safe, here.

She brings her hands to rest over his.

She has to trust him. She knows he has no room in his role for hesitance. She hopes she can be forgiven for hers.

“Rest,” Jarvan tells her. “Tomorrow will be long.”

He presses a kiss to her forehead, then lays back down. They sleep, side by side.

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They are all covered by her illusion from the moment they wake until they reach their destination. Invisible, they make their way in a military line, walking quietly. Ekko's hand rests on his zero drive, ready to activate it the moment they are not hiding every sound.
Jarvan leads the way. Lux recognizes the Noxian guard they walk by. She sees his eyes dart to the ground, to the smallest of dusty upturns as they pass, and curses the limitations of her invisibility. She appreciates that he begins a somewhat over-loud conversation with the other nearby guard to distract him.

They pass by with ease, and Lux makes careful note of their position. She knows the man with the flower cannot reveal himself by protecting them. She will need to incapacitate them both on the way out.

There is only going to be chaos inside.

Their mission is basic, in words. Raid the laboratory. Steal information. Destroy weapons. Take out enemies. This is not stealth, is not even scouting.

The laboratories are underground the military base. It is better to start there, cause what damage they can, and deal with the battle afterwards. It is difficult to walk past so many soldiers with ample opportunity to attack with the element of surprise. But that would spiral out of control quickly, she knows.

Where the surface is run down and iron and steel, the labs are clean and light. Zaun always strikes Lux as an ugly place, marred by so much unregulated experimentation that it spills out and stains and ruins. This lab is different. It is organized and bright and pale.

There are not so many scientists here. Perhaps because it is so early in the morning. It would be better to kill them all, but this makes things easier.

The front room is full of bookshelves and filing cabinets. There are stacks or paper and cases all over every surface. There are only two in this room, but she hears the buzz of activity coming from further in.

Lux watches from the doorway as her allies fan out across the room. Quinn and Vi both make their way behind the enemies. Lux releases her magic as she releases a breath – and Janna steals theirs away before they can as much as gasp. Even without air, they could make sound, knock their surroundings, and so Vi and Quinn hold them in place. They are weak as they struggle.

When they faint, their bodies are lowered to the ground. Lux watches, waiting to see their breath return, but Janna does not let it.

It's terrifying. Lux has always thought of her magic as a way of controlling an element, a storm, the weather. She feels a cold sweat and cannot tell if it is exhaustion from how long she held invisibility over so many, or if it is fear.

Regardless of which it is, she kneels to the ground, tired. She takes a moment, while the others begin looking through papers. Each of them flips through folders, tearing out pages here and there, shoving them into their bags and pockets.

Anything they find worthless is discarded, dropped on the floor for what Lux is sure will be a fire as they leave. They want documents with information they can use, documents to explain what is going on. She is sure more than half of these are tedious, unnecessary status reports for whatever Noxian founders they answer to.

They will have time to study these documents better, later. For now they only skim them to learn
how to handle the next part.

“Chemical warfare, chemical warfare, chemical warfare,” Vi mumbles, throwing papers over her shoulder one by one. Janna catches them before they land, doing a more thorough job of sorting through what can be used and what cannot.

Ekko does not say anything as he reads through the papers, but there are papers he pockets and papers he hands down to Poppy.

Quinn is the first to find something conclusive. She holds a manila folder in her hands, and she begins reading from it without getting anyone's attention first. Eventually they are all quiet, listening intently. “For the revival,” she is saying when Lux tunes in, “of the great juggernaut. It is for this purpose that we have provided a small sample of royal blood, to be examined, broken down, and made imitation of. Laboratory N-356 in Zaun sector D will be dedicated to this cause. Other operations on the Fallen Subjects are to be put to halt, with potential for further funding with results.”

“That's enough for now,” Jarvan says, quiet. Quinn stops immediately. She slides the folder into her backpack.

They continue searching, finding only further documents of the same nature. Some on previous, halted experiments.

“This research could be of use,” Janna says.

Jarvan's expression is hard, and Lux thinks of all the scars across his back. “No. We have no need for that. We have use for the information and words we have stolen. No one should have the product. We'll destroy everything here.”

Lux's temperature has finally regulated back to normal. She looks at the paper on the ground compared to the papers they have already sorted through. This phase is done, at the very least for this room. “Alright,” Lux murmurs, rising back to stand up straight. She locks the door behind her.

“Time for chaos?” Vi asks, shooting a wide grin to Janna. Ekko flicks on his zero drive. She wishes it had been switched on back outside, just in case, but she is still confident. Quinn and Poppy look to Jarvan for confirmation.

He nods.

It is instantaneous. Vi punches down the door to the next room. The wall around it comes with, crumbling down loudly, companied by the startled shrieks of the people in the other room.

Lux cannot view them as people. Not with what she must do. The benefit of this is that she does not have to care. They are to destroy everything here, so she does not have to worry about her surroundings. It is almost cathartic to detonate so much light, to gather up all her frustration and fury and the glow of the room and burst it, to burn it all up. She had wanted to burn up all the useless reports made during the League of Legends, and these – these here are reports made in secret, before, during, all through the Institute's reign. There is no way that this is all fresh after Sanctum Calamitates has ended.

But of course. Who could have expected Zaun, of all places, to follow rules? They are the land without regulation. That is why each and every one of these scientists are here.
People are screaming. They are not fighters, not armed. The most they can do is hide, and it is worthless against Vi's destruction.

There are chemicals that catch fire, powders that fall on top to put them out. A knocking at the door of soldiers that she trusts Poppy and Jarvan in the rear to handle.

“Oh good,” Vi boasts, having run out of tables and cabinets to overturn. She brushes past Lux roughly, “it's so boring to beat up on nerdy wusses!”

“Ahem,” Ekko snaps, following behind her.

“Don't worry, plenty of people like nerds.” Vi assures him. Lux is startled to watch her wink in Janna's direction. More startled when Janna giggles behind her fingertips.

“Not the time for flirting,” Quinn snaps, but it is cut off by the door falling inward.

The rush of soldiers is the first real challenge. They take only a moment to be startled by the wreckage, the small fires, overturned furniture, papers torn and thrown across every surface. Entire chunks of wall missing.

Mindless destruction was easy in a small space, but actual combat, less so. Poppy and Jarvan are in the lead, slowing the flow of soldiers as they come in through the door. Quinn is able to thin out those who make it more than three steps past them with her crossbow. Lux tries to do the same with her magic. Tries to blind and burn equally. But she is tired. Invisibility is one of the most difficult magics for her to calibrate, let alone how many it was on, and for how long.

Janna provides support for Vi as she fights her way through every man that comes her way. But she is backing up as she fights, overwhelmed by numbers. Behind her, Lux must back up as well, until she is stepping over dead scientists to move further back in the building.

Not good, her mind tells her, she mustn't flee further into this building. But she has no choice. She snares a soldier that makes it past Vi, backing up as quick as she can without tripping. She is exhausted already, and feels the heat of a fire in the corner of the room growing closer. She bursts her light around him and his skin does not even boil. She cannot hold him back much longer. Even bound, he is raising a sword.

Lux turns and runs.

The rooms in this lab look so similar that she does not know exactly how many she passes through. Going through them to take out the scientists had been easier, but she hears footsteps behind her. Hears Vi shouting after her. She does not know if the “wait!” is directed at her or her pursuers, but it does not matter when she has no options.

She slams doors behind her, trapping herself in rooms filling with smoke. She hears the doors bursting open shortly after she leaves the room. It is in a brief moment of being out of sight that she is able to slip herself not into the next room, but into a storage closet. This will not be safe for long, but it is all she has. She tries to relax, tries to regain her energy.

She hears the fight in the room outside. She feels magic in the air, stirred up by Janna. She hears the familiar sound of broken bodies falling, of Vi's fists.

“Lux?!” Vi calls out. Lux tries to answer, but smoke has been spilling in through the cracks in the
door. She tries the doorknob, but even through her gloves it burns too hot to turn. Vi's voice, quieter, “Janna, clear the air!”

Smoke pours in thicker, pushed into the storage closet for lack of windows. She drops to the floor to escape what smoke she can, and kicks at the door to make sound, but she is weak. She does not even make enough noise to drown out the sound of footsteps rushing to the next room.

Coughs wrack her body. She kicks at the door again, feebly. Pathetic, she think. To have locked herself in to her own death, air stolen away by those looking to help her.

Her vision tunnels in on her as she sinks to the floor to escape the smoke as best she can. The world is black around the edges, hazy and distant. She has always assumed she would die in battle, rather than of old age. But this is far from honorable.

Her lungs hurt. She gasps for air and does not get enough. Her vision is clouded over. The voices she hears are closer and further all at once.

She thinks she hears Ezreal.

No. She hears Vi. “When you hit a wall,” she says, and Lux finishes the familiar phrase in her head, *hit it hard.* It's a good thing she knew the rest, because the sound of it is cut off by the crumbling in front of her face. Vi smashes through the door and the wall both the same.

Janna is at Lux’s side in an instant, dropping a folder to put a hand on her chest. Lux can feel the oxygen in her lungs stirring with a horrible, nauseating clarity. She can feel the smoke in the air dissipating. She waves Vi off.

“Back on your feet,” Vi says quickly. Lux wants to snap, *easier said than done,* but does not have the energy. It is hard to stay mad when Vi is so crazy bright-eyed. “We're far from done here, Baby-girl.”

Lux's consciousness is fading in, her vision clearing even through the ill feeling. Vi leaves the spinning room, and Janna rises from her side as well after grabbing for the discarded folder. “How casually she says such things,” the woman murmurs, then shakes her head. “You only have a moment. You're needed.”

And then she is gone, too.

There is shouting coming from the other rooms. Through holes knocked into the walls, Lux can see that the next room ahead is empty.

She knows better than to move before she is ready. She breathes in deep. Waits a moment to let the nausea pass. She digs her staff from the rubble of the closet. Makes sure she can grip it in her hand again.

Then she returns to the battle in the front rooms. There are too many dead bodies along the way. Luckily none of her allies. Jarvan holds his own, always a proud bastion in the center of their indoor battlefield. Quinn is hunched over, weary, but her limbs do not shake. Her firing form is perfect even as she has to step over bodies, over broken furniture, skirt around flames, and dodge fists.

“Lux!” Quinn calls, without sparing her a glance. “Burn what you can behind us. We're heading up!”
Lux nods, and whirls back around so fast that she is dizzied. She doesn’t let it slow her down. She draws light from the fires, draws light from everywhere she can, and charges it all up. Then releases. She burns through what little remained of walls in a straight line through the building.

They rush the door as a group, Poppy and Jarvan still leading the way, trailed by Quinn. Ekko waits for Lux, touching her arm as if it would steady her uneven steps. Vi and Janna take the rear.

It is much better to fight on the surface, though a frightening look at just how many more soldiers they have yet to face.

Their strategy returns again. The forefront fighters, Poppy and Jarvan. Lux and Quinn from behind. Janna keeping Vi protected as she does – well, her own thing, really. She is unpredictable, smashing people, structures, and people into structures.

The man with the flower catches Lux from behind. She knows she cannot hold back in this fight, and that even as an ally, he cannot either.

Yet his weapon is still knocked from his hands far, far too easily. She thinks less of him for this.

He takes a swing at her with his fist, and though her hands fly to shield her face, it isn’t quick enough. Her eyes clench shut. She braces for impact.

She hears the sound of the punch landing, sees a shimmer of light behind her eyelids.

“Ow, fuck,” Ezreal's voice, this time. Her eyes snap open. He is still reeling from the hit, his voice muffled by his hand at his nose, blood dripping down it. “This is getting too repetitive.”

“Ez--” Lux begins, but they do not have the time. She reaches for his arm and yanks him back from another swing.

They stumble upright together, regaining their balance shoulder to shoulder. She raises her staff. He raises his glove. Both collect magic in a way that is familiar and natural. This is practiced on the field, but it has been a long time since they fought like this.

She wants to laugh.

They aim for his sides, for easy injuries to heal from, and with magic slicing at either of his sides, he collapses. If someone finds him, maybe he won’t bleed out. Maybe.

They fight together. It is an easy combination, one she knows by heart. If she is honest, she always found it satisfying. She binds enemies in place, burns them with luminance. Ezreal follows up, shifting up close so they have no time to dodge his rapid-fire bursts of magic.

This alone is enough to take down so many people that she feels unstoppable. All she has to do is whirl, face whoever comes at her, and trap them. If she manages just this, it is already too late to lose. She almost enjoys the way her eyes are always chasing Ezreal, following the glow of his shifts. They are just another light-source for her to draw from.

“You know,” Ezreal tells her, his voice in one direction, then picking up from another, “you really are a liar.” He sounds amused when she knows he should be angry.
Enemies are growing weary of their pattern, avoiding them more carefully. She scans the area. Her allies are busy, a whirlwind of a fight, quite literally, in Janna's case. Ezreal meets her eyes when she looks back, and jerks his chin in another direction. They will seek out the battle.

She follows him, and so much adrenaline pumps in her veins that she cannot feel the tired ache in her legs.

She grunts, swinging her staff to trap an enemy. She misses, but guided by blind faith, Ezreal still appears right in front of them. He has to dodge their sword, side-stepping clumsily. “And you,” Lux snaps, “are nosy!”

He bursts them bright with his magic, but without help from her, the enemies are only given pause. Ezreal jumps backwards to come to her side, and pointedly wipes his nose with the back of his hand. There is still blood smeared across his face. His lip is swollen, and she thinks she wants to lick the blood from the corner of his stupid smug mouth.

“That was not a joke! Did you follow me here?!”

“Was I not meant to?” Ezreal counters, and this time he is the one to reach back and shove her out of the way of a weapon's path. She is too weak to catch herself and falls to the ground. She watches as Janna's wind guides the blade away from Ezreal in subtle movements that Lux almost does not notice.

It's a trade of sword-swings and bursts of mana. The soldier falls first. Without Janna, Lux does not think Ezreal would have come out on top.

Their own battle is slowing; the Noxian soldiers are beginning to avoid them, beginning to thin out. To Lux this is nothing, but to Ezreal it is time to think. She sees him pause over the bleeding body.

Ezreal is as used to battle as the rest of them. But he stands over the soldier with an uncertainty to the curve of his body, face obscured from Lux's view. She knows he is not used to killing.

She had wanted to keep blood off his hands, but it is still running down his face when Ezreal comes to take her hand, pulling her to her feet roughly. He does not let go.

“Are you shielding someone else? I thought I was your one and only!” Vi exclaims, over the sound of crumbling walls.

Janna calls back, dismissive, “oh, of course, darling.”

“This is really not the time for flirting,” Quinn snaps, but then jokes, “I'll literally kill you both if you keep it up.”

“You should all show some respect,” Poppy says, back to back with the prince. Though it is more like back to thigh.

Lux feels vaguely hysterical. Ezreal pulls her where he wants her, drags her towards a retreating enemy. “You’re okay,” Lux tells him, commands of him, because her own mood is too manic to deal with how fresh he is to death. “You’re okay,” she repeats.

There are footsteps from around a corner, and before they even round it, Lux tightens the light in a burning coil, out of her own sight.
“It’s good to have ones more important than your prince,” Jarvan’s voice carries. The ridiculousness of him playing along with the banter around him only sets Lux off further. The ridiculous of his words pushes her over the edge into giggling.

Magic swells around her and Ezreal both, his instinctive trust in her senses. Their feet leave the ground in unison. She does not understand his magic, but it is beautiful to watch it slice through the same enemies she lights up. Together the way they destroy a man is so, so bright.

It is a strange sensation to laugh while killing a man. She feels rain on her cheeks, and Ezreal only grins at her as if she is not crazy.

There are no enemies near. None conscious, at least. Lux is certain many of them fled, dishonorable for a Noxian but predictable of Zaun. When her feet touch the ground the dirt has become mud.

She watches Ezreal land beside her, hair wet, clinging to his face. Firelight is in his eyes and on his cheeks. There is smoke in the air again, and Janna no longer has the energy to force it filtered herself. Lux doubles over, but Ezreal catches her before she falls. He holds her weight, too hard, grip too tight. She is grateful for it, body bursting with unidentifiable want for his hands on her however she can get them. Her mind races even as her body goes sluggish. They turn back, towards the others.

Jarvan pulls his lance from a man’s spine with a disgusting squelch. Poppy has left his side to retrieve her hammer, lodged in a shattered wall. Her eyes are still sharp, scanning the horizon. Quinn is nudging a body with her boot, Valor on her shoulder for the first time today. For reasons Lux has clearly missed the build up to, Janna is in Vi’s arms, holding a packet from the laboratories to her chest. Lux vaguely recalls that she had the envelope earlier, when she rescued Lux from the storage room.

She shakes her head. This does not matter now.

Ekko, when she spots him, is sitting down in the dirt, exhausted. He is covered in bruises and there is shattered tech at his side. Not his zero drive, though its glow is dim. She wonders if he had to use it. He is bleeding from a cut on his forehead, from more on his arms. He is the youngest, the weakest, and was protected the least.

She should have been with him – Ezreal should have, Janna should have, Vi – anyone. She knows better, she does. Knows that this all went well, despite bruises, cuts, and scratches. But seeing him wince and hold his arm makes her wish there were still someone for her to hurt.

At least it is over now.

The blood is washing off of Ezreal’s face, raindrop by raindrop. He should not have followed her and she is furious, but too worn out, too high-tension to even try to express this to him. He holds her up, her arm over his shoulder, and takes in their surroundings with a blank face.

She just wants to kiss him stupid and feel the warm of his body and the hot of his blood. She wants him to hold her so tight that she can hear their pounding hearts beat out of pattern with each other. She wants to pour all this excess energy and adrenaline into his body.

“Luxanna,” Jarvan says. Light is breaking through the clouds, caught in the smog of Zaun beyond him. He is back-lit by faded lights, and for how tired everyone else looks, he still stands strong. It is
quiet, except for the rainfall and the sizzling flames. Her vision is hazy.

She separates herself from Ezreal, and steps away from him shakily. She feels his eyes on her, but can only face her prince. Her mind can't slow down, racing no, no, no. “Yes.”

“It's time for Demacia to represent unity. To represent dedication. This will be war, and our kingdom needs hope to look to.”

She should never have begun this. This is the thought that repeats in her head like a miserable mantra as she leaves Ezreal behind her. Jarvan holds out his hand for her in the wreckage, and she takes it without looking back, gingerly resting her fingers on his palm. This is as much as they touch, and her gaze lingers on it. She does not feel anything at all.

Except - Ezreal's voice cracks. He does not mean to make a sound, does not even say anything, but he lets out this tiny, broken noise, and Lux looks back despite herself. His expression burns into her mind, blue eyes blown wide and mouth agape. He looks hurt, and for some reason all she can focus on is the sharp contrast of his eyes and the ever-blue glow on his cheeks.

She has to turn away. She assures herself that this is like tearing off a bandage, and that it will stop hurting shortly. Her footsteps are near silenced by the wet terrain, and she longs for a military march across tile to pace her heartbeat to. The rain is overpowering her senses.

Lux knows she cannot put anyone above her prince.

Chapter End Notes

Hm.
She does not let herself look back again.

Jarvan still holds her hand as he gives commands out to them. Quinn and Poppy are to stick with him, and they will set out from Zaun shortly. The others are dismissed at once. Stay safe, lay low. Seek Caitlyn’s protection, if needed.

Ezreal is silent. She hears the quiet murmurs of Vi and Janna, words overlaid by the rain and flames. There is concern in their tones, both fighting to try to sound casual. They lead him away.

Lux has to watch his back as he follows the women. His clothes are dark and damp, his body not hunched over, but rigid. Janna’s hand rests on his shoulder as she guides him, and Lux expects one of them, any of them, to look back at her accusingly. They do not.

Quinn and Poppy step up beside their prince. Ekko approaches Lux’s other side.

“Go home, Ekko,” Lux says, voice cracking.

He shakes his head.

She winds up dragging him back towards his own house by the wrist, agreeing to meet up with her partners afterwards. He complains the whole way, literally hours spent in the numbing rain.

“You guys are leaving so quick because it’s dangerous to stay, right? Isn’t it more dangerous for me to stay here alone after being involved? Following you would be safer.”

Lux bites the inside of her cheek. Her feet are sore. Her gut feels hollow. Her skin is burning up hot and prickly, tingling under the endless barrage of rain. Even now, she cannot let her guard down. There is some form of law here, however ineffectual. There is military, and they need to be gone, not walking through a damn residential district.

“You are not in more danger here than in Noxus, for heaven’s sake.”

“I don’t want to – stay here!” Ekko snaps, trying to yank his wrist from hers. She might have overpowered him if she were not so exhausted. He still walks beside her, knowing the path she is leading him down. His usual mohawk is weighed down with the wet. The blood has washed off his skin, at least. “It sucks here!”

“And Noxus will be worse.”

“I can be useful,” he argues. “To you. And to Zaun. Someone from here has to show that we aren’t for this, we aren’t part of this!”

“Perhaps an adult would be better.” Her voice is harsh but she does not have the time, patience, or even energy to be babysitting him or his feelings. He is a child and this is a war. She would have stayed out of it if she had been lucky enough to have the choice.
“You aren't even an adult!”

Lux does not try to argue. “You have family and friends and loved ones.”

He bites his lip so hard she thinks it might bleed. When he releases, he takes on a sarcastic tone. “Great. Can't wait until I'm old enough to ditch them like you do.”

She wants to hit him, and only catches herself with her hand in the air. He does not look scared, glaring up at her. They stay that way for a long moment, soaked to the bone, glowering one another down in defiance. Her mind reels through facts. He was a part of the attack. He is a child. He will be alone.

She sighs, running her hand through her hair, bangs pushed back and staying with the rain. It is a tangled and knotted mess. She wishes she had short hair. She wishes she had not let him come along.

No one questions Ekko's place, still right at her side when they meet up at the city outskirts.

They do not discuss plans until they are far from the city's boundary. They do not travel terribly far, all too exhausted to get into the mountains. Quinn scouts out a secluded, hidden area to set up camp. Thankfully, the rain stops.

Under the starlight, by the warm of a fire, Lux still shivers in her dry clothes. They have done nothing to heat the chill of her body. She does not do well to put on an act, only because she knows that no one is watching her so closely. Not with the prince here.

Quinn draws crude maps in the dirt, of the path they will take, and their hidden base in Noxus.

“We have contacts,” Jarvan says. “They are a small team, but with invaluable information. With luck, we may get a chance to scour these papers as we travel to meet them. We'll discuss what to do with it when we arrive.”

“Contacts,” Quinn repeats, curious, and Poppy's expression is equally inquisitive. He does not spare them more detail.

They only set up two tents, and trade off who keeps watch throughout the night.

Lux does not know if she is the only one, but on her turn, she reads papers by the firelight. She reads reports of genetic experimentation. Experiments on the living. Experiments on the dead. They do not mention Jinx by name. They use long strings of numbers for the seven live experiments.

Four out of the seven died. Lux is sure she knows who the sixth and seventh are. Roman numerals give Vi away, as well as the date of the experiment's disappearance. It matches her age when she was found in the streets. Somehow, even with big words and technical details, Lux cannot decipher if she escaped or was let go. There are references to further documents that she cannot find.

Lux thinks of the documents Janna held, close to her chest, held close to Vi's heart. She has a good idea of what is in that folder.

She only makes it as far as a vague understanding of past experiments. She does not get into the details of the experiments on the dead, on the prince's blood.
Quinn nudges her, whispering, “sleep, Lux. I'll take over.”

Lux nods. Her eyelids are heavy and she is grateful to be relieved. She is tucking papers back into their folders carefully when her eyes catch a signature. It is on the funding papers – a clue on exactly who has ordered such things. One name does not surprise her. Jericho Swain. The other does. Vessaria Kolminye. The High Councilor.

She nearly drops the papers into the fire, and scrambles to catch them.

Quinn watches, curious.

“We never truly believed the institute was unbiased,” Lux murmurs. “But this is a far cry from acting in their own self interest as they did for the crystal scar.”

As Quinn leans over her shoulder, Lux hands her the folder.

“If you're bored, I recommend reading something else so that we can discuss our separate findings in the morning. But the authorization on this will certainly be relevant.”

Quinn nods, and sweeps a lock of blonde hair over Lux's shoulder for her. “Get some rest. You don't look well.”

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For the first time in a very, very long time, Lux is not the first to wake. Though she had crawled into the tent beside Jarvan, she wakes up beside an empty sleeping bag. Her skin still feels flushed, and her hair sticks to her forehead with sweat.

She rolls over, kicking helplessly at the blankets until she sees Ekko, crouching beside her, watching intently.

“You're sick,” he tells her.

“I'm just tired,” she corrects him. When she sits up, it ends in her doubled over, coughing.

“It's not like we could slow down for you anyway,” Ekko says. She looks up at him, and sees the way he averts his gaze. He is still angry with her. “I just came to wake you up so we could get going.”

“Right,” she murmurs.

The day is long. There is sweat on the back of her neck, on her forehead. Thankfully she does not have to keep up with conversation. Everyone is quiet, reading over documents as they walk, only occasionally uttering a request to trade.

The next day is worse. The sun is back, her temperature flaring up wildly even before her skin and clothes are baked in the light. The others discuss the details of what they read, but Lux is dizzy. She tries to focus on words, tries to form her own coherent thoughts, but each time she opens her mouth she feels closer to vomiting.

Ekko walks beside her and stays out of the conversation. He does not offer niceties or check in on her as he had their previous journey. Even as the terrain roughens in the mountains.
But she sees his hand, often in the air, just inches from her elbow. As if he is ready to catch her should she stumble. She takes care not to.

When night falls she is ushered to her tent first, Ekko still on her heels.

He brushes her hair from her face while she lays down in the dark. She wants to laugh at the absurdity of being cared for by a child, let alone who is angry with her.

“In summary,” he eventually says, voice a bit too loud, and full of a joking haughtiness. He clears his throat. “The Grand General of Noxus, Swain, ordered the experiments with assisted funding from. Er... V something. Valerie?”


Ekko just brushes past it. This means very little to him. “Sounds like they were responsible for Jinx. And... For Vi.”

Her head pounds, but she doesn't want to miss out on his recap of what was gone over, today. He must have been listening well. She tells him, “there may be another that survived, out of the live experiments.”

“There were probably other labs, that kind of stuff might still be going on. There weren't too many papers on chemical weapons. Nothing recent.”

“They don't need a full lab of scientists to figure out what they've already used. Singed alone knows all about it. Do you know about the invasion of Ionia?”

“Vaguely,” Ekko admits, shifting in place.

“It's alright,” she assures him, knowing he must not have had very good schooling. Unlike Ezreal, he does not seek out knowledge in anything and everything that catches his interest. Or rather, far fewer things catch his interest. Hextech and survival are far more important to a boy who spends his times in the streets of Zaun. She doesn't blame him. “There was an attack, before the Institute's days. There was only one survivor, so the tales aren't in great detail. Noxus was outnumbered by Ionian ambush, but had a trap of their own. Singed had created a chemical weapon for them.”

Ekko is quiet.

“It didn't just take out the Ionian fighters, though. It was showered down on everyone on the battlefield. Out of both sides, only Riven of Noxus survived.”

“So,” Ekko deduces, “Singed's gotta die.”

Lux startles. Her abrupt laughter makes her head pulse. “It isn't that simple.”

“Yeah, I know.”

They are quiet. She hears the crackle of the fire outside, comforting. She thinks of Ezreal, and how he sleeps outside when left unattended. She wonders what he is doing, now that he has no obligation, no mission.
It has only been a couple of days. She is a fool. A love-sick fool. She takes in a shaky breath, and even her exhale wavers. “We’ve learned quite a bit about the irrelevant past, details that come far too late to be of use.”

“Guess they were done experimenting on live people and want to work with the dead. And I guess that’s got something to do with your prince’s blood.” Ekko finally lays down beside her, settling in and huffing. “I don’t really get it.”

“I’m sure we’ll make sense of it in time,” she assures him. She wants to think on it longer, knows she could make sense of it now, but her mind is still fogged by her fever.

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Her fever breaks. She is able to discuss the documents with everyone as they continue their travel, is able to take her turn keeping watch.

“My biggest question, I think,” Poppy says, so quiet and unassuming that a hush falls over them all just to hear her out, “or, my two biggest questions, I suppose? The first is to find out more of the juggernaut, whatever that may be. And the second...” This time she punctuates her point, swinging her backpack around to her front and digging out the papers in question. She holds them up. “This experiment was started, then stopped. Then begun again, later, but different.”

Quinn suggests, “before and after the Institute's reign?”

Poppy shakes her head. “One is from before it's inception,” she says, “and the other is certainly more recent, but not beyond its ending.”

“It isn't terribly suspicious for a project to be put on hold,” Jarvan says. “Further, I'm sure that Zaun's willingness to respect the Institute waned over time.”

Lux remembers those documents, having found them particularly interesting herself. She shakes her head. “It's made suspicious by the ones that authorize it. Boram Darkwill was the one to authorize it at first.”

Poppy nods. “The reports to him talk about the project like it is given up on for being hopeless, yet finished all the same.”

“Yet,” Lux points out, “the later reports discuss it as if it were completely unfinished. And the methods and funding described differ wildly from the original experiments. There is much more...” She grimaces, and watches Jarvan intently to see if he will tense. “sacrificial blood?”

He does not flinch. His back is a sturdy pillar of strength to follow behind. Lux is proud to follow him. She feels shameful to think her heartache is any real suffering when she thinks of him being tortured for his kingdom. She knows that it isn't as though he wants this, either.

“The later reports are for Grand General Swain,” Quinn says, but sounds as if she does not really understand what makes this relevant. “And High counselor Vessaria Kolminye helped to fund them. So whatever this experiment was, the Institute of War sanctioned it.”

“They've always worked in self interest, but to condone blood sacrifices and genetic experimentation is a bit much.” Poppy mutters.
“Hard to know what their motivation was without knowing about the juggernaut,” Ekko chimes in. There is an odd beat, as if each of them simultaneously realizes that he is still here.

“I have a theory of who that title represents,” Jarvan says, slowly. “Though I’d like to confirm it with our contacts.”

The three Demacians all reply to him in obedient unison: “of course.”

They do not discuss many theories beyond this, but Lux is sure they are all forming them in their heads, minds each racing for the rest of the trip.

Noxus is an ominous shadow against the setting sun, only growing more and more frightening as they approach. Its sharp spires and dark towers do not give way to charming architecture and recognizable homes and neighborhoods. It is fenced off to outsiders. Lux knows her invisibility will not be enough to get them within its borders. She knows she cannot spare the energy to pull it off anyway. Not while she is still recovering from her illness.

They circle around for what feels like hours, keeping out of sight from guards. They are an unobservant bunch, and it is not terribly difficulty. Lux cannot claim that Noxus soldiers are idiots, but certainly their best soldiers are focused elsewhere. She offers her illusions, not invisibility, but some sort of disguise. That, at least, is easier in the darkness. Jarvan denies her.

On closer inspection, some are asleep. Others sway on their feet like it is a battle to stay awake. They have been slipped a potion. One or two guards she could accept, but this many makes it clear.

She is leaning too far from their shelter, trying to get a good look at them, when a guard's eyes meet hers.

She recognizes his piercing stare in an instant. She has faced him in battle too many times to count, memorized his every tactic. He has always been a difficult opponent for her. She gasps, despite herself, not at seeing him, but startled at being caught by such a piercing gaze. She nearly stumbles backwards, but Jarvan's hand is comforting, catching the small of her back.

He approaches them, crossing half the distance.

He nods, a near imperceptible jerk of his chin. Jarvan guides Lux to step out with him. The others follow, remaining silent, ready to fight.

“He is our contact?” she thinks, not aloud."

Jarvan obeys. They all obey.

Lux thinks better of asking out loud, but her mind repeats the question over and over without answer. She has faced him in battle too many times to count, memorized his every tactic. He has always been a difficult opponent for her. She gasps, despite herself, not at seeing him, but startled at being caught by such a piercing gaze. She nearly stumbles backwards, but Jarvan's hand is comforting, catching the small of her back.

He approaches them, crossing half the distance.

He nods, a near imperceptible jerk of his chin. Jarvan guides Lux to step out with him. The others follow, remaining silent, ready to fight.

“Come,” Talon says. Lux has always thought his voice does not suit him. It is too deep, too rough. Then again she knows so little about him. Nothing beyond what she has read of his background in the Institute's files.

Jarvan obeys. They all obey.

Lux thinks better of asking out loud, but her mind repeats the question over and over without answer. She has faced him in battle too many times to count, memorized his every tactic. He has always been a difficult opponent for her. She gasps, despite herself, not at seeing him, but startled at being caught by such a piercing gaze. She nearly stumbles backwards, but Jarvan's hand is comforting, catching the small of her back.
He leads them through hidden gates in the wall. They cross underground halls in silence, following his every step, every pause. The halls are narrow, stone, too loud under-foot. Lux can scarcely see three feet ahead of her through the dark, and beyond Jarvan's form. She does not mind.

There is an underground bunker. Their only light is from torches, and it feels unnatural to have no windows and no sky. Even starlight is brighter than this.

She is watching the flicker of torchlight on the floor, staring down at her feet when they enter the room. Her group fans in, and slowly, she raises her head to meet their contacts within Noxus.

Talon steps towards his people. He claims a space beside Katarina, a step in front, not as superiority, but protective.

Katarina is seated on a stack of wooden crates, blood-red hair pouring down around her. She curls forward, a knee to her chest and her arm wrapped around it. She looks almost bored, as if she has been waiting for them for hours and is not impressed with the pay-off. From so high up it is as though she is looking down on her subjects.

To her other side, Riven stands straight, attentive.

Lux is so startled by their contacts being them, being these three, that she nearly misses the fourth. She does not know how. Not with who he is – not when he is so broad that he takes up nearly twice the space of his comrades.

Garen looks furious. Yet she cannot tell if his gaze is set on her or on Jarvan. He storms towards her, and she is certain that were Jarvan not his prince, he would have knocked shoulders past him in his anger.

“You shouldn't be here,” he says. He is in charge of so many men that his voice commands respect, commands authority.

It is outdone by her prince's arm, raised ever so slightly between the siblings. Garen has to step back, obedient.

“She goes where I need her.”

Garen's face contorts, a rare burst of fury that he cannot stifle. He tucks his head, hiding his clenched jaw behind his scarf. Lux does not let her own eyes waver from his. She is meant to be here.

He has never been protective before. Now is not he time to start. Now, when he has been working with the enemies, with some of the strongest members of their enemy's forces. She has to talk herself out of thinking this way. If Jarvan trusts them, there is no reason she should not. If Jarvan intends for them to ally, there is no reason to hate Garen for being involved with them.

Ekko nudges Lux inquisitively.

Lux gives Garen a military salute to remind him of her place. That his place is equal to hers. She cannot help but be terse. “Brother.”

Garen glowers as he returns the salute.

“What a touching reunion. I can only aspire to get along with my sister as well as the two of you,”
Katarina taunts, tilting her head back just to look down her nose at them. “Talon. Make note - as the elder sibling, remind me to condescend.”

Garen has decided to glare at the wall now, instead of his allies, arms crossed firm over his chest.

“You never cease,” Talon replies, flat and without missing a beat. Lux has always seen him be nothing but respectful to her on the fields. Are they like this in private? Her mind races into a thousand thoughts – do they laugh at bad jokes? Do they bicker? Do they do, small, human, endearing things, even though they are of Noxus?

Katarina does not laugh, but does not anger either. She does not show any signs of having heard him at all. She and Talon both share such blank expressions that Lux could almost think she imagined the exchange.

The woman nods towards one of the steel doors. “You'll sleep in the back room. Talon will deliver you meals and anything else you require, though…” She observes Ekko, and Lux feels him stiffen beside her. “We may be running lower on supplies than expected.”

“I take responsibility,” Lux says, stepping forward before anyone else can comment. “And we will make do.” She has to pause for a moment, just to wrap her mind around being respectful to Katarina of all people. To be speaking kindly and courteously, practically groveling. Even if they are informants, allies in some ways, it is too sudden to trust.

But she follows her prince. She trusts him. She adds on, quieter, “I apologize for any hindrance, but I believe he will be of enough use to be well worth it.”

Katarina waves a hand in the air, dismissive, then hops down from her crate-pile. She brushes past them, Talon at her heels.

“Rest well for tomorrow,” she tells them, and with a final nod, leaves. Lux hears the door locking behind her, and their footsteps echo down the halls for a long while.

Riven remains in the room with them for only a moment longer, then wordlessly dismisses herself to the back room. The rest of them follow her, not because she is guiding them but because it is late, and Katarina's advice was sound.

There are not enough beds, thanks to Ekko's presence. Quinn offers her place, comfortable with sleeping on the floor, but Ekko shuts her down firmly. He does not explain himself, but does not need to. He invited himself along, and knows he should not be catered to. Lux imagines he wants to see himself as an equal instead of a tag-along child.

With Riven present, Lux is too uncomfortable to discuss the surprising roster of their allies. Strategy, she knows, will come tomorrow.

Lux sleeps, far from home, on a mission that is unlike any other she has been on before.

Underground, she dreams of the blue, blue sky, and rain on the surface of the ocean.

Chapter End Notes
*siren sounds*
Chapter 15

Though Riven had been the one to lead them all into the back room for rest, she is still awake when Lux succumbs to sleep. She is still awake when Lux first opens her eyes in what she hopes is the morning. With no natural light and the torches unlit, it takes a long time for her eyes to adjust. She has no clue what time it really is.

But she can hear the way Riven's breathing is shallow, weary and uneven. And more than any of the other sounds around her, unfamiliar.

Lux makes no efforts to be quiet as she sits up, allowing Riven to hear her. In the dark, she sees the woman's head tilt in her direction. She says nothing, so Lux breaks the silence herself. “Good morning.”

Riven nods.

“Did you sleep?” Lux asks, almost joking in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Riven does not match her light-heartedness. She sounds almost confused by the question. “Yes.”

The silence stretches, awkward and uncomfortable, until the others slowly stir into the day with them. They relocate to the main room, though now that Lux takes it in without the exhaustion of a day of travel, it looks less like a hidden bunker and more like a forgotten storage room. Katarina's throne of crates are full of empty glass bottles, many broken, and there are empty barels in the corner with rotted wood.

They idle about for some time. Ekko makes conversation with Quinn on trivial subjects, and Poppy and Jarvan murmur amongst themselves. Lux keeps to herself. Garen's presence, even in silence, is overbearing beside her. He sits resolutely at her side, unspeaking and unmoving. She feels as though he is a guard dog, but without any fondness. All loyalty and no love. Just like a proper Demacian. She wishes she could be like that.

Eventually, Riven picks one of the barels up and shuffles it closer to the middle of the room for a flat surface. Talon shows up shortly after, but says nothing as he settles into a corner of the room. It still feels like being under enemy observation, having the two Noxians stare them all down. She feels as if they are captives, held in a bizarre cell. If the coming days are like this one, Lux worries she will go insane.

Katarina shows up much later, and takes an immediate position by their makeshift table.

“I hope you're all doing well,” she says. Lux scans her words, her expression, her tone, desperate to find the hidden animosity. She does not find sincerity, but she cannot place any malice, either. Garen grunts an affirmative.

Jarvan steps up to the other side of the barrel, Katarina's opposite. As they should be, complete foils.

She is olive skin with bright, vivid, blood-red hair pouring down her back. Sharp knives strapped to her tight clothes. She never hides them, like an assassin. Not in her culture. They are a threat. Then
the prince, in armor, shining bright, all pale skin and dark hair. He is broad-shouldered where she is small, shadowed where she is scarred.

Jarvan begins setting down their folders, packets, and papers in a stack for their contacts to peruse. Riven and Talon reach into the pile and each begin scanning them over with interest. Katarina does for only a moment, flipping through pages. Then she closes the folder.

““This doesn't concern me,” she says, airily.

“Some of the matters here serve reason for our visit,” Jarvan says.

Katarina shakes her head fiercely. Lux suspects more to get her hair from her face than in disagreement. She says, “Listen to me. With our petty alliance I am not going to be able to stop you from stealing secrets that benefit you, like a coward. But I am not here to stop a war between Noxus and Demacia. Even less to ensure Demacia's victory. We are here because we have a common enemy. That is all.”

Her sneer is audible, enough that it does not matter that her hair quickly falls to her face again to cover it.

Jarvan remains composed, even as Lux feels rage boiling up inside her. More alarmingly, she can see it on Quinn's face, and even Poppy has gone brittle. “Any weapon of Noxus is a weapon of Swain,” the prince says. “If you oppose him, he will oppose you. I understand you would rather not have us share secrets you wish to be yours after his reign ends, but we will need to work together, wholly, if we wish to overcome.”

The woman's face shows no give of defeat. She returns to reading over the papers. Katarina skips entire pages at a time, though Lux imagines this is because not all of the information is new to her.

They sit in silence as the three Noxians trade papers around. Talon shows only mild interest. Katarina is unreadable as ever, and alarmingly, sometimes a smile tugs at her lips, as though the scope of the weapons and experiments amuses her.

Riven's expression is dark. The bags under her eyes are deep, deep, as her bowed head throws shadows across her face. Sometimes her shoulders tremble, and Lux cannot tell if it is in sadness or anger.

One by one, they set down their final documents.

“The chemical weapons are of no concern to me,” Katarina says dismissively. Riven's whole body twitches, but she remains silent. “The live experiments even less so, given that they seem to be... Scattered to the winds, as it were. I'm sure they held a purpose at one point that I would need to be concerned with, had the project been more of a success.”

Ekko's fists are clenched at his sides, fingers flexing. Today he is better at keeping a scowl off his face.

“Honestly,” Katarina says, off-handed, “were it not for the worry of it being turned against us, I would have no worries about the juggernaut, either.”

“That would be the part most of our questions revolve around.” Jarvan says.
Garen is the one to explain, and for some reason this infuriates Lux. “It's a code-name. A title that was given to the Noxian warrior, Sion.”

There is a hush among her party. They are quiet, recalling Sion's history as it tangles with theirs. He is a near legend. To Noxus, heroic, to Demacia, devastating. It had been enough of a battle to take him down once.

Katarina is smiling wryly. “It would be an honor to have him returned to us, though without his mind he does become his own liability. I suppose in light of how little what remains of him cares for friend or foe, I'm impartial to his life or death.”

“In other words,” Quinn suggests, “we can totally kill him if we have to.”

Talon snorts, and Katarina sets a long, blank stare in Quinn's direction. “Yes. If you can.”

“I believe,” Lux says, clearing her throat. It feels good to have all sets of eyes land on her, and she speaks with rising confidence. “What concerns us more than the experiments is the authorization on them. Swain's name is no surprise, but High counselor Vessaria Kolminye is alarming to see.”

Katarina puts a hand to her chin in thought, but Talon is the one to offer, “I believe she was a resident of Noxus.”

Ekko repeats, “was?”

“She hasn't been seen or heard from since the Institute's end,” he clarifies.

“Do we have where, exactly, she resides?” Katarina asks. When Talon shakes his head, she instructs him with authority, “find out. Check her home for traces of activity. Anything you can find. Lightshield. If I recall correctly, Kiersta Mandrake was a resident of Demacia.”

“I'm sorry to say that I'm not aware of every resident of my kingdom,” Jarvan says. It could have been a snipe from anyone else, but he is sincere in his apology, as if he thinks that would have been a reasonable expectation of him.

Poppy speaks up, slowly, quietly. “I can't say I know exactly where each member of the Council of Equity is...” At Jarvan's nod to continue, she clears her throat. “Reginald Ashram is still missing, and Heyward Relivash remains in a holding cell in Piltover. I also know that Kiersta Mandrake had been keeping residence on Institute grounds, but may have returned to her Demacian residence at its closing. I'm sure when we're near home, we can find her residence to see if she has information on the whereabouts of Counselor Kolminye.”

Katarina seems to have decided this is not important to her. “Feel free to tend to that on your own time. We want as much information as we can get, but Swain's involvement is the primary concern. Their project, in the short-term, is more important than any alliance they may have.”

With that, turns to leave.

“Already?” Quinn demands. Jarvan gives her a quick look, and she flinches back, apologetic.

Katarina does not turn back to look at them. “I have something to look into. I'll be back for you tomorrow.”
Talon follows close behind her.

Riven remains.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The stay in Noxus is long and more boring than Lux had ever expected. She has been on a dozen missions like this, and there's something pleasant in the freedom of isolation in them. Yet now she longs to be alone. She is short-tempered from being trapped in such a small space with Quinn's desperate and unrelenting attempts to make small talk with the ever-quiet Poppy and Riven. Garen is a looming presence that doesn't speak and hardly takes his eyes off her. Her only reprieve from him is when he leaves with Jarvan – when Talon and Katarina take Riven and the two soldiers away.

Sometimes they take Quinn with the men. Sometimes Poppy. Other times only Riven is left behind with Lux. She wants to scream for being left out of the work, but bites her tongue for Jarvan's sake. He keeps shooting her these quiet, apologetic looks, but she has a guess as to why. She is his bride-to-be. She needs to be protected, at the very least until the public is aware of their marriage. That's the whole point of it, after all.

Then he should stay safe as well, she wants to shout, wants to demand, but knows he is a hands-on leader. That he would never consider for a second to be something less, even at her request.

Ekko paces, grows impatient like a child, but perhaps this is why he gets spoiled as one. Katarina leaves behind playing cards, one day, wordlessly dropping them on a crate before taking Quinn and Poppy with her.

Today they are alone – nearly. Being locked up like this has destroyed her perception of time; it could be three in the morning or seven at night, but they are awake, and so they play cards and try to pretend that Riven is not sitting in the corner.

“T'm going to die if I don't see the sun,” Ekko complains, laying down his paired cards in front of him. “If Noxus even gets sunlight?”

Lux bites back her laugh, too aware of Riven, even in her silence. “I understand how you feel, but you did agree to accompany me. Did you think it would be easy?”

“No, but it is easy. Just sitting in a dank room and doing nothing.”

Lux can only sigh. “You are a liability.”

“So are you, apparently. Why else they keeping you in the dark?”

“They aren't,” Lux reminds him. “We're given briefings the same as everyone else. We know the same information as the ones venturing out for it. And consider if something were to happen to them, out there. We're the back up holders of everything we know thus far--”

“--Like literally in the dark,” Ekko interrupts, snickering, and she knows he is interrupting her to soothe her own frustrations.

Riven laughs too, a quiet sound, hidden in her shoulder. When Lux's eyes dart in her direction, the woman is already looking away.

Lux tells them both, “I'm never in the dark.”
Ekko grins, Riven scoffs, and Garen throws the door open so hard that it slams into the wall and splinters.

There are dual cries of “Garen,” that take Lux a moment to decipher. Jarvan's, consoling and Katarina's, furious. She storms in after him, tensions high in the whole group as they follow. Quinn is a stream of ranting, unprofessional complaining about bow unprofessional Garen is, punctuated by Poppy repeating over and over for her to shut up. Talon is silent, but his body is all on edge as he stalks beside Katarina. She is hot on Garen's heels across the room, a seething flame of condemnation.

“You cannot come on any further recon missions if you're going to draw attention whenever we find something. That is literally the entire point – the goal is to find something, and to stay hidden, and if you cannot do those things in tandem–”

Lux takes vague amusement that Katarina's speech reverts to formalities when she's flustered – and somewhere beneath the concern for her own safety is vindictive pleasure that Garen is the one to slip. It should be her out there. Even if just to be with them with her illusions and invisibility.

She keeps all of this from her voice. “Calm down. What happened?”

Garen sits down on the floor in a heap of clinking armor. The scowl is firm on his face, but at least his is still now. He doesn't answer, practically in time out for the way Katarina steps in front of him to speak to everyone. As if he were waiting just to interrupt her, he doesn't give her the chance, muttering, “we should never have trusted Noxians.”

“Yes, that was your mistake,” Katarina speaks over him. She rolls her eyes, despite the absolute sincerity to her voice. The silence is uncomfortable as she looks at him over her shoulder, ensuring that he doesn't interrupt again. “What good would an impartial Institution be without equal Noxian representation? When the entire concept is to have representatives fight?”

“Katarina,” Poppy warns, to no avail.

“Oh, were you a fool enough to think Swain would be above manipulating our systems? That he would only manipulate the Institute? Or did you think that the government he is in charge of should somehow be above his influence?”

Jarvan snaps, with authority, “Katarina.”

She retorts “I'll speak until I'm finished.” Even so, she goes quiet.

Lux catches Ekko shifting his weight in discomfort at the edge of her sight. Her nerves are still screaming at the sudden tension, like being dunked in ice water.

“We've been looking as far into Vessaria Kolminye's records as we can,” Jarvan explains.

“I'm aware,” Lux reminds him, failing to swallow back the venom and impatience from her voice.

If Jarvan is offended, he doesn't show it. “This means thoroughly searching her home, as well as the office of her employment – those are where we've spent most of our time over these weeks.”
Ekko is shifting again, fighting back the impulse to point out how useful he would be for avoiding getting caught. Lux knows he is following her usual example and treating the prince with proper respect. Today, after weeks of sitting in this hole in the ground while everyone else works, Lux’s formality is fracturing.

Jarvan says, “Much of it was tampered with, and blatantly.”

“I'm sure we'd see the same thing of Demacia's records,” Katarina says.

Lux knows this is true, and winces despite herself. She has been allowed to see enough – has seen enough even beyond that thanks to her sneaking. She is not naïve enough to trust Demacian records any more than another kingdom's anymore.

Jarvan does not bother disputing it, though Lux watches his eyebrows furrow. He continues, “even among the falsified documents and the cleaned-up records, there were a lot of... Holes.”

“Like that she died, mainly,” Katarina interjects without ceremony, eyes darting to Lux as if to demand gratitude for the information.

Lux feels her heart sinking in her chest. It has been hollow since she left Ezreal behind, but the feeling comes back with a vengeance. “When? Recently?”

“No even a little,” Talon snorts. “Two weeks after she was appointed High Councilor. Natural causes.”

Ekko can't contain his sarcastic, “sure.”

Jarvan nods in his direction. “Exactly. What we need to do is get as close to the source as we can. Her quarters in the castle. That would be where the most honest documents would be.”

“Wouldn't that also be where all the fake stuff is, too? If it's where the dudes faking it are?” Ekko asks.

Quinn has finally caught ahold of her mood, though her voice is still gruff with frustration. “Probably, but that means evidence from the source. We need to see everything, falsified or not.”

Katarina crosses her arms over her chest and flicks hair from her eyes with a snap of her head. “And like I've been saying, that would be a job best left to Talon and I. If we get caught we can get out of it. And we won't get caught.”

“You might not tell us what you find,” Garen interjects. “You're just as untrustworthy as the enemy.”

“Yet here you are.”

He hesitates, then concedes gruffly, “here we are.”

“I could go,” Lux says, as firm as she is able. “I can be invisible even if we're caught. I can keep tabs on them.”

“You all really shouldn't form alliances with those you don't trust,” Riven says.

“I know that you're capable, Lux, and I promise you would be my first choice under normal circumstances,” Jarvan says, his volume dropping off the further he gets into his sentence. This earns a quirk of Katarina's eyebrow.

She bites the inside of her cheek to keep from complaining further, but Riven says, blandly, “you all
really shouldn't bring along dead-weight.”

Lux bites harder – but she is glad she does. One look at Riven’s expression tells her that Riven is not truly criticizing her, just that fact that she is not being utilized.

“I'm going to the Kolminye quarters tonight,” Katarina announces, before any further arguing can ensue. It only brings back the previous subject of conflict. She cuts that off, too, with aggressive competence. “I'm taking Lux with me. She's right that her magic is the most useful, and that should satisfy your paranoia on my loyalties.”

“I can't put Lux in danger like that,” Jarvan insists.

Katarina nods to Lux, ignoring him completely. “I'll be back just after midnight.”

Katarina is on Lux's side and on her own both at once. She is on Lux's side without being on Jarvan's. The thought of it makes Lux's stomach churn.

***

Lux thought the waiting was bad without information – with a mission to look forward, it's torturous. She is counting down the seconds even as she loses track of them again and again. Ekko has a knack for telling time, something instinctual in him. Lux wonders if it's something absorbed into him from his machine, or from the pull of the past when he uses it. Ekko just shrugs and says, “I dunno, but it's like... About three in the afternoon?”

Katarina comes to get her at two in the morning. Lux feels everyone's eyes tearing into her back as they leave. Riven's expression is pained; she, more desperately than any of them, wants to leave this room.

Katarina waits to speak until it is just the two of them, traversing stone hallways by torchlight. “I'll lead you to Vessaria's quarters and leave you there.”

Lux does not point out that she is meant to keep an eye on Katarina. In the same way that Katarina is trusting her to be left alone, she is trusting Katarina. She still hates her, wants to hate her. Watching her back as she leads the two of them to the surface, though, Lux thinks she understands why Talon and Riven follow her.

“I'll scout ahead to see how far we can push it. Whether or not we can visit Swain's offices. If we can, I'll come back and take you there. If not, we'll return you to the others.”

Lux murmurs, “understood.”

She sees the flick of Katarina's hair more than her gaze over her shoulder, looking at Lux with curiosity. It is a calculating look, and eventually she seems to solve the equation. She sounds amused. “Not as chipper when you aren't in the public eye, are we?”

“I'm as bright as always,” Lux says, but it comes out sarcastic.

Katarina snorts, then covers her mouth to stifle a startled laugh. It dies out quickly, and the hush that falls over them lasts the rest of their journey. Before they leave the final doorway to the surface, Katarina turns to her and does not have to ask; Lux cloaks herself invisible. Katarina, of course, can be seen in her own territory.

This is not the same path they took to get in. They are near dungeons. Lux can smell it, can hear the muffled sounds of chains and complaints, of familiar cell-mate whispers. Katarina leads her through
empty watch-rooms, then rows of empty cells. Not all are empty. She sees shadowed figures at the backs of their caves, and almost feels as if they can see her. Impossible.

Katarina does well to open doors for herself and keep them open for Lux without it looking strange, when they finally make it to an occupied watch room.

Lux has always imagined Noxus to be like the slums of Zaun. Near squalor, miserable living conditions. What else could produce such awful people? What else could make “survival of the fittest” a necessity of day-to-day life?

But the observation rooms are modern. Not quite like what Lux had seen in Demacia, smiling workers in uniform, chatting over coffee in front of numbered visiopathic crystals showing each cell. The rooms here are not as bright, and the workers appear to be wearing casual clothes. They use the same visiopathic crystals, but fewer, set up at angles to display multiple cells at once, and not even all the way into their depths.

“Katarina,” one of the workers stammers, a pretty girl, a dark haired nobody. “I didn't expect--”

“Yes well, I'm here,” Katarina interrupts, impatient. “If you didn't take so many breaks, perhaps you would have seen me come in, hm?”

No-name flushes. “I've been--”

“--Yes, yes, you're quitting smoking. Sure you are.” Katarina's voice has no give of good-nature, nor her face, but another worker starts snickering as if this is all a familiar joke between them. The pretty one buries her head on her arms, whining the whole while until Katarina and Lux are safely out of the room.

Katarina is so quiet, so steadfast in her stride, that Lux almost feels forgotten. Like a true invader to Noxus. It wouldn't be the first time.

But her path doesn't stray. It's a long journey, and Lux is on edge with her magic pushed to its limits. It has to be perfect. She can't get caught. She feels the pull for mana in her body, insisting Katarina needs to hurry the fuck up – but her mind reminding herself again and again that they need to take it slow and natural.

The dungeons are connected to the castle. This, Lux thinks, is ridiculously archaic. Convenient, but archaic. And vaguely terrifying when she thinks of Swain sitting in his office, and just a ways below him, slowly dying prisoners. Below that, the banished, criminals to the city-state, spies.

Then again, given Katarina and Talon's involvement, they aren't just far, far below him. They're right under his nose.

She wants to ask why, she wants to ask if it has something to do with Katarina's father. Wants to ask how Riven joined them and what their longterm goals are.

Lux watches the flow of crimson hair like a flag fluttering in front of her and knows Katarina would never answer her questions.

The castle is divided into clearly marked areas. There are maps all around as if it is designed for visitors. Vaguely ridiculous, Lux has always thought. Like inviting spies in to see all their secrets. Or like a place that does not keep staff alive long enough to trust them to memorize the castle. There isn't much staff around at this hour, but Lux sees a couple people. They carry knives on their belt like any other tool for work. Noxus is like another universe, sometimes. Lux cannot imagine wait staff and cleaning staff flashing blades like a threat to their own lords – not in Demacia.
The business halls are dark. It makes it easy to get to Vessaria's office without witnesses. Her office is nestled in the middle of a dozen rooms with unfamiliar names.

When Katarina has closed the door behind them both she says, quietly, “a lot of those people don't come in much. They're paper-pushers. But they do still come in. They still work here.”

Lux nods, at first, then remembers to say aloud, “then even the location of her office is to keep up appearances.”

Katarina's eyes cannot settle on her, which seems to discomfort her. She says, “be quick. Keep your ears sharp. I'll be back for you.”

Then she is gone. Lux is alone in the room, lit only by moonlight through the large ornate windows. Noxus has a certain image to it, but Lux cannot sincerely imagine working every day around dark stained wooden furniture and deep, midnight-purple curtains. It must be so depressing, even for...

Normal people? Citizens? Innocents?

Lux is having an easier and easier time picturing these people that never used to exist in her mind.

She is methodical as she searches the room. So much of it is boring paperwork. Things that do not concern her about the internal operations of Noxian government. Things besides military, besides leadership. Things like food rations, economy management. Apparently Vessaria dabbled in most every form of government. Enough to have dips into their paperworks and projects in her filing cabinets.

There is not even a day's pause in the dates of things. Vessaria's death comes and goes and her paperwork does not stop. But the focus of it does. It changes in an instant, from programs for the poor, from scholarship funding – straight into laws on military spending. Experiments in Zaun and tactics for battle.

All the paperwork of the Institute of War is there. Registrations, records, spending. Most of it is information Lux is already familiar with. There are papers she wants to get a better look at. She doesn't know if they can risk her taking them. It seems such a waste to pour her time into reading individual documents – but in not doing so, she may miss the only useful information.

When Katarina finally comes for her, Lux is perched by the window, her illusions carelessly dropped, comparing a paper in each hand.

“The Institute's funding went towards the Noxian military,” Lux says, conversationally. Her body is tense, and she sees the way Katarina stiffens defensively in response. “The high counselor is meant to represent a faction, not funnel money to them. This isn't even particularly hidden. Did you know?”

“What role do you think I have, here?” Katarina hisses, voice low. “How much authority and access do you really think that Swain gives me?”

Lux only believes her for how frustrated Katarina sounds, herself.

“This explains the strength of your military,” Lux says. In her mind a voice whispers that she should stop. Even so, she continues. “Noxus is never strong on their own. It's all through theft of resources.”

“If you have the strength to steal it, any resource is deserved,” Katarina says, dismissive, yet sounding like she does not believe it herself. She hardly rises to the bait for a fight, instead falling back into a silence as she mulls it over, eyebrows furrowed. The scar over her eye is pinched as she scowls at nothing in particular.
"All of us fought under the impression it was a level battlefield while your people stole. While we poured our energy into a system built to save the planet, you sabotaged it all to build an army to use in its collapse."

Katarina points out, "no one ever thought the Institute was what they said they were."

Lux feels her anger dissipating. They are, despite all of this, on the same side right now. She mutters, "Perhaps the other high counselors did."

Katarina is pensive, quiet as she comes to look over the papers Lux has set aside.

They have the information that matters. She knows that Noxus has revived Sion, knows that the Zaun experiments were under their command, with help from the Institute. Knows that Vessaria was replaced with a Noxian spy.

Somehow it's all very obvious, when she's staring down at only half the pieces.

It's Leblanc. It had to be. Who else could hold up such disguises? The list of potentials is only so long, narrowed down by a handful of qualifiers. Illusions, Noxian, access to the Institute, ally to Swain.

Do they even need to search his office? The more information they have, the better, but that's edging so close to the flames. She looks to Katarina, awaiting her input, but is startled to see her looking through further files.

Lux ventures, "we have what we need."

"You have what you need. I need to protect my family."

"You don't think you'll find clues of your father's disappearance here, do you? Practically in plain sight, just down the hall and to the left? How stupid do you think Swain is?"

Katarina does not look up. "So you agree that he's to blame for it."

"I figured that was just the way of things, here. Theft is just another show of power, isn't it?"

Katarina is alarmingly calm in the face of Lux's attitude. "It's too dangerous to venture any further. He's not stupid. There are guards. We would need a distraction."

"Ah," is all Lux manages, before Katarina whirls on her. The papers flutter from her hands to the floor, her hair like a red tornado as it whips around.

Katarina is behind her in an instant, hands are around her wrists. She is a physical fighter, much stronger than Lux. Lux isn't able to wrench away before Katarina has a good grip on her, and a knife pressed against her forearm with it.

Lux's voice is quiet, but severe. "What are you doing?"

"Capturing a spy, obviously," Katarina retorts. She does not make any attempt to quiet her voice.

She drags Lux out of the room, her knife drawing blood as Lux struggles against it. Lux can hear footsteps coming, can feel the warm trickle down onto her palm. Katarina is smart. She grabs at Lux's wand before throwing her to the ground in front of the wave of guards.

"I found her sneaking around the archives," Katarina lies, smooth as anything.
Lux grits out, “liar,” knowing it will fall on deaf ears. A struggle is just as pointless, now. She lets them handcuff her, has no option but to let them yank her back to her feet by her hair.

“What should we do with her?”

Katarina eyes Lux. She cannot read a thing into it. No hint of a plan she should be in on, no malice. Nothing. Then the woman shrugs. “I'm not in charge, here. Why don't you wake Swain? After all, her goal was certainly his quarters.”

The guards murmur amongst themselves until a pair volunteers to get communications out. Their footsteps fade into the distance, lights flicking on in their wake to lead the way back.

They wait for him in silence. A stranger's hands still roughly gripping Lux's hair. Blood making her fingers slippery. Katarina, leaning against the wall like this is all nothing to her. Twirling Lux's wand between deft fingers.

Chapter End Notes

the implementation of the league of legends universe is like a dream come true...! after five long years of being a fan of league lore, it's finally centralized in one place......!!!

I'm a little disappointed in certain bits of content, but that's personal preference, mostly. I think plenty of my complaints are perfectly valid, but I'm hesitant to air all of them out given that I don't know that my 'version' of lore is innocent to what I'm complaining about. Ha. Anyway, feeling very #blessed, but still doing my best on my own!!

The comments and kudos mean everything to me. Thank you for your patience and time. Up next: more stuff?!
Chapter 17

The wait is torturous. Her wound aches, oddly less than her scalp where the guard's grip is cruel and harsh. Her heart is pounding in her chest, a war-drum of betrayal and fear. Swain is coming. Swain is coming, and Katarina just hums and twirls Lux's wand.

She is afraid. It's nothing new, for being in Noxus, but this time it is not generalized fear. It is acute, it is specific. Swain is coming. Their act in Zaun was never going to be dismissed, she never had delusions of that, but this is a step beyond. Caught in the enemy's own dwelling. Red-handed. Literally, now.

She wonders if they'll kill her here or throw her in the dungeons to rot.

Lux cannot imagine many other possibilities, and it feels strange to accept her own demise so wholly. But that's the only outcome. It's a straight road ahead. The others should not come for her. She hopes that they don't realize she's missing in time to try.

Her adrenaline is running on high but it isn't energizing her body, just her mind. Her body aches, suddenly, like the exhaustion is catching up with her. Too much time in a dark bunker, and then this. All the fuss to let her be out here, and of course she gets caught. Of course Katarina betrays her. She had wanted to trust her. Lux doesn't get the things she wants. She should know this by now.

How could Jarvan make such a mistake?

"It's nothing personal, you understand," Katarina drawls. Lux looks up at her through mussed hair in her face.

Lux doesn't know why she doesn't spit their plan at her feet. Whether she turned on them or not, whether it was part of the act or not, Lux is sure Katarina had no authority for any of it. Why not go down with retribution for her captor? Why not condemn Katarina in her final moments?

She can't do it.

Swain is coming.

She can see his silhouette down the hall, approaching them slowly. His gait is unbalanced as always, if not more-so. His bad leg is heavier with sleep, his robes disheveled. In her mind he had stormed toward her, fury and lightning in his rigid body, but in reality he is sluggish and visibly disoriented.

He descends on her sluggish and off-balance, but still every bit as terrifying as the crows that pick dead bodies to pieces in the slums of Zaun.

"My Lady," Swain drawls, as he draws close. His voice is gravely, like he is in desperate need of a glass of water. He looks down at Lux with disdain, deep purple bags under his eyes. Beatrice is on his shoulder, and caws in punctuation. It's a wretched sound, piercing and shrill in the dead of night.

She imagines Ezreal coming to her rescue, vivid and fleeting. Imagines Quinn, Jarvan, her brother, Katarina. Anyone. Faces flash through her mind like options, but they aren't, really, they're all dead-ends. Or, she is.
“You’re pushing it, this time,” Swain says to her, his voice as painful as her aching scalp. Her past infiltration missions had never taken her this close. “Too close to the flame.”

“Too close to the flame,” Lux repeats, because it is far more apt than he realizes. The notion that she is staring execution in the eyes and thinking about Ezreal is nauseating. The world feels blindingly clear, all its edges sharp and distinct with adrenaline.

“We should kill her,” Katarina says.

Swain's eyes narrow in her direction. He does not like taking commands, and as if retaliating, he motions to the guard whose fingers are still tangled in Lux’s hair. “Preposterous. Miss Crownguard is the most valuable hostage we could ask for. Put her in a cell. The nicest we have. We will deal with her personally in the morning.”

Lux shudders involuntarily. She wonders why he says 'we.' She knows that he means himself and Beatrice, but from his own words, she isn't a crow's meal tonight. (Her mind does not conjure any new images of rescue, just a delay to her demise. She will be interrogated, she will be tortured, she will be held in false ransom.) She wonders what her fate would have been without Katarina’s insolent comment.

The guards lead her away, back the way she came, Swain trailing behind them as if he does not trust them to do their own job. He shouldn't. They only caught her with Katarina's help.

But Katarina is the one he shouldn't trust. When Lux tries to sneak one last look back to her, the assassin is gone.

They don't make it to the dungeons. They are close, and then there is a strange feeling in her gut, the nausea intensified for one split second so that she almost vomits. A bright light blinds her, and she remembers Ezreal's arcane shift, remembers a hundred instances of him jumping to her rescue, and she hadn't thought that it would be him, this time, hadn't thought he would be here – but even so.

Even so, she still feels her heart sink like a stone and her eyes start to sting when she comprehends that it is Ekko by her side, having knocked Swain to the floor with a deft strike to his cane. The awful grip on her hair finally drops, along with the dead-weight body of the guards beside her, crossbow bolts lodged in their necks.

She doesn't have time to linger on the mix of disappointment and relief. Ekko commands her, loud and clear, “four steps back, three steps right.”

She obeys him in a hurry, and watches Swain's magic vines burst up from the ground where she had been. Ekko tumbles out of the way, thorn nipping at his heels and curling longingly up towards the toes of Lux's boots. Swain is not so undignified as to cry out, but as he weakly rises back to his feet, his magic switches targets. They all know better than to get close to him now; for however weak he looks, he is still a threat. His magic flows through Beatrice as she swoops to peck at Lux, but another bolt narrowly cuts off her path without striking her.

Ekko leaps back to Lux's side along the edge of the wall, grabbing her wrist. He avoids her injury with the precision of someone who already knew of it, and does not seem surprised by the blood. He does not handle the rest of her with the same care, yanking her to follow after him as bolts pierce the floor behind them, deterring too-close a chase.

Ekko yanks her through doors and halls with practiced efficiency. It isn't long before Quinn is
jogging up beside them, shooting nervous glances back.

“They don't catch up until we're outside,” Ekko says, exasperated like he is reminding her.

“Right.”

“Six guards,” he adds, steadfast. “Four to our left like an ambush outside this door. Two to the far right, two o'clock. The others will catch up after we get them.” Lux cannot find her words, and as if suddenly aware of her silence, Ekko adds, “Quinn gets the two, you and me'll get the four. Ready?”

She doesn't like to follow his guidelines like this, but they aren't truly his. They were hers before, were hers later. Time is strange. Ekko doesn't look back to see her nod. He and Quinn both shoulder into a door together, and it breaks down in in splintered pieces.

The night air hits her, sudden and windy. She can see the stone walls of the castle and dungeons where they connect, thick forests in the distance. The bunker was to the South, she thinks nonsensically, as it that helps her at all.

Like an automaton, Lux unthinkingly follows what Ekko had said. She steps aside to give Quinn and her crossbow room, in the same motion whirling to face the startled guards on the right. She throws out her snare around the first two, focusing on gathering the mana from her body as they shout.

Ekko tumbles straight past them to take on the two beyond, swinging his bat haphazardly. There is no finesse to his fight, not like Lux and Quinn, all military-precision. But he does not fear the way a child should. Lux wonders how many times this has happened. He doesn't look hurt. She thinks of the vague wonder in Ezreal's eyes in a fight, and does not see a trace of it in Ekko. Maybe he is smarter.

Her shout is wordless, but Ekko responds properly; as she bursts the air in a straight line through the enemies, he throws himself to the ground, hands over his head. Her magic is beautiful as always, prismatic and light, shining right in her unblinking eyes.

The results are not so beautiful. The guards' skin boils, they scream as they burn, lit up like nothing. One of them reaches hopelessly for Ekko as he stands, but collapses after only a moment.

Ekko nudges a body with the toe of his boot. When he looks to Lux, his grin is forced and uncomfortable. “Were you scared?”

Quinn saves her from answering the obvious. “We have to move.”

They don't make it to the trees before Swain is yelling after them. Ahead of her, Lux sees Jarvan, Garen, and Poppy, step out from the brush. When she looks back, Katarina and Talon are spilling past Swain to fight for him.


“I don't know, a couple minutes? Not long.”

Lux's first clue is that Katarina and Talon make no effort to stop Quinn as they step right past her. That the Demacian scout shows no sign of apprehension as she aims her crossbow at Swain's glowing figure. The second is that no one is left for Jarvan to face, or for Ekko. That the two of them can stay in the shadows in relative safety, like watching a program on a crystal. That they do, with no
sense of urgency.

This is all orchestrated. Swain is too frazzled to see it, or perhaps he sincerely falls for their temporary strength in numbers. Katarina reaches Garen first, and Lux wishes she could watch with more clarity.

The way Garen swings his sword is sincere, with all his brute strength and no fear of hurting – he does not hold back. But this is their practiced dance. Katarina hops over the swing with deft precision, lands light, and side-steps her way behind him. They are fascinating to watch, the both of them. Katarina is all knife-tricks and sharp swipes in graceful curves. Garen is blunt swings and no finesse, brute strength enough to throw out half his military training. But she can't watch.

Lux has to turn her attention to Talon, but hears the clink of knives knocking useless against armor and sword-swings missing their target. She is not as practiced in her fights with Talon as those two, though she's fought him countless times. Enough to know what to expect. Enough to bite back her magic and keep from trying to bind him until he's close. He's always too fast from a distance. He knows her just as well. They way they move around each other is a tense and fast-paced stalemate.

Quinn and Poppy are the ones with the most at stake, Lux knows. She can't watch. It would be too much to try to focus on the small target of Quinn's bolts in the midnight air. She hears Swain, hears his crow and the heavy swing of Poppy's hammer hitting the hard ground.

Her eyes dart away from Talon for just a moment. Swain – a bolt in his shoulder. Blood? Too dark to tell. Jarvan and Ekko have backed up, only visible in the distance by the glow of Ekko's tech. And Garen is rushing, moving faster than usual to match Katarina as they clash. She twirls, she jumps, and she is flush against his body with a knife at his neck, and Lux thinks they are in love.

She knows, she's known. It hadn't been subtle before the Institute and it isn't now. But the Institute is gone, and the reminder of them now of all times is ridiculous. As they are caught infiltrating Noxus. She is furious.

Her brother is as much an icon as she is, and this? What gives him the right, what fairness is there in that? In marrying off a young girl while her brother lusts after the enemy. She feels her fury lighting up a storm inside her, burning her up alive.

Talon cuts off her view. He bounds to her, ducking under a branch. She can see his eyes so vividly, so close, and she thinks of having to leave Ezreal behind. He doesn't know which way to dodge. She doesn't have her wand to swing, to aim with. It doesn't matter – she doesn't use her magic. She punches him in the nose, feeling her knuckles crack uncomfortably. He is more used to physical attacks than a mage like herself, and only reels back for a moment before leaping back at her with a knife and bleeding nose.

“Retreat,” Poppy calls, rushing back towards them from where Swain has been knocked to his knees. A new guard is helping him up, and Lux is sure more will spill out the door in moments.

“Snare,” Talon grunts, muffled by a hand over his nose. He'd lined up with Katarina on purpose. It's easy to bind them both. Easy because they made it so.

She flees into the forest with the others.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Is it bad another update is so soon? I'm sorry, two readers...! But a lot of this, despite how much of it is clearly new thanks to the new lore, is stuff I wanted to write for a loooong time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In just under two months, Noxus officially declares war on Demacia.

An act of necessity for their own defense. Retaliation against the first moves made. Lux doesn't know why they bother with these excuses. Being caught trespassing, destroying their laboratory in Zaun – those aren't the first move. The first move came before the Institute. When their propaganda pushed the eradication of yordles, when they invaded Freljord, invaded Ionia.

Are people meant to forget the treachery they've committed? The Institutes time was no reset button. It was a break, a pause, and that is over now.

Lux does not want to be at war.

She does not want to be home in Demacia, either.

She doesn't know where she wants to be. All that longing for the familiar has been weighing her down for months, and now she's back. She's here. Home.

Miserable.

Everyone is. Demacia is great, its people know this. But they are not stupid or blind. War is war. No one wants that.

Katarina did and did not betray her. They were supposed to search together. Katarina used her as a distraction and whatever she found remains a mystery to Lux. Those three – they are an enemy of Swain. But when their plans lead to war, when they manipulate their supposed 'allies,' that doesn't mean much. Lux knows she should never expected better of a Noxian.

The weather cools slowly, at first, then plummetes with local moods.

Piltover had been strange. Zaun, too. People her age lived in their own apartments. People with money like she makes lived in their own homes. The nobility of Demacia is its own universe, and the strangeness of it only grows the more she travels. She needs to pay visit to the families under Crownguard protection. It's been too long.

Her mother tells her how long it's been. At length. That, perhaps she can help to soothe how much they have all missed seeing her face in the solstice celebrations. Surely they will come to the capitol to see how lovely she looks at the prince's side.
Lux starts sleeping in the military barracks.

They are far from the comfort of her canopy bed and its frilled skirts and thick quilted blankets. She still feels better, there. Jarvan assigns her to a room at the bottom of the list – it's made for four, but hosts herself and Ekko just fine, though the boy is off the papers.

She thinks of Ezreal's dusty house on the outskirts, isolated and warm all at once.

It's one of few comforts in a room that sometimes feels like nothing more than a cold metal box. Ekko is no help – his chatter offset by all the gears and fragments of tech he spreads around haphazardly.

The problem with his noise is that it so often tries to draw her back to Ezreal. With his eyes resolutely on the screwdriver twisting in his hands, Ekko asks, “so, what, you're just ditching your boyfriend? Like, that's it?”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Lux corrects, seated on her bunk. “Don't we have anything better to talk about?”

Ekko looks up to set his eyes upon her for a long moment. Then looks back down to his tinkering. “Nope.”

“Your parents must be worried sick,” Lux tries.

Ekko's shoulders sag. He does not deny this. “Sure, but kids just go missing in Zaun, sometimes. That's just how it is.”

“So you'd let them believe you dead?”

“Or I'll let them believe I'm a run-away.”

“That's the truth.”

The boy glances up. He shrugs. “I'm not trying to lie, I'm just trying to do what I want.”

“What's best for Zaun,” Lux repeats. She's heard it a dozen times from him. She still isn't sure what he means. What he thinks he could do for a place like that. She still has to fend off the baggage that comes from it being his home. Catches herself talking down to him, catches herself reassuring her own self that it was only because he is so young, not because he from such a place. She knows better.

“That's the thing about Demacia, I think,” Ekko says. “You guys just get so caught up in doing whatever you want that you don't think about anyone else.”

Lux is silent, waiting for him to elaborate and swallowing back offense.

“If you're at war with Noxus, Zaun will have to be involved, too. Whether we're just resources or cavalry, we'll get pulled in.”

“Then you should choose better allies,” she blurts out, unable to contain it.

His eyebrows furrow, but he only glares down at his work instead of at her. “Yeah, I'd love to, but I'm like ten.” (He grew tired of this joke long ago, but still makes it when he wants to make a point of
how she treats him. She can't blame him.) After a sigh, he tries again. “There are still some kids that
don't know better, but my generation? None of us want to be with Noxus. But it doesn't matter.
Because we are. We will be.”

“Perhaps only for your minds,” Lux offers, with no faith in the world being so kind.

“ Doesn't matter. If we're expending resources on Noxus's fight, we're weak to Piltover.”

“Piltover doesn't wish to wage war, I assure you.”

“No, but they want to end it, and they're allied with you. They don't have better minds, they just have
better resources. They know how that game works. So they'll knock us out of the picture to weak
Noxus, for you.”

Lux hesitates. “You don't know that.”

“You're right,” he says, loftily. “Maybe it won't be a big organized thing. Maybe we'll just get
Piltover randos coming over and picking fights with poor orphan kids because they're being
reminded at every turn that we're the enemy. Maybe I just don't want to get killed in my own home
for some outdated shit the adults think about me.”

Lux does not have words for this. She knows how the propaganda gets, especially in war-time. She
can only imagine how much more pervasive it would be in a city with visio-pathic crystals on the
sides of buildings, with radio speakers on street corners.

He would have gone home if he hadn't come with them to Noxus, she's sure. If it hadn't ended with
Katarina's eyes sharp like a warning of what was to come.

There is a knock at the door, and Lux's heart nearly jumps from her throat. She has to take a moment
to refocus herself and call out that she is coming.

Their first few weeks here, Ekko had always swept his things beneath a bed and ducked into a
shadow. Off the papers meant he wasn't supposed to be here, meant that he was a secret. Maybe it
was a self-destructive streak, maybe Lux had been acting out from stress. She hadn't bothered to hide
him for a second.

No one questions her. No one complains that he is always at her side, though she hears confused
murmurs in her wake. Even Jarvan has allowed him to be near for matters that should be private even
to other military officials. Perhaps he realizes that it is simply too late to hide anything from him, after
what he has accompanied them for.

Xin Zhao is the one at her door. “He wishes to speak with you,” is all he says. When her eyes dart to
Ekko, the older man's expression does not change.

If he needs her alone, he can say as much, Lux thinks, and nods for Ekko to follow.

Sometimes she is afraid of these thoughts. What sort of bride for the prince thinks so rebelliously?
With no reason? The only reprieve she can think of, at times, is that the Institute's administrators no
longer have access to her mind. Summoners no longer push at the barriers she builds up so carefully.
Her thoughts can finally, finally be her own.

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In his office, Jarvan IV is seated behind Caitlyn-levels of paperwork. More than Lux has ever seen him with. She has always admired his transparency. Always thought he was truly going to be the best leader Demacia has ever seen, and that they would see it in every step he takes, read it in every open word he writes.

His dossiers have always been the least padded with unnecessary falsities than any others Lux has been given.

War looks like a lot of things. She knows the stories from her uncle, and knows from the time before the Institute of War. It looks like loved ones leaving and never coming back. It looks like dead bodies on fields. It looks like tents full of the wounded.

This will come soon. Right now the face of war is paperwork and announcements and a tired-eyed prince.

She salutes. Ekko mimics lazily, beside her. (Xin Zhao coughs to hide what may have been a laugh.)

“Good news and bad news,” Jarvan announces, after giving her a quick nod to relax.

“Rare to have both,” Lux says. He shares a weary smile with her.

“My father,” Jarvan begins. Then trails off, like he does not want to say what comes next. He searches for words in Xin Zhao's face for a long stretch of silence. “Wishes to prevent a Rune War.”

Lux is not sure why this would be a subject of hesitance, but can read the room well enough not to say as much. Instead she nods cautiously.

“Do you know the primary cause of damage to the planet in a Rune War? What makes a war a Rune War?”

“Magic,” Lux says.

“Magic,” Jarvan repeats.

She shifts her weight in discomfort. It's a strange thought, that the strength that flows from her own fingertips is what poisons the world. But it makes sense, too. Too much of anything is a flood. She knows so many magic users, ex-champions of the League of Legends, and they are the exceptional, the best of the best.

She wonders how many mages are unheard of. How many geniuses are street kids, like Ekko. A boy who can do so much with no opportunities ahead of him. Up against boys like Ezreal. Older and stronger and handed the world on a platter by the sheriff of the city. Jobs and money and housing.

Her head hurts.

“I know that he has a number of interviews scheduled with the papers,” Jarvan says. “Intending to decry the over-saturation of magic in war-times. There have already been... Certain decisions in local news stories and editorials.”

She has noticed. She has been trying to ignore them. Her head hurts and the back of her throat wavers. There are pin-pricks behind her eyes. “That seems wise.”
“We have so few mages enlisted,” Jarvan murmurs, carefully keeping emotion from his voice. Something she is sure he's practiced at as long as she has. “It should be easy to push the image of the strength of our people.”

“Magic corrupts,” Lux deduces, soft.

“I'll figure something out,” he says. His fingers lace together in front of him and he leans forward as if to hide his eyes behind them. “Something. There's no...” He makes a strangled sound of frustration. “No reason to start a witch hunt against some of our own most prolific citizens.”

“No one would turn against their own so quickly,” Lux assures him, uncertain. Then what is the goal?

“I'm worried for you,” Jarvan says. Then, like there is no difference to him, “I'm worried for Shyvanna. She's never been safe here, despite our best efforts. I worry for Sona.”

Lux feels like the floor is falling out from under her. She wishes it would. Swallow her up whole so she didn't have to feel any of this. Of course Demacia is like this. Jarvan is not King yet. He can't fix things. A kingdom that pulls a child into its military with honor would feel no qualms with vilifying its own magic defenders. Of course. Of course.

“Swain is afraid of Sona!” Lux blurts out, one of so few slip ups in front of her prince that she could count them on one hand. “I know she's not Demacian in blood, but she was the chosen family of a noble name, she's every bit as Demacian as the rest of us, and one who would be invaluable in war times! She's a skilled medic, so what good does it do to distance ourselves from—”

–Xin Zhao clears his throat. Lux quiets obediently.

“Go,” Jarvan tells her, but there is no anger in his voice.

Ekko is uncharacteristically meek beside her. They had just been arguing. Now he is on egg-shells for her sake.

It's disgusting.

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“So then I,” Lux deduces, on her twentieth lap around her room, “have dedicated my life to a kingdom that condemns me.”

Ekko is less fearful now of the seething rage that has been seeping out her pores for hours.

She can't stop thinking about the oil on her skin, for some reason, hyper-focused on it. She is home. To be engaged to the prince. The solstice is coming up soon, and all the public events that come with it. Actual arrangements for war will need to come, and fast. She doesn't want to give a speech while breaking out. Oil. Oil. Oil. Thick and disgusting and heavy. She feels as if she is wading through it.

The boy is vaguely annoyed by now, and she does not entirely blame him. Almost impatiently, he tells her, “I mean, you didn't have to.”

This stops her in her tracks, but she cannot muster the words or patience to explain how wrong he is.
Her whole life has been preparation for this, and it's a miracle that she didn't destroy it all with her stupid stint with Ezreal.

Ekko pushes her on purpose. He drawls, “what angle do you think they'll go for? Trust no mages? Our mages are different?”

She is glaring at him, but he is too used to her. They have spent months together. This is strange to think of. Uncomfortable, knowing that his parents must mourn him every day.

“Or,” he says, after a long stretch of silence, “do you think they'll stand you up in front of a crowd and condemn everyone else? You can be the good one.”

She almost feels helpless in the face of his tone. He is a child, she reminds herself. He is a street boy and his opinion should be worthless to someone like herself. Her voice cracks against her will. “Why are you being like this?”

“Why are you? You're just allowing all this.”

“It isn't my place to shape the kingdom, it's only my place to support it!” She is louder than she means to be.

Ekko's calmness is falling apart just the same. His shoulders are squared, leg bouncing anxiously as he stares down the closed doorway. “If you want the best from your home, you need to learn to criticize its flaws. You're an icon, you have influence. Not like me.”

Lux winces. “You have influence.”

“Not yet,” Ekko says, with determination. “And I'm smart enough to know it. Any ripples I want to send out will take a ton more work than some idiot who could get front page on all the papers just by raising her hand and asking for it.”

“Anyone can get their word published if it's worth while.”

Ekko surges forward at this, his frustration breaking down his barriers. “No! They can't! You think that because you're a pretty rich girl turned into a military celebrity! Street kids like me? Little black boys? We can't get shit for attention, even when we're dying, even when we know exactly what's going on!”

Lux shifts her weight uncomfortably. She had known it wasn't true when she said it. It's hard not to repeat the thoughts that have been forced into her from every angle since she was born. Repeated and repeated for hours of days of months of years. Repeated page after page after page of The Measured Tread. “You don't want to be hated for something that's a part of you. You don't want to be looked down on and demonized for what you are. I get that. The thing is, Lux, I've gotten that since I was two years old. You're just now deciding it sucks, and it hasn't even started yet. It's messed up that this is going to be a brand-new thing for you. And it's messed up that you'll go along with it.”

Lux knows Ekko is right. The shame and discomfort swirls in the pit of her stomach. She can't bring herself to admit it out loud, and allows him to stomp around the halls to cool down.
The king's interview is exactly what Ekko predicted. What Lux predicted. Magic corrupts. Even our own expert mages would tell you the same. Lux wonders how long until she is paraded around to repeat this. Touted as the exception to the rule. In condemning mages, she, a mage, becomes proof that it is real.

War calls for extreme measures. Unity. Demacians have always hated Noxians, and always will. This is an escalation of it. Funny, Lux thinks, with how few mages there really are in Noxus. An interview to vilify magic is only a start. It will be a slow rise, but if the king wills it, it will rise.

Maybe it's just to foster hatred in Swain himself.

It's hard to see the good in this. Not when Jarvain IV has worked so hard within the League of Legends to foster relationships with other factions. Not when they are meant to represent unity and hope for the future. What unity is it when you're condemning some of your own people? The people of your allies? There are mages in Freljord. There are mages in Piltover. Ionia is nothing but mages, it sometimes seems.

How can the king push a narrative of corruption with so many exceptions? Does he wish for his own kingdom to have no allies?

Each time she thinks of it she is overwhelmed, but it is in the back of her mind, always.

Her one distraction. Her own engagement.

The engagement is ceremonial and scheduled.

Of course there is nothing terrible in the surge of anti-magic news, in the push for hatred and fear. Of course not. The prince, after all, is marrying their very own iconic mage. The light of Demacia.

On the front steps of a castle that Lux has only set foot inside perhaps three times in her life, Jarvan IV kneels in front of her. Her dress is specially tailored by his staff for the day, pale sky blue with swirling cloud trim the same shade as the golden-hour sunlight. When the light hits her right, it is almost white. Of course it is.

She can't stop thinking about her skin. They hardly put any makeup on her at all, she reassures herself.

Her prince looks up from her hand, and the ring on her finger is ornate. It is swirling silver around giant diamonds. So big that it seems like something that would get in the way. Lux has always preferred gold to silver. She does not even like such gaudy, showy jewels. Her heart should be racing. She should be thinking – he is so handsome, and holds her hand so gently. She should be thinking that holds such sincerity in his eyes for something so calculated by his father and her own.

Her head is empty.

She looks out on the crowd and smiles pretty. Makes a show of looking at her ring and beaming with delight. Her prince rises, and she takes his arm.

When she looks out on the crowd, they are a faceless sea of strangers. No one in this crowd has ever cared for her. No one in this crowd has ever known her well enough to love her. They certainly aren't going to see her as human from here on out. She is on a high pedestal, rising higher still.
Yet the same family will be pushing her back down.

Maybe the king is right. Her magic was never a gift. For all her genius, what has it done for her? Led her into the military when she was an unwilling child. Taken her soul away from her, destroyed her faith. It is the reason she is bitter and angry when she should be just as prideful as every idiot in this crowd.

Though her eyes search for them and she knows they are present, she cannot find her parents. Their faces would be no comfort, anyway.

Jarvan's speech is of hope and unity. That's what the two of them are meant to represent. He barely brushes on the impending tensions, but this is to be expected. Instead he invites everyone to the solstice celebrations, to be hosted in the castle.

This is the least Lux has spoken to such a crowd. She is no stranger to public speaking and interviews. Today, in her own engagement, she is entirely overshadowed. The day she is promised to be elevated to royalty, but knows she is being pushed down by the same name.

They have to kiss. She stands on her toes and pretends not to notice the way Jarvan still tenses with discomfort as they draw close.

His lips are soft, too. Maybe everyone's are. Lux pushes Ezreal from her mind.

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The solstice celebration is warm for winter, and everything glows gold. The candles in chandeliers paint yellow light on cream tablecloths, and the flames reflect on silver platters of petit fours. The crowd is loud and excited, a blessing in these uncertain times. The image of unity seems to be helping – more than Lux had expected. But it is visceral. A happy engagement means a happy kingdom.

The things she hates will bleed into her community slowly. This stains the edges of her every thought. Like the frost creeping up the edges of all the castle windows.

Lux smooths her skirt for fiftieth time in as many minutes. She feels as though everyone is watching her, judging her worthiness for the prince. She knew this would be the outcome. Even before the push for suspicion of mages.

She knows her skin looks clear. She knows the makeup is as minimal as ever. She still checks her reflection each time she sees it. Maybe the white dress is too presumptuous. Too bridal. But that is the implication, isn't it? It's purposeful.

"Don't pay them any mind," Jarvan murmurs to her under his breath. "You know that I'm not."

Lux nods weakly. He reads her well. All these people picking her apart on his behalf, when he's the one who knows her best.

She is grateful to the League of Legends, for the bond it has given her to the prince. She would have always worshipped him as a figurehead, but now things are different. She worships him all the more, not because he is a Lightshield, but because he has saved her from pain countless times, because he will never judge her magic. And because, most of all, she knows something one of the civilians
know. She knows he is the type to sulk like a child when he stubs his toe.

She prefers a prince who can lose his composure, sometimes. Even if only among friends. Though it occurs to her, she has not seen him so genuine in a very long time.

Still. There are worse people to be engaged to.

Civilians are allowed in the castle until eleven. After that the ball will be invitation only into the early morning. Primarily noble families, but Lux knows many champions of the League will be in attendance. She has seen Sona meandering about after her performance, with Taric at her arm. She has seen Poppy and Quinn. She has seen Sivir, looking wildly out of place despite her proper attire.

She sees Caitlyn in the crowd. Later, Janna. Ekko passes her by a number of times, looking uncomfortable in his formal-wear. Lux thinks he looks charming, but it only takes three passes before he sends word through Quinn that he's bailing. She doesn't blame him. Parties like this aren't fun for proper guests, let alone the improper one.

Lux checks her reflection once more in the large glass windows, as she and Jarvan make rounds. She watches the crowd behind herself, like they exist on another plane of existence. This is when she sees him disappearing into the crowd – blond, young, maybe just her imagination, she isn't sure.

She has been pushing Ezreal from her mind for so long. For months.

All at once she thinks of the way he cannot stand to hear others complains, yet does it more than anyone. He judges harshly and tactlessly and without hesitation. He does not brush his hair often and when he does he scowls and whines. He leaves half his meals unfinished, leaves all his messes uncleaned. He wakes up several times throughout the night and his shifting moves the bed. He reads trashy romance novels and he shrugs too often.

He watches her when he thinks she is not looking. He does not look away when she catches him.

Her breath hitches, thick in her throat, and Jarvan's free hand brushes over her fingertips. He disentangles his arm from her loose grip, and asks her, quiet enough not to seem like it's a show, but loud enough to be heard, "are you certain you don't need to step outside? You've been feverish these past days - the fresh air may do you good, even if it's the winter cold that got to you."

He is such a good actor that at first her mind races to figure out what he is talking about. When she catches on that he made it up, she gives her best look of resignation. "Well... Perhaps just for a moment."

It's nearly eleven. The crowds will be thinning soon, and this gives her reprieve until then.

Jarvan gives a nod to Xin Zhao. He has been their faithful shadow all night, and for the first time, leaves them. He returns moments later with Sona. The two of them exchange nods, and then Sona is offering her arm to Lux like a gentleman.

Sometimes Sona does such interesting things, without a second thought, without a care for what people say. She is used to the scrutiny of high class society, and there are ways she plays to it and ways she does not. Lux hears stray giggling and whispers behind hands at the faux pas, and to spite them, she takes Sona's arm the same way she had held Jarvan's a moment ago. If Sona wants to play prince for just a moment, so be it.
Sona looks unconcerned for Lux's health as she leads her away. Lux has always felt that Sona is not as gullible as others take her to be. They think that because she cannot speak what she sees, that she does not see it.

Despite any disbelief, the woman escorts Lux down twisting halls, taking an odd route that no one would follow by mistake until they reach a dead end. The area seems almost designed just for portraits, a hall hidden away with nothing at the end but a pretty cherrywood desk with a bursting vase of roses to the side. The wallpaper is tasteful and ornately patterned, and the end wall is taken up almost entirely by an equally decorative window, its flowing curtains bunched prettily where the table pins them.

Sona helps to crack the window open, shivering at the sudden cool breeze. Her designer dress is beautiful, but doesn't do much for the cold. Flowing red sleeves drape off her bare shoulders, and the golden-edged neckline is dangerously low. Lux does not miss the ruby heart on her necklace, dangling straight into her cleavage.

For a moment, Sona stays with her, looking her over as if trying to assess her wellbeing. She is both a skeptic at heart and a medic. She eventually smiles, her shoulders relaxing, before signing something.

Lux bows her head in apology, feeling ashamed. She should learn. She should know. She hates that this always slips her mind until it is too late. She has been so painfully idle these past couple months that there is no reason to not have begun.

Sona just shakes her head to say it's okay, like she always does. Not just for Lux, but for years and years. Lux hates how familiar this must be and that she is no different from anyone else Sona has comforted for them not understanding her.

Lux does not know what to say. "I'm sorry," or "I'll learn, I promise," will be lost in the moment, she knows. She manages a small smile, which Sona returns, before turning her back and leaving Lux to her privacy.

She watches Sona's figure fade down the hall, long pink skirts flowing behind her until she eventually turns a corner.

The air feels nice. There is a beautiful rose garden outside, the flowers blooming by a greenthumb or witchcraft. What hypocrisy that would be, Lux thinks. Who knows, anymore. For a moment her mind drifts, tempted to try to feel out any magic in the earth, in the dirt, in the vines.

She can't concentrate well enough. She doesn't mind. It isn't her element, anyway.

Lux leans agains the hallway wall and allows herself to slide down until she is sitting on the floor. It's rather undignified, but her feet are killing her in these high heels. She sweeps her skirts aside, the back of it long and "magewear inspired," according to the designers who visited days ago. Like it is something they need to play up, not something that Lux simply is.

She is used to having nice clothes, but has to admit that the fabric feels particularly nice. Like a cloud made of soft laces. The clothes she has been given since the engagement bring back the thick nostalgia of seeing her mother's pretty dresses in the closets as a child. All that beauty, and now it is being hand-made just for her. Hours of effort and the finest fabrics around, professionally sewn for her to wear once and never again.
She doesn't know how long she stays there. She does not want to go back to the party that is just like seven hundred other parties she has been to. It's just in a castle instead of a mansion.

It's like living in a stasis since she was a child, reliving the same fake conversations with the same high class people, too rich to be impacted by the world around them. With a war encroaching, this should feel different, but it doesn't.

There is a rustling from outside, then a loud, graceless clamoring. The cold air is blocked as Ezreal climbs in through the window and across the table to stand beside her.

His hair was once in a tidy ponytail, but it's mussed from running around outside. His jacket is wet at his back from the snow, and his tie is undone. The stupid coattails of his too-big jacket are in the same style as hers, and she feels like a fool for the brief flash of satisfaction.

He tracks in mud behind him.

She wishes he weren't here. But he is, looking at her with genuine concern all over his stupid face.

"You'll mess up your makeup if you keep crying," are his first words to her as he slides into place to sit down beside her.

Lux stares. "I'm not crying."

Ezreal shrugs, as if this was not a bizarre thing for him to have said. He sits down beside her, thoughtlessly pushing the train of her dress beneath her bent knees. Her legs feel suddenly exposed in this high-low dress, and she does not know if she is disappointed or not that his eyes don't wander.

It feels intimate, sitting together like this. Maybe because this is what they always were together. Hideaways. Running from crowds and fame and fights together. Even before they were dating. On the fields they had been such a perfect team.

His hand slides over hers as easily as the snow covers the ground outside. She does not pull away, even though his skin is just as cold.

She cannot muster the hope to read into this too deeply. Ezreal is weird, and stupid, and she is sure this is just his awful attempt at cheering her up as a friend.

Her chest feels hollow. Ezreal's cheeks are burning up again. He is always quick to blush, a funny trait for a boy who tries to play as uncaring as he does.

No. She needs to stop lying even in the privacy of her own mind. As a friend? What a hideous joke.

She knows it is her who initiates it, but he mirrors the way she leans in as if to take the blame. The tilt of their heads is unified. His lips are cold and wet with melted ice. He tastes like winter, like the snow falling outside. But it is still warm, touching him. His body radiates heat and when they part, only slightly, she feels his breath warm her face.

He leans in closer to her, taking the lead this time. She likes to let him lead. A force of habit; she allows him to kiss her harder, pushing forward as if trying to force her down.

She comes to her senses when she feels the lace of her skirts against her arm.
Lux pulls back so hard she scoots a couple inches on her dress, the cloth sliding across the floor.

Ezreal does not look guilty or embarrassed. He just stares at her, his expression unreadable, as if this is nothing special. Like they are still dating, or worse, like he thinks you can just kiss the prince's fiance and that it is not a big deal.

He does not even look hurt of the reminder that this is over. Maybe nothing was a big deal to him.

But she remembers his face when she took Jarvan's hand, like something inside him was breaking and he had never experienced that before in his life. He has always been so naive, so unaware of his own innocence. Not like her.

Finally, his eyes rake up and down her body. The straight, golden trim across white cloth, shimmering out from her waist like rays of sunlight. She has less to show than Sona, she is acutely aware, but it is still low cut at the chest, high cut at the skirt. If she had not been a mage of battle, something like this would never be acceptable to the public. The designers had said they need the imagery. Everyone needs to know exactly who she is.

They want to glorify the same traits she will come under suspicion for.

"You should go back to the party," Ezreal breathes, but they have been apart too long for him to be out of breath from kissing.

Lux nods, feeling numb. She tries to pull herself up with a hand on the wall, but these shoes were never meant for sitting on the floor. She hardly makes it an inch off the floor before falling back down. A disbelieving laugh spills out from her against her wishes, something ashamed and furious with herself.

Ezreal stands, then holds out a hand to help her up. It feels anticlimactic and awkward to stumble to her feet, to have to steady herself.

They stand, hand in hand, for a long moment. Then he smiles. His fake smiles are unpracticed and obvious.

But he lets her go.

Chapter End Notes

As per every huge lore update, sorry for my long ass author's notes! Look, there's no reconciling this. I'm doing what I can, but look...... I...ook........

I'll be honest. I adore Garen, J4, Galio, Shyvanna, and Quinn's reworks. They're excellent. Lux's I'm dissatisfied with, and I don't think it's just that she's my favorite. Her lore before: a genius magic prodigy, the light of her people. The happiest, most patriotic girl who harbors more hesitation in her faith than anyone. The only one to reveal the darker sides of Demacian culture. She feels trapped and hopeless and betrayed.

Her new lore is: she's Elsa except she runs off and has magic adventures and just doesn't
tell anyone back home. ;) It fails to hit any of the emotional notes of that isolation and keeping her magic hidden. (We get better tugs to the heartstrings for Lux from Garen's lore and Galio's lore, but not her own?!) Her lies used to be based on emotion, now they're based on skill. Which is weird, for a character who was lauded as being a magic genius by her own people. Now she's just... Helpful and adventurous, I guess. MeridElsa? That's not my Lux.

So...! You know. Fanfiction. I'll do what I want. But I also can acknowledge that from here on out, I am only capable of veering further and further from canon.

I'm actually really interested in a Demacia that shuns magic and think that's interesting! I'm not opposed to SECRET MAGE LUX, although it's much to late to integrate that seamlessly into this particular story. More importantly, if Demacia shuns magic because it knows the danger of Rune Wars, but would inarguably have been a huge part of those wars, its anti-magic attitudes must be relatively new. Especially if no one wants to talk about those 'dark days' except for Garen's uncle. It must have just been like a generation ago. If Rune Wars are still a threat to the planet in new lore, how will things turn out without an Institute of War...? Hmm.

Regarding her new voice lines? I love them...! I'll miss the old, but it's the same VA and she's still great. The game is technically outside the bounds of lore now, anyway, so I can even enjoy the more jokey stuff that seems off for her character...! The character lines are so cute! I even like the one with Ezreal, even if it's frankly fucking bizarre that Riot is basically making fun of fans of its own lore for their own created plot holes! Oh you guys like Lux and Ezreal? Sure, we'll make them canon friends! Ezreal's uncle implies there are rumors about them! Ezreal has a drawing of them on his desk! What? Lux and Ezreal? They've never spoken you fucking idiots. You fools. You stupid fucks. …?!
War.

Lux hates this part. All that patriotism that she has to be exuding at all times has to be multiplied. The spotlight that never leaves her is more narrow than ever, more tightly trained. She feels eyes on her from when she wakes to when she sleeps, though she knows that in privacy it's all in her mind.

An ex-champion of the League of Legends. A star of the military. The prince's fiance. And after her whole life of being admired for it, suddenly, distastefully, a mage.

The most infuriating part is that they still rely on allies. Piltover, to a lesser degree, but even this bothers Lux. It's hard to stare Ekko's resentment in the face and not allow the guilt to rub off on her. But what hurts her to her core in a way she wishes weren't so familiar is the betrayal of how heavily the king intends to rely on Ionia.

Not their armies, because God knows that Demacia's army will never be lacking. Instead they rely on Ionia for backup, for support. Inarguably, purely, entirely for their mages.

She knows magic is more rare than the League of Legends has made her feel, but even so it feels like nothing more than a front for deniability of magic from their own people.

Demacian Military encampments fill and overflow outside the kingdom. They inch closer and closer to Noxus. The best defense is a good offense, Lux tells herself. And it isn't wrong to be wary. War is war is war, and the Noxian military bases never really thinned out, even during the Institute's days.

She tells Jarvan first-hand accounts of everything she saw on her travel and swallows back each anecdote about Ezreal that comes to mind. They pour over maps in his office together. Sometimes their fingers trace outlines and borders, too-close together, so close they almost touch.

When Jarvan doesn't pull away, looking uncomfortable for just one moment before he is his charismatic self again, Xin Zhao always seems to interrupt. She does not waste any of their time thinking about this.

Xin Zhao is quiet. Lux doesn't blame him. There is little he could say to comfort either of them, and certainly nothing the prince could say to soothe him in return. Demacia did not accept Ionia refugees from the invasion they did so little to assist with. Allies. Is that what it means? Receiving help after refusing to give it? Receiving the help of people you will condemn with the same breath?

“Plenty of people are unhappy with Noxus being under Swain's leadership,” Jarvan mutters. “We can't condemn a whole kingdom for one man's corruption.”

If there were not a door between them and the rest of the world, Lux would disagree loudly. But they are in private, and she allows her shoulders to fall openly. “Their power systems aren't our responsibility to fix. That someone so hated can take power without a system of opposition... That's not anyone's fault but their own.”
Xin Zhao arches an eyebrow. “And is there any choice in Demacia? Do the people choose their king?”

Ekko, curled tight in a corner by his own choice, surrounded by too many books, snorts loudly. The prince lets out a grunt of annoyance, though Lux isn't sure if it's directed at the system or its criticism.

Briefly, Xin Zhao is almost casual in his musing. “I wouldn't be hardly so sympathetic to the general public of Noxus if it weren't for who, exactly, our contacts are.”

It's natural that a body-guard would have more authority and exposure to classified information, but Lux is beginning to consider Xin Zhao as more of an advisor than a guard. She wonders if that is simply because he has information or if it was a more conscious decision on Jarvan's part.

“Demacia isn't going to care much for the nuance of things,” Ekko says. “Just a, uh, outside perspective, here? It's great that you don't want to screw over all the street kids of Noxus and all, but how much backing can you get on that? You can't say what you've always said and then turn around to the people who've listened and say, actually, you know what, not all Noxians.”

“I'm well aware of the problem,” Jarvan says, the words curt, but his tone somehow not. Lux is always impressed with the way he handles Ekko. He speaks to him almost casually, perhaps to make it clear that he does not mean to condescend.

The mere concept of a little poor boy from Zaun sitting in this room with royalty is mind-boggling.

“What we need is a way to take out Swain, directly.” Lux says, but knows it is ridiculous. What we need is a simple solution to a complicated problem. What we need to accomplish is a task that becomes more impossible by the minute. She is sure that since they left, security has only increased.

“Not just Swain,” Xin Zhao says. “Leblanc is trouble, no matter who she is playing second-hand to. She–”

“–I don't want to involve innocent Noxians, but I'm not blind to their culture,” Jarvan interrupts. “Even with both of those two out of the picture, the next leader is sure to continue in their footsteps.”

Ekko asks, “what if you could control who's in charge?”

The silence in the room speaks volumes. Lux is fairly sure they are all drawing the same conclusion.

Lux is the one to explain to him, “it's no use. The only Noxian allies we have are tentative at best. They aren't much more trustworthy than the worst of them.”

Jarvan speaks slowly, like he does not want to say any of it out loud. “I trust Katarina in that I would work with her when we would mutually benefit. Out of those three, she's the most likely to rise to leadership. Both for her father and her own personality. But can you really picture her putting a stop to anything Noxus does?”

Almost laughing at the thought, Xin Zhao muses, “Katarina retracting the war on Demacia. Katarina pulling back the invasion of Ionia.”

Lux's stomach cramps painfully, an abrupt and visceral reaction. How do you end the hatred between two kingdoms? How do you put an end to what has stretched on from the beginning of
recorded time? How many generations past her own will fight?

The planet will be ravaged by this Rune War, and Lux can't see an end to it.

War is not as glamorous as recruitment posters and bright sunlight on statues make it seem. War is endless, hopeless.

“Then how do we proceed?” Lux asks, weak with despair.

The quiet that stretches is tense once again.

“I believe,” Jarvan ventures, “the most important thing to do is to confirm allies.”

Xin Zhao says, “I worry that where other factions could be pushed back through intimidation, it will do nothing but spur Noxus to further violence. Intimidation doesn't work as a preventative measure when the enemy wants only to see themselves as powerful. They are a rebellious people, and even oppression won't stop them. Not when they see themselves as above us, still.”

“Their armies are strong,” Lux murmurs. “As are ours, I know, but...”

Her head is buried in her hands before she realizes. When she looks up, Jarvan's gaze is gentle, one hand hesitating half-way between them, like he wants to comfort her, but could not bring himself to touch.

“This isn't your problem to solve. Try not to think about it too much. I'm sure to have a mission for you soon, so try to relax.”

This is a dismissal. Fine. Fine. Lux cannot muster anger. Instead she just nods for Ekko to follow. Having him at her heels almost feels like he is a pet. This thought does not make her feel any better.

“A mission,” Ekko repeats, when they are long-since down the hall from the prince's office.

“Probably nothing big,” Lux says, allowing herself to sound bitter. Her pretenses are fading away. She can see the way she does not try so much, even when there are other soldiers around to see and hear her. The fact that her guard is down around Ekko is a landmark in itself.

“Yeah, I guess it looks bad to throw your own princess into danger.”

Princess. The word feels awful. “It looks bad to let a warrior sit back because of who she married.”

“Says you, but probably not the public.”

Lux looks at Ekko, sidelong. He has grown maybe an inch. He could use a hair-cut, and despite her best efforts during shopping trips, he's still dressed like a street rat.

She lets out a long breath, but the weight of war is no lighter on her shoulders. She does not force a smile for appearances. She allows herself to sigh, and frown, and crack her fingers one by one.

“Let's grab dinner,” she tells Ekko.

The way that he brightens almost reaches her.
Ekko has mostly been eating from the military cafeteria. What Lux eats, he eats, and though she comes from money, she has not been sinking into luxuries lately.

He looks out of place in his trashy clothes, surrounded by beautiful décor. Unlike Ezreal, he actually seems aware of it, shifting his weight and trying not to look starry-eyed. He does not succeed. The simple fact that all the silverware matches seems to amaze him. From across the table, Lux watches his eyes go wide at the prices on the menu.

“And this is just nothing to you, huh?” He asks, half bewildered and half in awe. “This kind of money?”

Lux does not like that she feels proud. But it does not stop her from feeling it. She bows her head and smiles. It really is nothing to her.

Happiness comes back like slowly spreading watercolors, watching Ekko order four different entrees. (At least his smart enough to order three of them in boxes.) His table manners are awful, but never-the-less, she is pleased to watch him devour his meal. She can hardly touch her own.

“So, like, for sure assassinating Swain is the first priority.”

“Ekko,” she scolds him. Politics at the table is something she only forgave with Ezreal because they had most of their meals in private. “We’ll discuss this later.”

Apparently he is desperate too, because once they are back in the barracks, once they are behind closed doors, Ekko begins again, “alright – so, step one, assassinate Swain. And Leblanc. So I guess Leblanc is step two.”

The day catches up with her in the dim-lit room. While stripping down to her underclothes, she sighs. “Most likely. But it would only be a temporary reprieve while their kingdom scrambles for new leadership.”

“And you’re sure Katarina would be just as bad as Swain?”

Her nightclothes are from home. They do not suit the grounds. Going from uniforms to pretty white-lace nightgowns strikes her as the epitome of all her masks. She remembers waking up at five in the morning for drills, remembers her uniform being precise and perfect. Now it is custom-made. Now she could sleep until noon and no one would say a word.

She gives a distracted, “mm,” in Ekko's direction. She knows he is looking the other way politely.

“She seemed like she'd be better.”

“I know that it's easy to think that, but you're wrong. Katarina is clever, but she is every bit as power-hungry as Noxians are expected to be. I can't imagine her settling for peace.”

“Then just take her out, too.”

The thought doesn’t sit well with Lux. They are enemies, but it would be hard to kill someone she is so acquainted with. She shakes her head as if to loosen her hair from the neckline of her clothes. “No.”
“Well... Maybe someone else would rise up?”

She cannot imagine it being anyone but Katarina. She would not sit by and allow another to take her father's role again. “No,” Lux says again, laying down. “And before I even concern myself with the steps after one and two, it's important to remember that Swain knows of our intrusion. It will be much, much harder to infiltrate again. We've made things difficult for ourselves.”

“Will that be your job, you think?”

Her arm comes to rest over her eyes. She does not pull it away even when Ekko turns the lights off for her and pads his way back to his own bed. “I don't know. I don't know if I'm strong enough for that mission.”

Ekko's voice drifts quiet across the room, murmured into the dark, “I don't think there's anyone stronger.”

This frightens her, because she does not find herself disagreeing.

Chapter End Notes

I really love all the new Vastaya lore. I also think I'm wrapping my head around the new Lux lore in a way that I feel better about it. I'll spare you all the words about it, but after 2 years of nothing after the retcon, things are so good...! As such, this whole fic really is just going off the rails, but. Whatever!!!! I just want to write miserable EzLux and a thousand love triangles in complicated fantasy political climates!!!!
It takes weeks for Lux to get her dossier, and when she does it is startling how simple it is. She recalls what Jarvan had said – that in his mind, allies are the most important thing right now. And so her mission is this: travel to Ionia to ask for aid in person. What good is a relationship founded only through laws and letters? These are the ripples of the Institute of War: connections to others.

It feels awful. Self-serving. Give us your mages so that we can condemn them, give us help so we can take credit.

“Well,” Ekko points out, “letting Noxus run wild would probably feel a whole lot worse.”

That's as good a motivator as she’ll get.

The ship to take them to Ionia departs from Piltover. Lux pretends she is not anxious of passing through. She assures herself it would be ridiculous to run into Ezreal by chance. He is not looking for her. He may not even be there. And even if he is, the population count makes the odds slim.

There's no point getting ahead of herself.

It's a long journey just to get to that half-way point.

The guards accompanying her carriage detour to the Institute of War's old grounds for an evening. There is no moderation of them, now, as they sit abandoned and empty. They are not even re-purposed. It feels like a terrible waste, and no less dangerous than anywhere else so close to Noxus.

There are Demacian military camps to the north and south, the guards assure her. She only realizes how many guards are with her when they set up tents and camps all around the grounds.

“We sleepin' in the carriage? Lil' squished, but it's real cushy,” Ekko asks. He is peering down the breezeway and front office building, curious. Perhaps he recognizes them from the crystal showings.

“Most likely. Unless you'd rather set up a tent.”

“Pass.”

“Here. I'll show you around.”

She takes the lead, Ekko stepping up beside her with ease. He grins, despite the way he says, “a tour of a shut down place kind of sucks.”

It's her first time back. She remembers sleeping here for weeks at a time, thinking all the while that this is not home. But she misses it. The familiarity of it shocks her, walking through the halls. She has to fight the instinct to head straight for her room.

No reason to give Ekko an abbreviated tour when they have all night. Besides, she's fairly interested in what was left behind. The staff dissolved so fast, there's no way everything was destroyed so fast.
In an ideal world, there is something helpful. But her luck is not so good – the paperwork left behind is boring. Outdated land-rights and PR re-prints of interviews and journals. Ekko allows her to sift through them in patient silence, sitting up on the front-desk counter and swinging his legs.

Without the mages, the summoners, the administrators, it looks like any other front office. Like a doctor's office waiting room.

She leads him through the rooms of dusty furniture. In the breezeways the sunset light comes through archways in beams. There is more dust catching light than Lux recalls. There is no sound, no footsteps besides her own. No quiet murmurs of other rooms. The building does not shift and creak with the weight and warmth of people.

It is silent. And there is no one waiting for her outside her old room.

She lets herself in, only somewhat surprised that all the abandoned furniture she left behind remains. Like everything, it is dusty and dull, as if this short amount of time has drained the color from it. Then again, Demacian styles don't usually have much color to begin with.

Ekko takes careful steps through the unit. He nudges the couch with his toe, watching dust cloud up and making a face at it.

“For some reason I imagined this place crumbling.”

Ekko glances up at her. “It hasn't been that long. You're just destruction-minded.”

Lux isn't sure what that means. When she sits on the couch it is on the arm-rest, as lightly as she can. She thinks of laughing and chatting as casually as anything with Taric and Sona and Ezreal.

It feels like a hundred years ago. Maybe that's why the Institute feels like a thousand.

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It doesn't take long for Ekko to tire of the dark and dirty room, and Lux allows him to wander freely without her. It isn't as interesting for herself, and she finds herself wandering back to the carriage.

There are guards waiting nearby at a camp fire – more than there were when she had wandered off. Visitors from the south camp, Lux learns, though they mostly just want to interact with the guards. There is a noticeable hush when she takes a seat beside the flames.

She is used to getting along with soldiers well. She is used to being one of them.

She is also used to traveling without an entourage.

Things are different, when you are engaged to the prince.

Lux does not linger there long. With as many guards as there are, the only excuse for stopping for the night at all is for them to visit the stationed soldiers, and she doesn't want to intrude.

When she stands to leave them, keeping how disheartened she feels from her face, one of the men looks up after her. There is something familiar in his face. In the elegant slant of his eyebrows and his sharp chin. In the fall of his inky-black hair.

“How do you have a moment?” He asks. His accent is subdued, but Lux recognizes it all the same. It is
like Fiora’s. Thinner and subtle, but unmistakably stained with her city. Lux nods, and waits for him to stand. She allows him to escort her to her carriage for privacy.

“I’m sorry,” Lux begins, cautiously diplomatic as she must be. (She was so close, she thinks, to being able to let go of that. She had almost tricked herself with Ezreal into thinking she could stop.) “If we’ve met, I’m afraid…”

“We haven’t,” he assures her, stilted and awkward, like he does not really know how to deal with women. Lux doesn’t see how this could be true, with how many women there are among the ranks. “We haven’t – I was already off in the barracks during the fuss my sister made, and I just... I know you.”

She smiles and nods, graceful as she can, like it is something she is grateful for. She can only guess what he is referring to.

“I just got stationed out here. I was working in Jandelle until just a month ago.”

Lux prays she has not simply forgotten an acquaintance. These days the list of people she cares about it slim. She has been allowing the list of names she remembers to shorten. She lets out a distant, “ah.”

“I know that our houses aren’t on the best of terms... My sister has caused so much trouble for the Crownguards. Though, growing up with her, I’ll tell you it was no surprise.”

Lux forces a polite laugh, though it comes out strained. “Fiora has... Done a good deal to bring honor to her family name.”

Never mind that its shame might as well have been in her hands, Lux thinks, then scolds herself for it. That's no way to think. There should be no shame in refusing a marriage you don't want. A family should not be pushed to such extremes just to fight it.

It would be nice, Lux thinks, to have someone try to defend your freedom like that.

Belatedly, though with a voice as smooth as his sisters, the man says, “I'm Aster Laurent.”

“A pleasure.” Lux offers her hand, and the way he shakes it is delicate and with a deep bow. This is beyond burying the bad blood between their families. Or maybe it is because of it. In debt to the princess is a bad place to be.

Aster hesitates. Lux is certain that if he were anyone else he would be nothing but commands. Like Fiora. He looks like a simple soldier, but he is nobility the same as Garen. The readings teach not to discriminate. They teach that being a soldier is a level field, an equalizer.

As if there could ever be such a thing. She had thought the League of Legends could have been – and all it did was collapse under the weight.

“You were gathering intel, I heard. Scouting Noxian camps. Like in Zaun.”

It was so long ago. Lux closes her eyes, feeling her face scrunch up in thought. “Yes? What of it.”

“We – have our own men stationed in Zaun. Spies. I know that–”

–Lux realizes what he means. The words slip out without thought: “You're the flower. Not Fiora.”
Aster looks as though a weight has been lifted from his shoulders, as if his armor suddenly weighs nothing at all. He laughs. “Fiora is no flower. Fiora is the thorns.”

“That man,” Lux murmurs, quieting, though she does not notice anyone nearby enough to be eavesdropping. “Our man, in the Zaun camp. He said to tell his flower that he would return home in time.” Lux pauses to scan Aster's face, as if she is scouting out the slight drop of his smile, tracking the way the light in his eyes dims just slightly. “I'm sorry that I can't...”

Do more. She wants to do more.

“Noren. His name is Noren. His real name, not whatever they call him there.” The way Aster says his name is so light, so distantly fond. The end of the sentence is a sharp change, nearly spit out, before he is back to looking at Lux softly. “Thank you. It's good to hear anything at all.”

Lux does not want to keep talking. But she does not want to lie to a man in love, either. “He said this before we were at war. What may have been true then can't be promised anymore.”

Aster tells her, “I know. Even so. Thank you.”

Aster bows to her, almost impossibly lower than before, then returns to the camp fire. And just like the day she met Noren, Ekko is quick to join her.

The two of them curl up on opposite sides of the carriage seats for sleep. The closeness is second-nature, and Ekko is oddly quiet.

Lux thinks of dust caught in the evening light. Dimming sunbeams striped across cheap sheets and through Ezreal's hair as he leaned in to kiss her jaw.

***

The rest of the trip to Piltover is uneventful. Disappointingly, so is the brief stay before the ship departs for Ionia. She does not see the familiar faces that she had dreaded seeing. She does not stop wishing that she had.

The ship ride is not any more eventful. There are guards in the cabins to either side of hers. Then more to the sides of them.

Ekko gets seasick for the first two days, pretends to be better the third, and is actually better by the fourth. His excitement at seeing the ocean like this – stretching out into eternity – does not even last as long as his nausea. (Lux suspects the seasickness was from his own insistence on staring off, solved quickly when he stopped.)

“It's just,” he complains, sprawled across his bed like a starfish near the end of their journey, “water forever? Don't get me wrong, that's still awesome, but it's also scary.”

Lux glances in his direction from where she is seated, next to the porthole. It's easy to laugh sincerely when it's just the two of them.

Ekko is only half-joking when he whispers, “what if we get attacked by pirates?”

“I don't think the pirates want the wrath of Demacia on them for messing with my ship.”
“I guess,” Ekko says, sounding unconvinced. He seems to consider this for a moment. “Probably a real bad time to be making enemies.”

“Making enemies is all pirates can do,” Lux points out. Then admits, ”but with Miss Fortune on the loose again? I imagine many are laying low.”

Ekko nods like this sounds reasonable and falls back into silence.

Something has been on his mind these past few days, but he is not the quiet sort. Lux is sure he will tell her when he's ready.

Lux's gaze wanders back to the water. She is so mesmerized by its flow that she forgets to respond. She likes to watch the way light sparkles off the surface. It shimmers in such a familiar way, the same way she can conjure it at her fingertips. The same way her body dissolved when she was restored to the fountain of the fields. It's like sparks, like the fire that often overtakes her mind when she is pushing down rage.

Chapter End Notes

I miss Ezreal. Anyone else miss Ezreal?
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It is early when they dock, nearly six in the morning. Ekko is groggy from a restless sleep, but he stumbles after her off of the ship.

Ionia is beautiful. Different from Demacia, that builds up to the skies to honor their Goddess. Instead, Ionia honors nature. Streets are lined with landscaped gardens. Buildings are covered in vines, are propped up against trees, sometimes even built around them.

Lux has seen it before, but not for some time. It wakes Ekko up quickly, or maybe it's just the ocean mist that refreshes him. He looks completely out of his element. A boy who is nothing but tech and science surrounded by the culture of art and magic. His zero drive at his back, behind him winter roses. Ratty clothes, despite her best efforts, and icy flowers.

“Straight there?” He asks, catching her gaze. She nods, and leads the way. The memory is distant, more in her feet than her mind.

The Ionian Guard is a barracks not wildly unlike Demacia’s military headquarters. Different traditions, uniforms, people. Same idea. Same quietly respectful gazes cast on her as she leads herself up the front steps.

Ekko is uncomfortable for the first time in a while, but does not hide his curiosity as he looks at his surroundings. The stares he is catching are tepid, yet aggressively polite. Demacians are more open in their disdain than Ionians, Lux notes.

Irelia doesn't leave them waiting long, coming to greet them in the entrance hall.

She greets Lux with a kiss on the cheek and held-hands. After a quick glance from Ekko to Lux to confirm that he is with her, she bends over to give him the same courtesy. (For as flirtatious as he likes to play, Lux enjoys seeing him blush and shy back from her.)

“Have you eaten?” Irelia asks, gesturing back towards the door. “Or perhaps your tag-along would prefer a tour?”

“I'll eat after business,” Lux says, then realizes how cold this sounds. “If it's not any trouble. I'd like to get the formalities out of the way to alleviate my own nerves.”

Irelia smiles, reassuring. “You're all formalities. Very well, then.”

Without confirming anything verbally, a tour it is. Ekko lets the two of them walk side by side, trailing behind them. Irelia makes way past the barracks, further into the residential areas of the city. The architecture fades from modern to traditional, slowly but surely. The three of them are quiet for most of the journey.

“This is more representative of our culture. Of our history,” Irelia eventually says to Ekko, over her shoulder. Lux realizes he may be the reason for Irelia's extended silence. “The more... Modern buildings you see for the public have been a recent act of necessity.”
He nods with interest.

“Anything you can say to me, he can hear,” Lux says, at length.

“Is that so?” Irelia asks, looking at Lux sidelong.

“It’s a long story, but Ekko is my ally.”

Irelia’s expression is unreadable. Ionian culture is judgmental, but secretive with it. Lux doesn’t blame anyone for questioning her judgment, dragging a child along with her in such dangerous times.

She tries to deflect, asking, “how are things going with the Vastaya?” It feels like centuries ago that she had missed Ahri’s departure back to Ionia.

“I wish that we had more time and resources to dedicate to the matter, but the fact is that there are bigger threats.”

Lux does not point out that to the Vastaya, the Ionians are the threat.

Irelia continues, her eyes narrowed on the path ahead. “But we’ve received word that Noxus will be returning to us. Our temporary reprieve is over.”

“Even though they’re at war with Demacia?” Ekko asks, too curious to recall his own shyness.

“It would be naive to think that they lack the resources. We’ve seen what they can do. They’ve done this before, been a wave of destruction on too many fronts to count.”

Lux hesitates. In the face of such overwhelming strength and numbers, when Irelia is saying herself that they are outmatched and afraid, it does not seem wise to ask them any favors. But politeness be damned, this is her mission. She does not have any choice but to ask, albeit as tactfully as she can.

“This is why we need to be unified,” Lux murmurs.

Irelia turns her head, looking out among the housing. Small shops and carts. Civilians are watching them both, smiling at the sight of Irelia more genuinely than Lux feels she has seen in days. Irelia’s hair is long and breezy as she returns their waves with soft bows. This is avoidance. She understands, but does not wish to answer Lux.

The woman turns to Ekko, then nods in the direction of what appear to be apartments – more modern, more Western than the houses nearby. “This is the latest housing project. Ionia is doing its part to help home those displaced by the League of Legends. As well as others. We also intended to use it as an outreach towards the Vastaya, for those who would wish to integrate within our community.”

Lux doubts that’s going well.

“Captain Irelia,” Lux ventures.

Irelia whirls to face her, dark hair spinning like black thread, rising up in her anger, as alive as the rest of her. “You come here to ask me favors? You come here to ask me favors? Do you have any idea who you are?”
Lux does not falter, meeting Irelia's glare with her own even gaze. Her determination is not so shallow to break from just this.

“You are the princess of Demacia, the light of your people and an ex-champion of the League of Legends. Your kingdom is at war with Noxus, the greatest threat to us all. You, with a target painted on your back, would drag their aim to my shores?”

She does not back down. “We need your help. We are not just allies in name.”

“Yes, now that you desire our help, of course not. Old wounds don't heal so quickly, we haven't forgotten. You put my people in danger just by coming here, and you want us to leave our own land unprotected to protect yours?”

She needs this to work. She needs to complete her mission. The world is terrible, her life is terrible, but she needs to be what is expected of her. It is a calculation of a different sort than usual. No bubbly smiles. A careful frown, a balance of stubbornness and sympathy in her eyes. Make it work.

“No to protect, but to defeat. A mutual enemy,” Lux says. Softer, she adds, “I can't undo what Demacia has done in the past, and I can't make up for it. I know that we are a proud people, but nothing will change if we continue to let Noxus push without enforcing each others' push back. I... Apologize for coming here, short sighted, but this request is important and it is personal.”

The people in the streets are aggressively not looking at them, continuing on their path with not so much as a whisper about the scene. Ekko is standing close, looking cautious and defensive, like he thinks a brawl could break out any moment.

Lux kneels before Irelia, bowing her head. “I am not a princess, but I do carry word from my prince. This is not our atonement. We pray that it may come in the future—”

“—Leave,” Irelia commands with severity. Lux almost expects the floating tendrils of her hair to turn to the knives she wields.

“—However the enemy is not one that can be defeated by your strength alone, nor ours—”

“—You think we haven't heard of what your people are saying of mages? You already have his weakness among you, yet you have the audacity to come, to draw enemy attention—”

Lux bows her head lower, shoulders dropping down. She raises her voice to match Irelia's, forcing herself to continue, “—And so we beseech you to to honor us with a new loyalty, that we may return to times of peace, and do whatever it takes to maintain our ally-ship.”

Irelia seems to have grown tired of interrupting her, allowing her to finish.

“Please, Captain,” Lux says. “We can't allow Noxus to instigate a rune war, whether their target is Demacia or Ionia or even Freljord. I understand the desire to punish Demacia for our past actions, I understand your hesitance, but this is our best path to the safety of all people.”

Irelia breathes deep. Her hair is lowering, so long that it falls into Lux's line of sight even as she stares at the other woman's boots.

“This is nothing personal against you as an individual, Lux, but I need you gone,” Irelia says, calmer
now, but just as firm. “You're too great a target to be among my people right now. I'm sorry. I want you back on a ship by this evening.”

Lux drops lower still, in deference. Her shoulders are so tense that they ache, eyebrows furrowed. “Please.”

Time stretches for too long. The crowds are finally beginning to murmur, unable to contain themselves.

Ekko comes to stand beside her, then slowly kneels as well. He is no one, Lux thinks bitterly, knowing that this means so much to her, but so little to Irelia. She wishes she could look to see his expression. She is sure he is biting back his own words. She is sure they are good words too, he is smart, he is passionate, he is the perfect example of the innocents that they need to protect with this ally-ship.

Maybe Irelia can see that even without him speaking up.

She sounds tired. “We needed your help.”

“I understand.”

“The League of Legends was the only sanctuary we had. No one came to our rescue, and I don't trust you to do it now. Not when you're asking us to rescue you.”

“I understand,” Lux says, because this is not the time to argue the semantics of rescue versus teamwork.

“We prayed for the salvation of and none came. Not even a resting place for our refugees.”

“Yes.”

Irelia shifts her weight. Her voice is softer, but only just. “We sent Zelos to you to ask for help, just like you are now, and he never came back. Be sure you get home safely.”

Lux lets out a quiet sigh and feels herself relaxing in defeat. There is no winning this. Irelia's word is final, and there is no hope of her changing her mind in sight. Lux does not blame her, necessarily. The untrustworthy can't expect trust. The trustworthy would not have to beg.

Irelia offers her hand, helping Lux to rise. Chain of command. Lux offers Ekko her hand. His shoulders are still squared, and he can't meet her eyes, glaring down at the ground. His pride did not like any of this – of her prostrating, of having to keep quiet, but he had done it even so.

Irelia's brother. Zelos. Lux thinks of the dungeons of Noxus. Figures in the shadows of cells, quiet and resigned. Prisoners of a war put on pause. She thinks of Garen, furious at his own prince for Lux being dragged into danger. She thinks of Aster Laurent, speaking fondly of his disgraced sister.

A rune war on the horizon and one missing sibling, years ago.

Lux asks, slowly, “what if I bring him home?”

Chapter End Notes
I've met literally every champion reveal for 5 years with disappointment that it wasn't Zelos.
Ekko hardly speaks the whole way back to the docks. The only communication he seems invested in is when Lux stops at a food cart, buying them both something to eat.

Lux has rice noodle salad, with pickled carrots and cucumber slices. Ekko has something resembling an omelet, and seems proud of himself for knowing that it's called banh xeo. Zaun gets a fair number of Ionian immigrants, he explains, counting off names on his fingers of friends he has known from overseas. This isn't too surprising, Lux thinks. The trip from Ionia to Zaun is just as close as Piltover and probably far cheaper if you're willing to take the risk.

The memories of his friends only uplift him briefly. Lux wonders how many of them are even still alive. Ekko is back to scowls and glares pointed everywhere but her all the way until they are back on the evening departure ship.

Lux realizes, somewhat startled to have not caught on, that he was waiting for privacy. He is tactful. Still upset, but tactful. Once they are in their cabin, words pour out.

"Such a waste to come all this way and turn right around. We can't even stay one day? That's ridiculous. How paranoid is she?"

Lux takes a seat at the edge of her bed. "I've had assassins after me during my travels in the past, even before I became a bigger figure. She isn't being unreasonable. But I am sorry that we couldn't stay longer."

He grumbles out a "'s alright I guess." Then after a moment elaborates, "I just don't know if I'll ever get the chance to come back. I'm only here on your coin, you know?"

"Then I'll take you again, in the future. When things have calmed down. Look forward to it, okay?"

He manages a smile, but it seems insincere. "I'm not your kid to take care of. How long do I get to tag along?"

She isn't sure how to reply to that. She wants to retort something clever, wants to ask why he is sticking with her so faithfully to begin with, but no words come to mind.

Ekko seems to understand that he has stumped her, and crosses the room to look out the porthole window. "So are we going straight there? I don't imagine your prince is going to be pleased with this plan. Like, if he allows it, he'll just send someone else."

Lux admits, "I'm still thinking about it."

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She has plenty of time to mull it over. She hashes out plans with Ekko, poured over maps she sketches out, herself. He is better for plotting than Ezreal. Ezreal is all impulse and luck. Ekko is trial and error. Calculations.
No matter how many times they go over it, the result is clear.

“We can't do it alone.”

On the surface, infiltration is easier with just two. One with invisibility, the other with an infinite re-do button. But she remembers the layout of the building. Remembers the security of the dungeons. Invisibility or no, once they have a no-doubt weakened rescue in-tow, it's going to become a matter of strength. There will be no sneaking out with someone who will be dead-weight.

No matter how good a fighter Zelos was years ago, he'll be tired, starving, weak, frazzled.

“We can. No matter how many tries it takes.”

“No,” Lux argues. Outside the window, moonlight is shimmering on the sea. She can hear other passengers, a muffled murmur past the walls. “We could try however many times until you're too exhausted to make use of yourself. Your zero drive is an amazing resource, but not one to rely on. It's to fix mistakes. We need a plan that works without it.”

“Then are we heading back to your prince?”

“T'm not sure he'll support this plan. We've already over-stayed our welcome from our contacts in Noxus.”

“Quinn would help you,” Ekko offers. “Even if she's not supposed to.”

Lux knows this is true. She shakes her head. “I'm not destroying her career.”

“But if it works out, you're getting Jarvan what he wanted. He sent you to get Ionia's support and this is what it takes.”

“I don't think that he expected the conversation to go as poorly as it did to begin with.”

“So then we need supporters. We need people who would help you.”

No one comes to mind.

That isn't true. Ezreal's is there, fleeting, before she remembers that this is a burned bridge. What help would he be, anyway? Even on the prince's orders she had wanted to keep him from the danger of Noxus. Not just for the natural risk of it, but because he would be a liability.

She has to run through names in her mind, realistic or not.

Ezreal. No.


Sona. Taric.

These names stick. Why? Taric could be of use. His magic could stun pursuers. He could keep Zelos
alive, give him the energy to run with them. He owes Lux nothing, but she knows that he would agree in an instant out of pure goodness. The kindness in him is too deep for her to understand, deeper than her own compassion can go by miles.

She would feel guilty for wanting to take advantage of it, if the situation weren't so dire. He is a resident of Demacia, she rationalizes. Their safety is his safety – Ionia's support will support his home, however temporary it may be.

Sona is another matter. To drag such a noble woman, a musician, right into the heart of the enemy. Her magic is powerful. Like Taric, she can manipulate others, keep them at bay. She's as much a fighter as the rest of them, but it still feels wrong. Like pulling her back into a darkness she's escaped. What right does Lux have?

It's for the better good. She is protecting people, that is her right.

“Sona and Taric. They have no military affiliation. I think they would both be willing.”

“A musician and some... Guy?”

Ekko's skepticism is understandable.

She is not sincerely as defensive as she plays. “Hush. This plan is still a work in progress.”

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Lux wakes in the early morning, sunlight barely tinting the horizon's edge. The sound of footsteps are too close to her door, too careful, too quiet. She senses a magic, vaguely familiar, more responsible for her waking than any hushed sounds on the plush hallway's carpeting.

As ridiculous as it seems, the only thought that runs through Lux's mind is: it's been a while. It repeats in her mind like a mantra, keeping fear at bay.

It's been a while. She is quiet as she pulls the knife from under her pullow and moves to Ekko's bed. She nudges him awake with a finger to her lips. Watches how fast, how sadly fast his expression goes from tired to ready. His zero drive is between him and the wall, as familiar a bed-mate as a teddy bear, and he drapes an arm over it in preparation. Lux lays in front of him and pulls the sheets over his head to hide him.

It's been a while. The flood of light from the hallway is too bright for her eyes. The figure is a woman in a cloak. Her movements are elegant as she enters, and she closes the door behind her with care. Lux is still until the woman is close. She is already thinking – how long do they have to move a body? To throw it overboard?

It's been a while. Lux moves sudden – hurls her light up overhead of the assassin to distract their gaze, preparing to lunge at them in the opening. The woman follows the movement as expected, her head whipping up to follow it by reflex. Her hood falls with the movement, her long black hair spills over her shoulders.

Long black hair. Tall fur ears. White tails poofing out abruptly, the empty-handed woman too startled to keep them hidden.
“Ahri?”

The vastaya is wide-eyed and frowning as she looks away from the orb of light. She looks at Lux with indignance and confusion and – Lux takes pride in seeing the fear. “You were going to attack me!”

“I thought you were going to attack me!”

“So, friend not foe?” Ekko asks, ducking out from under the bedsheets. He recognizes her from the League of Legends. Otherwise, Lux is sure, his fingers would still be on his zero drive.

Lux waves her hand, shifting her light to the wall and dimming it. Ahri's clothes are as ornate as ever, though her cloak is far less. She is looking Ekko over, head tilted back just so she can stare down her nose at him.

“A little young,” Ahri comments.

“Aren’t you keeping up with the news?” Lux asks, knowing she is just joking. “I'm happy engaged to the prince of Demacia.”

Ahri tilts her head to the side. “Whether this one is your side-boy or your main-boy, he's still pretty young.”

“I'm not anyone's boy,” Ekko says, at length.

Ahri frowns, and takes a seat on the bed Lux has left unoccupied. “I thought you were with Ezreal.”

“Did you sneak into my room this early in the morning to discuss my love-life?”

“I snuck into your room to surprise you.” Ahri leans forward, childishly playful. “Were you startled?”

“I almost killed you,” Lux says, just as brightly, “so I think you already know.”

“Can't tell if you're friends or not,” Ekko comments.

Ahri answers, “of course we are! I came along just to spend more time with my dear friends!”

“Did you,” Lux asks.

Ahri is quiet for a long moment, looking her over with an arched eyebrow.

It occurs to Lux that her mask has been severely fragmented in her journeys. It has been a long time since she spoke to any journals, but she remembers the process. Bubbly and chipper, always. These days it's just the smile from a distance – they can infer the rest themselves. It used to be the same, even with other champions.

She's gotten too relaxed. Too open with Ezreal. With Ekko. Too used to being alone with people she trusts.

Is she unrecognizable, like this? Is she still herself?
She imagines Ezreal rolling his eyes at her. That thought will have to do for now.

Ekko asks, “so why'd you wait to come out until like... The day before we dock?”

Ahri seems pleased with herself, and begins swaying back and forth. “Oh! I had planned on joining you much earlier, but I overheard your dilemma! I knew that if I revealed myself too early, you wouldn't tell me anything, so I just kept eavesdropping.

Lux frowns. “I didn't hear or sense you so close.”

Ahri's fox ears give a pointed twitch.

“Oh,” Lux says, distantly.

“I'm very indebted to Irelia, as you must know. It's her leadership that makes a place for someone...” Ahri's sway halts. Her gaze drops to her lap. “Someone like me.”

It is not necessarily a bad idea. Ahri may not have military discipline, but she is accustomed to death. To killing. Lux is too distracted by this thought to offer any kind of emotional support to the woman. Pros and cons.

Just as well – Ahri brushes past it. “Taric is a good idea for an accomplice. Very charming.”

“That's not the determining factor,” Ekko says.

Ahri shrugs with innocence. “All the same,” she says, then lays down in Lux's bed.

Ekko is skeptical, burying his face back into his pillow with exhaustion. “You really letting her come with us?”

Lux dims her light further, and sinks back down to lay beside Ekko. “It's under consideration. Now go back to sleep. You can rest a couple more hours.”

For show, Ahri yawns, making herself comfortable.

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Piltover's air is thick with electricity. The hum of it is distracting after a place like Ionia, near devoid of hextech. After the sea.

Lux pushes the thought from her mind that she is able to sense things she was not able to sense before. She lets the white-noise fill her mind and numb her to the awareness.

If she lingers too long, she knows she will be overcome with guilt. This close to Ekko's home, again. This close. And still he's with her, his parents surely worried sick. It's a shame to wound a family, a real family, not all doll-house perfect like her own.

If she lingers too long, she feels the hollowness of her chest will eat away at the rest of her. There's a void in her heart that wants to see Ezreal as much as she dreads it, and for every moment that passes, every stacking second of awareness that it isn't going to happen, she is this much closer. But closer to what?
Her grief will not consume her, now. Not after everything she has been through. Her family, her people, her kingdom, her battles. She refuses to allow her tipping point to be a stupid boy and a stupid crush.

Lux pays for a nice hotel, and Ahri quickly makes herself at home on a bed, lighting up the visiopathic crystal. Lux supposes it’s a bit of a luxury to her, though the only broadcasts appear to be interviews with old men showing off their inventions.

Ekko mutters, “thieves,” under his breath, but does not elaborate as he settles on the other bed. Instead he looks up to Lux. “Think it's better to send word to your guys? Or go pick them up?”

“Both have their own risks,” Lux tells him. She stays standing, unable to relax. “For example, being home so soon will no doubt draw attention, despite any efforts. But sending written word can be intercepted.”

Ekko arches an eyebrow. “I don't think anyone would intercept from like. Here to there. No one knows what you're doing.”

Lux is not so sure. “Either way. It takes so long to get a return letter. It would be such a waste, sitting and waiting all that time.”

Ahri chimes in, without looking up from the crystal, “it'd be a waste to walk there all slow and have them say no. Why not send someone fast? Someone you know can sweet talk them into coming?”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Lux shifts her weight. “Quite a bit of responsibility to put on your shoulders.”

This time Ahri looks her way, eyelashes thick and dark, shoulders bare and smooth as she rests her head on her arms. “Don't you trust me?”

“It's not a matter of trust, it's a matter of personal responsibility. And this responsibility is mine.”

“What's wrong with delegating a messenger?”

“I think I'm with her on this one,” Ekko says.

Lux is quiet for a long moment to consider. Ahri has tagged along out of a sense of duty. Out of sincerely wanting to help Irelia. Out of belief that Ionia and Demacia would be mutually beneficial allies. To protect her home. Carefree as she may seem, she is invested in this mission.

Eventually she says, “fine.”

Ahri curls up on the bed, her tails coming around her like a blanket. She burrows her face into her own furs, inhaling deeply. She seems to almost shrink away in – exhaustion, Lux assumes, though it is not so late in the day.

She is shrinking. She does not grow so small as an ordinary fox, but a rather tall one. Her fur is sleek and white all over, tails twisting up in a way that strikes Lux as ethereal. Her eyes are unnervingly human.

Her voice almost takes a moment for Lux to comprehend. It is some combination of howl and
human. “I can travel faster like this.”

Ekko is quiet, biting his tongue, but Lux can see the amazement on his face.

“I'd never seen – I didn't even know you could take this form,” Lux says.

Ahri is quiet. She stretches, paws becoming hands, growing back into herself. When she is finished she grins, but something in it is off. She staring past Lux in some kind of avoidance.

Eventually she admits, “this is part of my motivation.”

It takes Lux a moment to understand. But she remembers what Ahri's files had said. A fox that consumed human souls to become human, until the Institute of War offered her a more permanent solution in exchange for her service.

But that deal is off.

Ahri is getting further from human. Perhaps it is harder for her to maintain human form.

A rescue mission like this is guaranteed combat. A promise for the need to kill. Her price pays itself if she can join them.

The woman does not look particularly excited for it, but she is willing even so. Guilt is human, Lux supposes, but even humans can drown in it without changing their ways.

Ahri leaves before evening.

And in the morning, Ezreal arrives.

Chapter End Notes

*whispers* hi
The dawn is every shade of light blue that Lux can imagine. There is grey and there is gold, but outside her window there is mostly just blue. She watches the sun rise, the room slowly fading into the reality of daylight. Ekko sleeps soundly, enough to put her at ease and distract from the concept of how awful this is for him and for his family.

When he wakes, it is with a long, quiet groan as he stretches. He rubs at his eyes and sits up.

“You wake up so early.”

“Habit,” Lux says, offering a smile. “Never really shook the military schedule.”

He takes his time getting out of bed and getting dressed. They do not have anywhere to be until Ahri's return. It almost feels like being on the run – avoiding home, not wanting to be known by her own people.

Birds pass by the window, so close she can hear the wind under their wings.

There is a knock at the door, and Lux's first thought is that Ahri has forgotten something, or perhaps encountered some sort of problem. But she doesn't sense her magic. It can't be weakening that quickly. But there is magic.

She doesn't want to admit who's it is. Ekko glances in her direction, then pointedly cocks his head towards the door.

Lux hesitates for a moment longer before conceding.

When she opens the door, Ezreal is just pushing off from the hallway wall, as if turning to leave. “Uh,” he says at first, looking startled. Like he hadn't expected her to come at all. Like he hadn't expected himself to.

Ekko hops up from his seat on a bed. “Well, time to go get us breakfast.”

Lux is careful not to allow herself to struggle with looking away from him. She feigns normalcy, pulling money from her wallet to hand over to Ekko as if this is not blatantly his escape from awkwardness.

He brushes past Ezreal with a light shove, but Ezreal does not seem to react to it in the slightest. He simply shuts the door behind the other boy.

“I'm coming with you,” Ezreal announces, apparently having shaken off his embarrassment. Whatever inclination he had to leave has been replaced with stubbornness, she can already tell.

“Ahri,” Lux deduces, not wasting her time with how he knows where she is, how he knows what she's doing.
The way he averts his gaze gives away that she's right. He crosses the room to sit down on her bed. As comfortable as ever, Lux thinks, but knows he is not really. The room feels stuffy and uncomfortable. The blue out the window has given way to a foggy day, muggy and grey.

“You're running straight into Noxus on a mission like that right as a war is starting and right after announcing that you're engaged to the prince. I heard who you're bringing with, and I'm not letting that many of you go die at once.”

Lux frowns. She takes a seat at the edge of Ekko's bed so that the two of them are facing each other across the small space between. Her knees are together, ankles crossed. Polite. Years of etiquette lessons. His legs are spread wide, palms flat on the bed between them as he leans forward. Too close, for how little space parts the beds.


Ezreal doesn't elaborate. Instead he says, “Taric is going to come. That's how he is. If he's asked for help, he gives it. Sona is going to come with. Hell, she'd probably come even if he didn't. I'm sure Ahri will be back with both of them as fast as they can be.”

“They're coming because I'm asking them to. I did not ask you.”

“Too bad?”

Lux stares at him. His brow is furrowed, but he is having trouble looking at her. His delusion that he'll be joining them is no real issue. She simply has to leave before he realizes. She's done it before. Practically habitually.

He turns his head to the side, and with that manages to look at her sidelong. “I know you think you can just sneak off again, but I'm not leaving.”

“Of course not,” Lux lies.

There is a tense silence in the room. Lux does not know if she will be able to handle days of this, then an entire mission of this. (She remembers having the same concern when they were dating, when they were first beginning their travels together, and that must have been a century ago.)

Ezreal taps his foot until apparently he cannot take it anymore and stands up. “Are you – did you plan this just to mess with me?” Almost immediately he throws his head back and muses his hair in frustration, adding, “I know that's not it, but seriously?”

Lux leans back just to put space between them. She doesn't mind that it makes her seem aloof. She'd like to look that way. She'd like not to care. “What are you talking about?”

“You're putting everyone at risk. Even just yourself is bad enough, but then Taric? Sona?”

“Ah,” Lux says, a bit flatly. “I had forgotten. You're in love with her.”

“I – sure, whatever,” Ezreal snaps. “Did you forget that Taric is one of my best friends, too? Did you forget that I'm in love with you?”

“Still?” She asks, incredulous.
Ezreal falls back onto the bed behind him in some kind of dramatic defeat and mutters, “what the fuck. Why are you like this?”

She isn't sure how to answer something like that.

He stares up at the ceiling. Lux stares at his knees. “It doesn't just go away,” he says.

Lux wants to be cold as ice. She wants to freeze over her heart and go numb, wants to sink her feelings into the bottom of the sea. She wants to give him frost burn until he leaves. But it's hard. It's hard because he's right – it doesn't just go away. Her body is too warm with his presence for any of that.

“It doesn't,” she agrees, soft.

He sighs. “Is it just... Politics? I mean, just. Because you're a Crownguard?”

So he understands. If she is honest, she is startled. He isn't stupid, but the world of nobles has always been a bit beyond him. He doesn't have the sense of responsibility or understand the concepts of social pressures well enough. But he knows that this is not just a choice she has made based on emotion.

He kissed her, at the party. What freedom does he think her confinement gives him?

She knows that she has waited far too long to answer for him to believe her, but even so she says, “no.”

“Liar.”

“It makes no difference.”

All she can think about is climbing over him on the bed. Of the blue marks on his cheeks and his chapped lips and how sure she is that it would only make this easier. That he wouldn't make her explain herself, whether out of his own uncaring or his own unwillingness to hear the truth.

It's shameful to feel this way. She feels nauseous.

Ezreal changes the subject again. “You should tell me the plan and draw me up a loose map of the place.”

For lack of anything else to do, for the sake of her own avoidance, she does. Ekko must have anticipated this sort of outcome; when he returns, it is with three people's worth of food. He finds them hunched over a map together, foreheads nearly touching. Lux jerks back with guilt, but Ezreal does not.

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Ekko sleeps in Lux's bed with her. It is decided wordlessly and without fuss in a way that is pointed, daring anyone to complain and be struck down. Ezreal's expression goes sour, but he knows better than to complain about getting his own bed when he's the one who barged in uninvited.

For as much as he seems to want to put himself between them in the evenings, Ekko makes himself
scarce during the day. He says it's nice to look around and explore without guilt or fear, and that anyone who's been paying attention enough to know that he and Lux have been traveling companions would probably assume she's left him behind in her trip to Ionia. It's better, he says, for him to be seen closer to home and without her.

Lux is sure he is just leaving to avoid being stuck in the middle any longer. True to his word, Ezreal does not leave her alone for a minute. A bit silly, given that it isn't as though Lux would leave before their other party members arrive.

Lux wishes she could convince Ekko to visit home. To at least tell his family he's doing well, at least leave them a note, for heaven's sake.

Ezreal, with no family. Herself, with only a shadow of one. Then Ekko, with a family that loves him. Yet he's standing right alongside the two of them. She can't ask why – she knows. He wants better for his home, and that goes for his family, too. He can't sit idly by. Neither can she.

At any rate, it's smart of him to not stick around. The room is in near perpetual silence, broken up only by the occasional thought about their plan or the sound of the visiopathic crystal. (Or, if Lux is completely honest, Ezreal's annoyed grumbling at what it displays.)

After three days, Lux allows herself the luxury of sitting beside Ezreal. On the fourth, her fingers brush his and neither shifts away.

The next day she is sitting at the hotel room's table, looking over the map she and Ezreal have made off of her descriptions of the dungeons. She is trying to remember just how many gates doors she had passed with Katarina, just how many people they will need to sift through to find Zelos. The portrait of him that Irelia gave is set aside, but who knows how he has aged in captivity? If, Goddess, she hates the thought, but if he is even there?

She is trying to think of what features may have hardened, of what will be he easiest to identify at a glance. She is trying not to think of the old portrait of herself and Ezreal during the Institute's days that she knows he kept on his desk so, so long ago. She is trying not to wonder if it is still there.

Ezreal drapes over her shoulders from behind, his arms curling over her collar. Lux stiffens, sitting up straight.

She scolds him, “Ezreal.”

He doesn't reply at first. Probably because he knows there's nothing he could say to justify it, nothing that she wouldn't immediately counter. Nonsensically, she simply leans forward slightly and returns to looking at the map, even if it is a bluff to act like she can really focus on it.

What he does ask is, “have you gotten used to it?”

“Used to what.”

“Being touched.”

Lux forces her voice flat. “I suppose so.”

She wonders what he thinks they are talking about. Or who.
She hardly touches Jarvan at all, and despite what the public may think, even when she is in Demacia she does not take up residence anywhere near him. They hardly see each other when they aren't discussing work, and she is not sure that will ever change. She thinks that even if they were truly and sincerely in love, this would still be the reality behind the image.

Then there is Ekko. Only a couple of years younger than her, but cemented firmly as a friend, as a child in her mind. But she will admit, there are times he bumps his arm against hers. Times they hold hands. He has brushed her hair for her in moments of boredom. None of this puts her on edge.

But even touching Ezreal had been comfortable, by the end. It's infuriating that he wants to act like she had never gotten better – never moved past how she had been when it was all pretend.

She does not like the idea of him thinking it never progressed past one big act of discomfort.

But whatever he is thinking, all he does is make himself comfortable, resting over her shoulders. After a long stretch of time, he breaks the silence to say, “are the doors labeled? Do you remember their numbers?”

When Ekko returns in the early evening, they are still in the same position. This time Lux cannot be the one to flinch back as if in denial, but she is sure her face must look guilty. Ekko only arches an eyebrow at them. And Ezreal, of course, does not budge an inch.

The next day Ekko links his index finger around Lux's, and asks her as discreetly as he can, “should I have my own room, maybe...?”

She chastises him for the thought, yanking her hand away. “Ekko!”

He hops back a step, playfully defensive. “What? I'm just asking!”

“The answer is no. We're not doing anything that requires – privacy.”

Ekko shrugs, grinning, and dismisses himself for the day again.

She watches the programs on the crystal with Ezreal. It's dull and boring and she wishes that it were comfortable, but it's not. She lays on her bed on her stomach, feeling childish, but somewhat less so when she glances over and sees that Ezreal is on his back, watching the show upside-down.

He catches her gaze, and asks, “are you going stir-crazy here?”

“I can't be seen, right now,” she reminds him.

“Use illusions.”

“There's nothing I need to do here, anyway.”

He rolls over. “So when you don't need to do anything, you're alright just... Sitting in a dark room until someone needs you? Until you've got a mission? Like a tool?”

“Sure,” Lux says, because she does not care to have this conversation. It isn't worth the energy to argue. She isn't sure how she would argue. She cannot recall the last time she did something for the fun of it. She has always lived mission to mission. Maybe that's why she has felt so completely ruined with
all this change. The end of the League of Legends was the end of an era of missions. The end of her travels with Ezreal, cut off in the middle, was another. Then Noxus, and then...

Since then, what has she done? Sit in the barracks and wait. Sit in hotels and wait. Wait for someone to explain how they intend to use her, then let them.

The thought flits through her mind that it was nice to use others for a change. It had been nice to use Ezreal. It's nice to use Ekko. She is glad the thought is brief, because it is terrible and cruel.

Ezreal props himself up on his arms. He asks, “want to run away with me?”

She rolls her eyes and does not humor him. Does not humor herself.

***

Taric and Sona arrive with Ahri behind them. They don't look any different than she recalls.

Sona, holding Taric's arm, is still elegant, her hair so long that her magic must be the only thing keeping it from the floor. Given the anti-mage climate, lately... This sort of display must be out of stubbornness. Sona rebels how she can. Her dress is something that suits the noble neighborhoods of Demacia but maybe not the streets of Piltover. Lux wonders if it's the most casual thing she owns.

Taric's hair is still long as well, braided over his shoulder. He is not dressed in armor – surely it is packed away in his bags – but instead in the rich fashions of Demacia. His suit is deep blue, like Sona's dress, his tie fitted with a beautiful crystal broach.

Frankly, Lux feels a bit under-dressed in her travel clothes.

Ekko doesn't have those kinds of social rules drilled into his head. He welcomes them into the hotel room, already numbed to meeting famous people. Celebrities don't have anything on royalty.

Lux allows the room to settle. Gives time for Ezreal to give lingering hugs to both Taric and Sona. Allows them to give their introductions to Ekko – Taric translates Sona's sign language. (Ekko tries to steer the conversation to parallel worlds, but unfortunately Taric does not have as much information on his own situation as the boy had hoped.)

Taric and Ezreal are whispering to each other, snickering about who-knows-what. Sona is showing Ekko her etwahl, allowing him to curiously pluck at strings. Ahri is curled up behind the two, looking ready to doze. She looks so tired and brought them here so quickly that Lux does not have the heart to hold a grudge for her telling Ezreal.

She watches Ezreal reach over to toy with Taric's braid almost idly while they catch up. Watches him move and plop himself down beside Sona, next. Watches her smile down at him without shifting over to give any more room; their hips pressed together as the bed dips under their weight. Their arms line up as she holds her hands over her etwahl's strings, and even Ekko gives slight pause before returning to the somewhat one-sided conversation.

Lux interrupts, “I trust Ahri's told you what we're planning, or you wouldn't have come?”

They quiet. Sona nods, her hands lowering to rest on her lap. Taric says, “yes. A rescue mission for Irelia's brother, correct? Held in the dungeons of Noxus.”
“We assume,” Ekko adds. “Like, there's a very real possibility that we'll accomplish nothing and leave empty handed.

“I know that this doesn't really concern you,” Lux says, soft, “so I appreciate it. I didn't know... Who to ask for help. But if Demacia wants Ionia's cooperation in this war, we owe this to Captain Irelia.”

Sona signs. Taric does not directly translate, but when she is finished nods and says, “this concerns us quite a bit. To Sona, Demacia and Ionia are both her home. She's invested in the well being of everyone, regardless of which they hail from. She's personally invested in rescuing Zelos.” After a pause he adds, “as for myself, I have been welcomed into Demacian arms. I can't imagine turning my back on the opportunity to help once more.”

“Is it really so welcoming, still?” Lux asks, without meaning to.

Sona averts her eyes. Taric looks down at his lap.

“It's natural to be afraid, in times like this,” Taric says.

“Yeah, of the enemy,” Ezreal snaps, “not your own fucking people.”

“In all fairness,” Taric begins, but Ezreal cuts him off.

“–Don't defend people being afraid of you, there's no reason, whether you're from here or not.”

“I don't really think Demacia's politics concern you, Ezreal,” Lux says, loudly. This gets him to shut up, but she watches Sona bring a comforting hand to Ezreal's lower back. She wills herself calm, quells the bitter storm inside of her. Her face feels hot. “Let's just... Go over the infiltration plan, alright?”

Chapter End Notes

Next up: a........ lot......
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip to Noxus is slow and careful. They are too large a party for Lux to completely conceal or even to convincingly disguise with her illusions. But they cannot be detected, cannot be followed or intercepted.

Sona is not much use in the 'roughing it' part of their camping out. But she does not get in the way, at least, and Taric makes up for it. She keeps out of the way and doesn't complain. (Of course she doesn't, Lux thinks.)

Taric and Sona share one tent. Lux and Ahri share one in the middle. In the third is Ezreal and Ekko.

They do not seem to realize how close the tents are.

In the night, Lux can hear Taric whisper to Sona. About magic and about Noxus and about Swain. About his home and her home. She can sometimes hear the shift of their bedding and clothing.

She hears Ezreal and Ekko talk. She strains herself to hear them, like an idiot. Unfortunately, they are idiots too, so for a long time, all they do is bicker over space and sides and lighting. Ahri gives her a knowing look that Lux can make out even in the darkness, but doesn't comment. Just keeps herself quiet to make the eavesdropping easier.

“Think we'll have to use that thing?” Ezreal asks. There is a dim glow from their tent; Ekko's zero drive.

Ekko doesn't hesitate. “Yes.” Then, after a moment. “Why'd you even come?”

The muffled sound of movement. Ezreal, earnestly, “Lux.”

“Worried about her?” Ekko asks. For as little as the two of them seem to get along, the question is sincere.

“Yes and no.”

There is silence for a moment, surely filled with an odd look on Ekko's face.

Ezreal explains, sounding annoyed, “Lux can take care of herself, but it doesn't mean what she's doing isn't reckless. It's irritating not knowing where she is or what she's doing. However it goes, I at least want to see what's happening.”

“Just read the news.”

“Lux lies to journalists. And everyone else.”

It's hard to hear herself talked about with no chance to retort or defend. She's always been so in control of her image, but these past couple days have had her realizing how completely she has lost her grip. The papers still call her cheerful, but she's sure Ekko, Ahri, Sona, Taric – Ezreal. They
would all call her serious without hesitation. Serious and cold and harsh.

She focuses on the hard ground beneath the tent. The comfort of solidity in the way it jabs into her back. Something that should not be a comfort, but somehow is.

It is quiet. She hears the occasional sharp intake of breath, recognizable to her instantly as Ezreal’s. He keeps beginning to say something, then just grunting in irritation and going quiet.

Eventually Ekko snaps, “if you have something you want to say, say it. Stop making noise just to remind me you're upset. I get it. I know.”

It still takes time for Ezreal to mutter, “is she – okay?”

Flatly, “that’s a bit vague, but yes. Maybe ask her yourself?”

Ezreal lets out a long suffering sigh, but a quick movement of bedding signals that he has given up on talking and has laid down to sleep. Lux knows that he is driving himself crazy with whatever is going on in his head. She still does not understand what exactly it is, but she knows he is more the type to implode in on himself for lack of ability to articulate what's bothering him.

Ahri is watching Lux, her eyes bright even without a light. She hums with amusement, but does not comment.

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Lux almost wishes she had talked to Jarvan about this. Maybe he could have arranged something with those ‘connections.’ Having a hideout and a way to get into Noxus would have been nice.

Who even knows if they're still trustworthy? It's hard to truly trust Riven, let alone Talon and Katarina.

Lux asserts to herself, stubbornly, *I can do this*. She looks at Sona, Taric, Ahri, Ezreal, Ekko. A mismatched bunch of ex-champions alongside one random street kid. She runs through the list of what she has on her side. Hypnosis and healing through music, through gems, through vastayan magic. Ezreal's power. Ekko's rewind.

*I can do this alone*, she thinks.

The others do not like that plan so much. She had expected the arguing from Ezreal and Ekko. Not so much from Taric.

She sighs, frustrated and unused to having so many people to tend to. “Not – I don't intend to follow through with everything by myself. But it's much easier to get in and out with invisibility. I could at least determine where his cell is before we rush in.”

Ekko looks mischievous. “Why don't we just let everyone out of their cells?”

Ezreal elbows him. “Because of actual Noxian criminals that would let loose.”

“Do they jail criminals? Do they have, like, *crime*? Because in Zaun–”

Lux interrupts, “–Zaun doesn’t have nobles and rich districts to enforce law. Those are the people
who want to show off their power. This isn't what we need to be discussing.”

“The reason I object isn't to give any slight to your abilities, Lux,” Taric assures her, gently guiding the conversation back on track. “Just that I know a spell that may help with locating him. If he is here.”

“Question,” Ekko says, raising his hand. “If he's not here, do we just, like... Run back home in shame? Like, break in, probably kill some people, huge political scandal, and we just leave because we were wrong? That's gonna get real awkward.”

Lux frowns. “We'll deal with that if it comes to it.”

“Question,” Ezreal mimics, “isn't this super reckless? Imagine that scenario and also your husband is pissed at you for it because your actions represent your entire Kingdom.”

The urge to hit him is sudden and intense, but she bites the inside of her cheek and the fire in her gut fades. It's a dull ember at the bottom of her lungs, an impatient burning. Even Sona tilts her head in his direction in distinct disapproval.

Taric clears his throat. “Let's work with the best case scenario in mind, shall we?”

Taric's magic is other worldly. It's impossible for Lux to read. Most magic she encounters that feels unfamiliar and confusing is also distinctly of Runeterra. Something she could decipher, given the time, given the resources. Maybe if she traveled to Shurima she would understand Ezreal's magic, maybe if she spent more time in Freljord she could make sense of Lissandra's. Maybe. Maybe.

There's nowhere she could go to make sense of this.

She thinks it is sad that the same can be said for Taric, even when he returns home. He is the last mage of his kind. Anything that wasn't taught to him is dead and gone, and to the world he left behind, the arte is vanished.

It's in the crystals, in the ground, in the vibrations in the air. That's as much as she understands.

“Dowsing,” Taric explains, “can refer to many different things. One of which is a locating spell that my grandfather taught me.”

Ezreal raises his hand, and Lux is genuinely not sure if he is still making fun of Ekko. “Can you use it even to locate someone you've never met?”

“Not as well,” Taric admits. “But gemcraft is something drawn from everything. Everything and everyone. This means that for however weak it would be if I were alone on this quest, my magic is stronger for each person working with me.”

He holds a sapphire in his palm, a small, fragmented thing that looks jagged and sharp. “The things the crystals search with and search for are emotions. It finds the resonance between what we are each seeking and the other side of that coin.”

Ekko whispers, “neat,” and Sona laughs silently beneath her hand. Then, like she is already familiar with whatever ritual is needed, holds her hands out to Taric at her side, and to Ezreal at her other.

Taric nods, taking her hand in his. “Please hold hands and concentrate. Remember what you know
about who we're looking for. Even thinking of Irelia will help us. Try to remain calm and not to overwhelm yourself with stress or worry.”

Ahri links her arm with Taric's, since he is holding the crystal in his hand. (He chuckles, so Lux is not sure this was necessary.) Her other hand holds Ekko's. He and Lux reach for each other with ease.

It's stupid that Lux hesitates when she reaches for Ezreal's hand. It's stupid that her face feels hot when they have so much more going on. A part of her is angry that he is as casual as always, even though she knows that he is faking. She knows she would be just as annoyed if he were so distracted.

Think of Zelos. A man she's never met. An Ionian who wanted their help, who never made it, who would have been turned away even if he had. She recalls the sketch of him. Somewhat androgynous features, like Irelia. Sharp and elegant. Pale skin and dark, dark hair, like ink, like perfect sweeping calligraphy lines. Maybe they have made him cut it. Maybe it has grown longer in captivity.

The crystal glows dimly; she sees Taric's shoulders jump like he is startled by something.

“He's here,” Taric murmurs. “Somewhere. The light will get brighter the closer we are. This doesn't give me much to go on beyond that he is here.”

Lux asks,“ does that still work if it's separated from you?”

Ezreal squeezes her hand like he's scolding her. She resolutely does not look at him.

“Not as well,” Taric says, only somewhat apologetic. “And I'm afraid if you were planning to sneak in alone, I still have reservations.”

Ezreal's grip loosens in relief. “Well, then... It's time to jailbreak.”

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Despite Ekko's suggestion of just waltzing straight through the border, using the zero drive to make sure they get the timing perfect and go unnoticed, they rely on Ahri. Lux does not want to waste a resource before they are in desperate need of it, and can imagine fewer uses for Ahri's magic than the zero drive.

She has seen Ahri's magic on the fields. Even remembers experiencing it first hand. It's fascinating to see it again without limitations.

Ahri is dressed for seduction. She always is. Her skirt impossibly shorter than usual, neckline lower. Her sleeves drape far off her shoulders, yet none of that is what the guards are distracted by. They look her in the eyes. They wipe clammy hands on the hems of their shirts, they talk to her openly and bashfully. They hardly spare a glance in the direction of her party as they let them all pass into Noxus.

Lux understands the draw, in a way. Ahri is beautiful. It is no wonder that researchers keep wandering into vastaya territory and falling in love. The fall of her silky hair is ethereal, captivating. Her skin is soft and pink as a peach. The curl of her tails, they sway of her hips, alluring, calculated, mesmerizing pattern.
And then, as they step into the inattention of the kingdom's crowd, it suddenly isn't. Her skin is pale and almost sickly, her hair greasy, eyes dull. Her legs tremble for a moment before she all-but collapses into Sona's arms.

“Well done,” Taric murmurs.

Ezreal keeps his voice quiet, but is incredulous and red-faced. “Were you – did you just charm all of us?”

“Too risky to focus on one or two people a time,” Ahri whispers. She rights herself, still looking ill, but persevering. Sona presses a hand to her back with a soft light, and that seems to help at least a little bit. “Needed everyone to accept us.”

And they do. Now there are civilians everywhere, forgetting them, dismissing them. Shoving past without a glance back, muttering complaints.

Lux has toyed with her appearance only slightly, short fiery red hair and eyes. On Sona, straight hair to her shoulders, deep crimson. Dark clothes to fit in.

The others don't matter. People do not look as closely as you would expect. The explanations fly through Lux's mind – Ahri has defected to Noxus out of her bloodlust, Ahri has rejected the vastaya so thoroughly that she has left Ionia behind – but she knows that no one will ask. No one will even think about it.

Taric is no official representative of Demacia. Ezreal may represent Piltover, but they are not Noxus' direct enemy. And Ekko – she is sure that if anyone can tell he is from Zaun, that only does them favors.

It's strange to be in a streets of a place so loathsome. These people, doing their day-to-day shopping, selling newspapers, selling fresh fruits and vegetables, are the enemy. They stand in small groups and chat about the weather and the war and everything in between. They are rude and pushy, but they still laugh amongst themselves and let their shoulders relax. It is not so different from the markets back home.

They don't move in a group. Taric walks beside Lux as she leads them towards the spires. Swain's tower, the dungeons. It's too much in one place, like a concentrated center, like the dark heart of the kingdom. Taric holds his hand out, and Lux covers the sapphire with her own palm, watching the dim blue light that filters between their fingers.

Ekko and Ezreal keep pace nearby. Sona and Ahri trail behind at a slower pace, making slight show of looking at wares.

The heart of the kingdom. Lux can't get the name from her mind, even though she knows it's far from the center of Noxus. Noxus is big, like Demacia, made up of districts that would each take a day to traverse.

And they put their political headquarters, their base of operations, right at the edge. Lux almost thinks it's on purpose, a bluff, putting it as close to Demacia as they can.

“If we get a hotel,” Lux murmurs, “Ahri can recover her strength and distract the watch room staff.”

Taric considers it. “I'm not sure it's wise to be here any longer than necessary.”
She can't argue with that. She offers him a smile. “I guess I've had enough of a rest.”

***

Ahri manages to get them past another fleet of guards, though Lux can tell that her best is less than it was earlier. Lux is no longer captivated by her, no longer fooled by her sheer will to be attractive. Even the guards question letting them pass. They allow it, with smooth talking from Taric to back Ahri up, but it's nothing like the border guards.

She remembers this path, with Katarina. Through the dungeons and into the watch room. Convenient for the break in, less so for the escape.

She hears chains on the other side of the thick stone walls. Ekko is picking the lock.

“We won't have much time. They'll see us on the crystals,” Lux reminds them, even as she casts her invisibility over them. It's weak. She is spreading her magic thin to keep energy for the fight that she is sure will catch up to them. She can still see distorted air where they stand, and knows anything more than a glance will give them away.

Still. Buy what time you can.

They nod, but any further recaps of the plan are interrupted as Ekko pockets his tools and presses his palm to the door.

They barrel inside. Trying to move slowly won't stop them from being detected, it would only waste time. They split up, checking the cells as they’d divided up before, one-by-one. Lux feels her illusions slipping away. First from Ezreal as he strays too far from her, then Taric and Ahri before it drops off completely.

The prisoners are heart-wrenching. Lux cannot tell if she is more pained by those who look at her with false hope or those who only glare, already certain no one is coming for them. She passes them by, looking past the bars frantically and ignoring those that curse after her, those that beg.

She can hear an alarm sounding. She is moving so hurriedly that she bumps into Ekko, immediately catching him by the arm to keep him steady. He is frozen in front of a gate, and it takes her a moment to realize that the prisoner is furiously talking to him. His voice is level as he calls Ekko every terrible name under the sun, pouring a scalding rage through the bars.

Lux squeezes his arm to snap him out of it, speaks louder than the prisoner. “Ekko. There's no time.”

He looks at her with wide eyes. The skin-and-bones of all these starving people, the burn marks and the lashing-scars are all more than he had prepared himself for. Their anger and desperation still floods him, when to Lux it is a shallow thing to be stepped over. She can see in his eyes the unspoken, we can't leave all these people; the insistence that some are innocent.

Ekko surprises her, shaking it all off. He reaches behind himself, ready to activate his zero drive. “Did you find the one?”

“No.”

She can see the alarm spreading across his face as he turns to check the others. Taric is already
approaching them, the sapphire in his palm no brighter than it was in the streets. Ahri is sticking close
to Sona, exhausted and seeking her support, even with her body rigid and ready for a fight.

Ezreal is still double checking cells, triple checking them, eyes narrow and mouth tight. They were
supposed to find him.

The alarm has stopped. She hears footsteps.

“He's not here,” Lux says.

“I'm sorry,” Taric mutters, closing his fist around the crystal. It isn't his fault, but Lux does not have
the time for comfort. The edges of the world are too sharp, its shadows too dark. They feel like
they're expanding in her mind.

Ezreal is holding her hand. She isn't sure when that happened, but he tugs her and says, “we have to
go.”

The prospect of a failure she didn't expect, didn't plan for, is horrifying. And she knows he's not
here, she knows, but still blurts out, “but Zelos--”

“–isn't here,” Ekko interrupts.

Taric's voice is heavy with a guilt he doesn't deserve. “I thought he was closer.”

“Well,” Ezreal begins, and Lux doesn't hear the rest. Her irritation could boil her skin – they are too
loud to hear the footsteps, the door, and she is about to scream just to quiet them, to remind them that
the enemy is approaching and they don't have the time to just stand here.

Or maybe they could go back. Ekko's zero drive, a cosmic re-do. Maybe they don't need to waste
any time here. (But she hates this, hates the idea of losing what she knows, losing what she's seen
and leaving it all with Ekko.)

“They're coming,” Ahri reminds them. They quiet, and she mutters, “why did they stop the alarm?”

Lux expects the staff from her previous infiltration. Those women with weapons, a small army of
guards.

She doesn't expect one person to shoulder the door open and stumble into the dungeon. Doesn't
expect a familiar face look at her through long black bangs.

“Zelos,” Lux says.

“Who are you?” He asks, but slams the door shut behind and doesn't wait for an answer. “We have
to get out of here.”

Her breath catches in her throat, a flood of relief coming over her. She doesn't know how to catch
her breath, and almost helplessly turns to look at Ezreal. He meets her gaze, looking equally-shell
shocked for a moment longer, then squeezes her hand once before snapping himself out of it.

“This way,” Ezreal commands, voice loud to rush all of them into action. Maybe because he is used
to collapsing ruins, where you cannot afford to stand still and hesitate.
Zelos approaches them with one last urgent look over his shoulder. “Right. Lead on.” As a group, they turn to the exit.

“No.”

Lux stops mid-step. Taric has not moved, and holds an arm out to block Zelos’ path.

“Who are you, really?” Taric asks.

Instinctively, her fingers tighten around Ezreal's, drawing light in towards herself. No illusion breaks, nothing in his face, so much like Irelia's, gives way.

Zelos nods in Lux's direction, his brow furrowed. “As she said, Zelos Lito. I don't know how long I've been a captive - it's been. Months? Years? I don't know, but I... The guards will be here any moment.”

“You aren't the man we are looking for,” Taric says, slowly.

Lux is still drawing heat to herself. It's almost easier, with Ezreal's gem only one-body away from her, their fingers laced. It has always been a gem to pull powers to filter them clear and clean. Perhaps this is why she shivers.

Why Zelos' slight hitch in breath is visible in the air when Taric says, “you don't share Irelia's blood.”

“This is no trick of the light, Taric,” Lux says.

Taric's voice is firm, his eyes not wavering from Zelos for even a moment. “I know what I know. I know what the earth knows. And I know that a representative of the Ionian military planning to ally with Demacia would have recognized Lux.”

Lux feels Ezreal's gaze flicker to her with uncertainty, feels the pointed walls he throws up between his magic and hers as she keeps pulling, keeps drawing. The air has gone cold.

Zelos' stance changes like night and day. His weight shifts to one side, one hand coming to rest on his hip. He smiles like it is unfamiliar to his lips, and even the cadence of his speech has changed when he drawls, “that gem magic of yours has always been so weak. That woman's blood is a fraction of a fraction of what we have – but we have it. I assure you, right now I would bleed Zelos Lito's blood.”

“It's not a trick of the light,” Lux says again, louder this time as the realization washes over her. “It's a transformation.”

This magic is familiar. She should have sensed it earlier, should have expected it, with what she knows of her prince.

“A transformation and an illusion aren't so different at all,” Zelos says, but the spell is thinning enough for Lux to feel it in the air, now. It isn't wearing off, but simply being retracted. Zelos' face is melting away into another, his body reshaping as he sighs, “what a waste of blood. But it's no matter. We can always get more of his.”

Lux is surprised that her own voice comes out a whisper. “Leblanc.”
The transformation dissipates into the air like fog, like warm breath in the chill that Lux has made.

Leblanc makes the first move without warning, dashing forward so fast that no one has a chance to dodge. Her fingers only have to graze Ekko's chest to cast her spell, rending him to his knees in pain. Of course she targets him, of course. Lux feels the cold air on her palm as she lets go of Ezreal's hand to step defensively in front of Ekko.

Ezreal is already down, kneeling beside the boy, and Sona at his other side.

Lux knows Leblanc well enough. She knows to line up her sights – where she is and where she was. She doesn't even need to pin down someone who's movements have become so predictable to her.

What startles her is not that Leblanc is able to tumble out of the way of her final spark, but that the spark is not the usual piercing prism. It is pure fire, burning a straight line through the room and setting it ablaze.

Chapter End Notes

im still starstruck over those star guardian skins. ezreal... my beautiful boy.......
Lux is so startled by her own flames that she falters.

At least Leblanc is caught off guard, too. The moment's hesitation gives the woman time to get back on her feet, and she steadies herself with a quick look of interest over her shoulder. Noxian flags over the doorway are burning. If they hadn't sent guards in to uphold her illusion, they sure as hell will, now.

“The prisoners,” Taric says, but the reminder isn't necessary with the frantic yelling coming from each cell. Frantic, desperate cries for help, not to let them burn.

All it does is anger Lux, and she flexes her fingers. Criminals have no right to complain, their lives are nothing to her, endangered or not.

Ekko, though. The others. Ekko is drawing to his feet, more thanks to Sona than Ezreal, but still leans harder into Ezreal's supporting arm.

Leblanc comments, “branching out, are we?”

Lux grips her baton tight. She bites back the retort: apparently. Leblanc doesn't need to know how new this is. How terrifying. The comfort of her magic, her only constant companion, is now someone new inside of her. Maybe because she is someone new, herself. Maybe magic really is an unpredictable danger.

The alarm is sounding again. Footsteps. It's no surprise how close they are.

Leblanc dashes, splitting in two. One of her is after Sona, this time, lunging to the side for a good angle on her, but Ahri moves just as fast to block her path. Lux's eyes dart to track the other Leblanc. She is moving slower, but sizing up Ekko.

Picking off the weakest link, Lux assumes, and side-steps again to keep herself between them.

Her magic feels different. The way she channels it through her fingertips to the end of her baton is familiar and easy but it's hotter than usual. Like it's rushing to escape her, like it can't stand to be held back. Lux hasn't felt her magic so eager since she was thirteen and couldn't control it yet.

She doesn't want to waste energy on the fake, but Leblanc's illusions are more than fragmented light for Lux to pull at. She can't tell them apart.

She can't risk Ekko getting killed, either. She is less startled this time when her snare shoots out in embers and flames. Her fingernails feel like they're on fire, but it's worth it. The Leblanc closest to her is trapped in a tall circle of flame that burns on the ground from nothing. It bites at the hems of Leblanc's clothes, and the woman snarls like a caged animal.

It takes a concentrated effort to keep the fire burning high enough to trap her. She can't look the other way, but hears the sounds of sharp musical notes, so crisp in the air that they hurt her ears and head.
She hears the sounds and grunts of Ahri and Leblanc, each moving back and forth in a fast-paced dance.

She hears the familiar sound of Ahri's hurling that orb of hers forward. She doesn't hear impact – maybe it's just drown out by the prisoners, by the burning flags.

Then Ahri's voice calls out, “fake!”

Then this one is real. Her walls of fire are slipping - Lux throws out what should be light, but comes out fire again, but it isn't fast enough. Leblanc faces the weakened flames to avoid the new, stepping through them with only a pained grimace.

“Oh, at least give me my doubles,” she grinds out. Magic flames die off from her clothes too quickly once she's out of them – she dusts her skirts like this is nothing. “Six against one is just cruel.”

Ezreal shoots at her, sloppy as his body slants to help support Ekko's weight. She dodges it, but still lets out a pained sound at her burns.

The numbers don't stay in their favor. The guards burst through, a whole squadron of them, one after the other. The front lines have buckets of water, and quickly fan out to tend to the small fires around the room.

They, and the prisoners both, Lux thinks, are fools. There fire was never going to spread across a stone-built dungeon. All they've done is make more work for themselves, give a distraction to half their force.

Not that it matters. Taric takes the front lines, stepping forward to shield Lux as she recovers. Dusts of crystal freeze the Noxian soldiers before they can reach her, keep them from dodging the swing of his hammer that does more to scare them away than to hurt them. (Lux is briefly struck by a wave of despair. Of course he won't hurt anyone, now that they are off the fields. Of course.)

Ezreal fires on them from behind him, keeping close to Sona as her music pushes all of them to move faster. Ekko is looking better, now, still hanging at Ezreal's shoulder but less pale in the face.

Ahri leaps to the nearest of the guards, all claws and fangs, a feral fox in a human body. Blood flows over her sharpened nails and she licks at the splash of it on her lips with satisfaction. They don't even have a chance to defend themselves before she's on to the next. Lux can understand why the Institute had wanted to monitor her.

Lux throws up a wall of fire with an upwards flick of her arm, though it comes out much weaker than she had hoped. She uses it to draw a line between her own and as many of the guards who aren't already in the fray as she can. Too many of them step through it without hesitation, knowing it is more for intimidation than it is capable of hurting them.

She should have more power than this. She knows she should. Her skin is hot, feverish and clammy. The magic comes, goes where she wants it, but it isn't what she wants. It's wrong, it's the power she had prayed for in her deepest rages to burn the whole world, but uncontrolled.

Leblanc has settled on squaring off against Ezreal and Ekko, two targets in one. She dashes to them; Ezreal shoves Ekko one direction and arcane shifts in the other. The moment his feet touch the ground he is already in motion, right back to where he was, arm raising to fire off his magic. Leblanc has to fall back from Ekko's prone form to dodge Ezreal's magic.
When Ezreal reaches Ekko, he drops down in front of him, firmly planting himself in the way with his gauntlet still raised. The wave of despair that hits Lux is heavier, thicker. Ezreal is strong, stronger than he realizes, but compared to the damage Leblanc could do, it is nothing.

Leblanc is like Lux, after all. A pretty illusion with too much power in her hands, too much blood.

Lux steps forward, raises her baton to cast another spell, but feels a hand on her arm, Sona.

She signs something, but Lux doesn't know what, doesn't understand. There is urgency in Sona's eyes as the woman's lips part like she is searching for her voice. Her fingers drop to her etwahl in frustration, slamming down in a discordant sound before she points for the exit.

Lux can only think to call, helplessly, “Taric,” but he is busy, he has wedged himself between Ezreal and Ekko, another protector to the boy that Lux dragged here. She is a wreck, leaving him to the others like forgotten baggage, her own magic betraying her. It is getting harder and harder to breathe, even when her enchanted fire leaves no smoke.

“We need to leave,” Taric says, and Lux isn't sure if he is intuitively translating for Sona or simply thinking the same. “They can call for more and more backup.” A Demacian does not retreat, Lux thinks, but does not have time to say. Preemptively cutting off the thought, he urges, “at least allow us to get out of here. Come!”

“Fine,” Lux whispers, but it's enough. Sona pulls her rough, but Lux doesn't mind, almost grateful for the guidance as they stumble back towards the door.

Lux tries to heighten the wall she's made, but the feel of it is new and wild. Flames soar to the ceiling in disobedience, then back low again. For the second time, more of a distraction than anything, but it helps to allow the others to join her.

Except for Ahri, somewhere beyond the fire, laughing.

“I'll catch up,” she calls out to them, over the cheering of the prisoners, the crash of weapons missing her, hitting walls and floor instead. “I'll show her a transformation!”

Sona and Taric move to either side of Ekko; Ezreal comes to Lux's side.

“We are absolutely not leaving you here,” Lux calls back, though there are guards approaching from another hall to their side. They must have been waiting. Lux isn't surprised. Leblanc has always preferred to be a one-woman show.

Ahri doesn't respond, not to her. But to Leblanc, she is asking, “so where's the real one?”

Lux doesn't know if she means the real Leblanc or the real Zelos. She doesn't have time to think about it, Ezreal pulls her by the hand, away from their pursuers. It's only the blast of cold air as they reach the outside that snaps her out of it, that makes her think to do more than follow him.

Sona's etwahl hits her in the side, hard enough to bruise, but for good reason. The approaching guards are stunned, frozen by her chords, as if the harp strings themselves are tying them.

Ekko crouches down at her other side, like he's about to break into a run. Lux reaches down to stop him – he's already injured. His chest, she is sure, will bloom into an enchanted purple bruise, given
Thankfully something else interrupts him. Throwing-knives pierce the guards that Sona and Taric have not taken care of, knocking them to the ground.

Ekko rises, but still walks to the bodies. He retrieves the knives.

“Thanks,” Katarina says, jumping down from her vantage point. Ekko hands them back to her, but she hardly looks at him as she takes them back. Instead she nods to Lux. “Hey there, burning vengeance the second. Burn the bodies.”

Lux feels frazzled, mind racing with none of its usual calm clarity. Her emotions aren't on mute, they're hot and frenzied with the new rage of her magic. “Why?” Lux asks. Why is Katarina here?

The woman misunderstands the question, raising an elegant eyebrow and cocking her hip with impatience. “Because ashes don't look like they were killed by a familiar knife. Burn them and follow me.”

So Lux does. She can't control herself, but she can be controlled. The men at either side of her group burn with ease. The smell is too much, nauseating. She hardly has the forethought to consider that she doesn't want Ekko to see this – or Ezreal. The fire comes much, much too easy for this.

“Now follow me.”

“We can't leave Ahri,” Taric points out, but Katarina is already leading them away into shadows – and they are already following.

“If you don't think she can hold her own, you shouldn't have brought her,” Katarina says, dismissive.

She leads them to back to the tunnels, but this time the route is different. Lux can hear muffled footsteps and murmurs overhead, like they are walking beneath the whole city and not just the dungeons. They walk for so long that she realizes this must ring somewhat true. When they resurface, they at the edge of the slums. The streets are empty, but Lux thinks this is out of fear more than anything. Families barricaded behind their closed windows, peering out through blinds.

The quiet is disarming, jarring after the fight and fire. Lux has always loved the long walks, the military march, but she is short of breath.

The building Katarina lets them into is four stories tall and falling apart. An old housing unit of some kind. Unlike the quiet houses along the way, it is almost empty of life. The rotting wooden structure creaks around them as if to make up for the silence.

Katarina leads them into a bare-bones bedroom on the second floor. Riven is seated on the bed, Talon across from her, the two of them hunched over a map spread between them.

“Stay here, and do not fucking leave this building unless you're told,” Riven commands, without looking up.

Katarina flicks her hair over her shoulder, eyes narrowing. “Oh, are you in command, now?”

“No less than you,” Talon says.
Then he and Katarina laugh, and even Riven cracks a small smile. Some sort of joke between them.

Lux is losing feelings in her legs.

“There's food,” Riven offers, words of compassion with no warmth to her tone. “And enough rooms for all of you.”

“Stay away from windows,” Talon adds.

“And stay quiet,” Katarina finishes.

Talon stands, dusting himself off like he is disgusted to even be in the building, to have touched its ruined furniture. He should be used to it, from what Lux knows of his champion files from the Institute. Maybe that's why he hates it.

He glances down to Riven. “You shouldn't be here,” he says, terse. For some reason, Lux feels as if she is intruding. This reminds her of when Garen had met her here in Noxus, telling her the same. Lux wonders how close the three of them are. How much of a family they have made of each other. She wonders what the meaning behind those words are – the words her brother gave to her, the words she is always giving to Ekko.

She had not thought much of this during her last visit, but there is so much risk in this. Not only in their ties with herself, but in their ties with Riven. Then again, for those hoping to overthrow their government, perhaps hosting an exile in secret is not such a hurdle.

She wonders where Garen is. Where he went. The rest of these people are not her family. Sona and Taric are friends, but more friends to Ezreal than her. And Ekko, Ekko who is so young, who is with her instead of his family. Who watched her burn bodies moments ago, had to watch their flesh boil and char and smell their death. His life now is meeting beautiful women, then watching them spill blood.

She used to worry about getting blood on Ezreal's hands, and that thought is like a whole new wave of nausea, of weakness in her knees. He is still holding her hand.

Katarina says, “we'll be back. Be good. Wait here.” And then she and Talon leave the way they came.

“And also, get out,” Riven says to the remaining group, but for once Lux thinks she means it to sound like a joke. It still isn't one.

In the hallway, Sona plucks at a string of her etwahl, then seems to catch herself, flattening her palm over it to silence herself. She turns to Ezreal, signing something instead.

He nods. “Ekko, go with Sona and Taric. They can take a look at you.”

Ekko frowns, but doesn't disobey. He knocks Ezreal in the shoulder lightly with his fist, then follows the two adults as they cautiously open a door. After deeming the bedroom inside acceptable, they lead him in, then close the door behind them.

The sigh of relief Ezreal lets out is long and heavy. The exhaustion is plain on his face, but he tries to give Lux a reassuring grin, squeezing her hand.
“Come on. Let's explore.”

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The layout of the building seems to be the same on every floor. A series of bedrooms and bathrooms and offices. The first floor had held the only kitchen, dining room, and even a scarcely furnished living room.

Lux is getting tunnel vision. The edges of her sight blur and fade into obscurity, and all she can see is Ezreal as he leads her up to the fourth floor, one step at a time. He is moving slowly, waiting patiently after each step.

It's infuriating, but when she tries to speak, tries to insist that she doesn't need to be handled like she's made of glass, the words just come out as a whimper.

He leads her into the first room of the fourth floor, another bedroom. There is nothing inside but a mattress on the floor, but it looks like as good a place to sit as any.

Lux doesn't even make it that far. She feels her hand slip from his before her knees knock down against the hardwood. Her breath is coming out uneven – no matter how desperately she gasps for air, she isn't getting enough. Her lungs hurt, her limbs all ache, her magic is in a disarray inside of her.

Ezreal is saying her name, she realizes through her hyperventilating. He drops down in front of her, hands in the air between them like he wants to touch her but thinks she might shatter.

The urge to talk, to snap at him, to explain herself is so vast, but she can't stop her uneven breaths. There is a hopeless hitch that catches each hurried intake of air half-way. Her mind is racing, each tangle of thoughts cut off abruptly by the next. Garen and Ekko and Ahri. Ezreal, and fire in her veins instead of light.

Ezreal wraps his arms around her slow and careful, giving her plenty of time to pull away. She doesn't. Once his hands are on her, he loses all caution, holding her tight, pulling her close against him. She leans into it, still gasping for breath in shudders against his jacket.

His fingers cup the back of her head. He doesn't feel like he would let her go for the world, but she hears him ask, “do you need me to get someone else? Taric, or – Ekko?”

She's getting air, now, in deep gulps, but can't find her words. She shakes her head against his collar. She understands Taric, the medic who can speak in words Lux understands, but what good would Ekko do her? Why would she allow Ekko to see her like this?

Maybe Ezreal just thinks the boy would be a greater comfort to her.

Maybe he would.

She clings to Ezreal, her fingers digging hard into the back of his jacket, feeling its rough texture under her fingertips. Then she remembers the fire that had come to her without being called and lets go quickly.

Ezreal sounds like he is speaking through gritted teeth, his voice rough and gravelly. “You're okay.”
She hates the sob that tears out of her mouth. How long has it been since she cried? Since she *wailed*, unable to do it silently? She can't come up with the words to tell him he's wrong, to tell him what is wrong with *her*.

She doesn't know how long it takes before she's caught her breath and quieted her cries. Just that eventually they are laying on the hardwood floor, still across the room from the mattress. Eventually she can breath again. Eventually her body is not trembling, just resting, curled up against Ezreal's. Her head rests on his arm while his free hand runs through her hair, surely making a mess of it. Her hand on his back has slipped underneath his jacket.

It feels like awakening from a nap. The light that stripes into the room through the tattered blinds is sunset-orange. Ezreal's body is warm against her, his scent comforting and familiar, even though she knows they both desperately need to bathe. She is tired, face buried in his chest.

When she has the courage to lean back, to look at his face, his eyes are closed. She would mistake him for asleep if not for his fingers rubbing against her scalp. For a long moment she just watches him, taking in his jawline, his bare throat. The relaxed curve of his body, of his hips. There is a beam of sunlight streaking over them both and catching dust in the air, but even the shadows are not so dark.

Ezreal opens his eyes, bright, vivid blue. “Hey, Lux” he says, quiet.

“Hey,” Lux replies. Her voice is raw.

For a moment she thinks the spell is broken and that Ezreal will get up. Instead his hand falls to the small of her back and he pulls her closer, leaning in to meet her. She breathes in deep, grateful that she is able to, now.

“Feeling better?”

She nods, too tired to feel appropriately mortified.

Ezreal shifts to get more comfortable, a useless effort on the floor. Lux thinks better of suggesting they move to the bed.

Her mind searches for words. All she manages is, “I'm so sorry.”

“You're okay,” he repeats, and for a flicker of panic, it all rushes back to her. She is *not* okay, and she has so, so much to be sorry for.

She blurts out, “it's not, I'm so sorry,” but he interrupts her with a tightened hug.

“It's okay. As long as you're okay. I l–“

–A sound cuts him off, clumsy footsteps and creaking steps outside the door. Then, from right outside it, Ekko's voice calling out “Lux?”

She winces at the volume, but it isn't anything that will get them in trouble. He just doesn't realize they're in the first room of the hall. She calls back to him, “I'm in here.”

The door creaks open, and she hears Ekko snort. Belatedly, as she stares at the amused arch of Ezreal's eyebrow, it occurs to her that she is laying on the floor with her ex-boyfriend, feet away
from a mattress.

Ekko gets over it fast enough. “Katarina sent word that Ahri is alright. Thought you'd want to know.”

Lux tries to sit up, but Ezreal's hand twitches and she thinks better of it.

Lux meets Ezreal's eyes, but can't read his expression. She closes her eyes to processing the information. “If she went back for Ahri, do you think Leblanc knows what Katarina is up to? That she's been working with us? Though we hardly knew that ourselves, it's still—”

“—Stop,” Ezreal grunts.

Lux quiets, obedient. It's almost painful to talk, anyway, though she can't stop her mind from running theories – and results, God, the results are such a horrifying thought. What will Jarvan say when she returns home?

“Katarina said she'd be back in a couple of days, so we're just resting up.” Ekko says, his voice drifting through the room. “I think Taric is cooking, if you're hungry. You should eat something.”

“Yeah,” Ezreal says. “We'll be down in a minute.”

Ekko sounds doubtful when he mutters, “sure,” but he closes the door and pads back down the stairs even so.

She can hear birds chirping out the window, the only ambient sound beyond the whispers of the building itself and the quiet, quiet sound of people on other floors. Her mouth goes dry. She wants to kiss him, but knows better.

Apparently he doesn't. Ezreal leans forward to press his lips to hers in a simple, fluid motion. It's familiar. Parting her lips for his and tilting her head is an easy habit to fall back on. There is a desperation to it, a plea for something stable and comforting; if he realizes, he doesn't mind. She's not entirely sure the desperation is entirely her own.

He holds her tight, his body lined up against hers. She can feel the rise and fall of his chest, her own. Each of his fingers, pressed into the arch of her back. His breath, warm on her mouth when they momentarily part for air, then the hot wet of his tongue at her bottom lip. It's all so soothing that it takes her a moment to realize that his gem is circulating their mana together, regulating her. Maybe that is why it's so soothing. She wonders if he even realizes what he is doing, the instinctual idiot.

For being the one who slides his hand down to her butt, it's is vaguely amusing that he is the one to say, between her kisses that greedily try to stop him from saying anything at all, “need to – stop.”

“I don't want to,” Lux whispers urgently, but Ezreal tilts his head away from her. His lips pull thin; his jaw clenches.

“You need to eat something.”

Lux swallows her disappointment. Reminds herself she has no right to feel anything like betrayal. She pulls herself away from him and up to her feet on trembling legs. She hears him drawing up behind her, but refuses to look back the whole way down to the first floor, where everyone is waiting.
Chapter End Notes

My fav things to write, apparently: entire-chapter-long-panic-attacks and ill timed makeouts.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It's nearly two weeks of surreal domestic living. Once again, she is playing the waiting game. Lux does not even feel cooped up – not when she can see the sun rise and fall each day. Some days she even hears people in the streets, their conversations so gossipy that the voices do not even make her nervous of being found by Noxian soldiers.

She was right about Ekko's bruise. His chest is a sickening deep purple with yellow-green patches at the edges, despite Sona and Taric's best efforts. She catches him wincing every now and then, when he moves too fast, but also sees the way Sona's eyes track him with care. He also lifts his shirt to show her at every opportunity, as if it is something he takes pride in. ("I think I can get her next time," he says, and Lux can only smile and nod helplessly.)

Taric does most of the cooking, and though Lux vows to pick up some slack, she often meanders into the kitchen with that intent as he is half-way through preparing the meal. Lux isn't sure who is responsible for the food available to them, but they are either more generous than she would expect, or possibly just want to ensure that Riven eats well. Either way, there is a large bag of rice and plenty of garden vegetables. Spices are a bit lacking, but no one is in the mood to be picky.

Riven keeps to herself, though she has become willing to sit in the same room as them instead of shutting herself away.

Lux has another panic attack after the first week, but it comes to her while she is showering and she is able to keep herself quiet. Her magic is still foreign in her veins, and she cannot stop thinking about how long it has been since she sent word to Jarvan. Word of her failed infiltration, a clear act of war, may have already reached him without even a chance of giving her side of the story.

It almost comes as a surprise to be able to shake Ezreal's presence. Maybe he thinks she needs space. Maybe he is afraid of her. She resists the urge to tip-toe to the room he has claimed for himself each night. Assures herself she is simply too accustomed to sleeping with company, these days, used to dozing off to the sound of Ekko breathing.

She is too afraid to test her magic. She might burn the building to the ground. And there is a small part of her, afraid that it will be nothing but light again.

“What do you suppose this building was for?” Lux asks, towards the end of the second week, seated in the sofa in the living room, because she is less likely to cry when she is surrounded by others.

“Hotel, maybe?” Ekko offers. He is sitting on the floor in front of her.

Taric is seated at the dining room table, chair turned to face the living room through the wide archway. He says, “or perhaps an apartment complex?”

“Not enough bathrooms,” Ekko points out, the cocks his head to the side. “Maybe a... Dorm? Don't feel like anything that fancy'd be in the slums though.”

Riven is feeling social today, but remains silent from her seat on the bricks bordering the fireplace.
There is a smile tugging at Sona's lips, and she tucks her head towards her shoulder as if to hide it. She is sitting across the room from Lux, though she floats in the air as easily as Janna, her etwahl taking a light and simple form, spread across her lap. When she looks back up, her eyes go straight to Ezreal's; he is standing beside Lux, despite the open seat beside her.

Lux follows the look, raising an eyebrow.

“Brothel,” Ezreal says, sounding revelatory.

Ekko seems unaffected, and just says, “hard to know the difference between brothel and hotel based on layout, I guess.”

“Nah,” Ezreal says, with confidence, then more firmly, “brothel.”

Sona is giggling, hand over her mouth, and signs something to Taric, who snickers in response. Lux is too emotionally drained to feel frustrated or left out, and just looks at Ezreal, expectantly.

“Found the client list,” Ezreal explains. “Under some floorboards upstairs.”

“Ezreal,” Lux scolds him, reflexive. Then, after a moment, “why were you tearing up floorboards in the first place?”

He shrugs.

For the first time Lux can recall seeing in person, Riven laughs.

The front door opens and closes so fast that it’s a miracle anyone made it through. Katarina throws down the hood of her cloak, but seems to lose her dramatic flair for a moment, caught off guard by Riven’s laughter.

“... Yes?” Riven prompts her.

Katarina recovers with severity, shaking her head once in a quick snap that her hair flows after like a fluttering crimson flag. “Up and at ’em. Time for a big job.”

“Are we your hires?” Lux asks, but is already rising to her feet. “You really must give us more warning.”

“Don't waste time complaining,” Katarina says, terse, but not unkind. “Get your things, get ready. I'll explain as we go. You won't be coming back.”

They room flurries into movement. Ekko has to run upstairs and back to grab his bat. Ezreal has to retrieve his jacket from one room and his gauntlet from another. Lux slips into her shoes, her wand already ritually in her hand like a comfort blanket.

Before they leave, Katarina pauses. “Illusions, if you please,” she drawls, mocking Lux with the formality.

“There are too many of us,” Lux says, feeling put on the spot. She does not want to admit how wildly out of control her magic may be. “I could get maybe half of us, and not very convincingly.”
“Oh,” Katarina says, simply. She turns her gaze away from Lux and almost as if she is talking to herself, adds, “I thought you were better than that.”

Ezreal mutters something rude under his breath, and Lux sees Sona’s hand shift in her direction as if about to soothe her.

“Fine,” Lux snaps. She appreciates what Katarina is doing for them, she does, but allies need better communication and more time to prepare. She knows it isn’t going to work, knows that this outburst is going to come out making herself look bad, but at least then Katarina will understand her limitations. Even before the fire, this would be too large an undertaking.

She clenches her fists, knuckles white with her irritation more than the strain of casting. She draws from her mana, shifting light around them.

It feels like painting, and she pushes the brush in her mind fiercely, rearranging features and colors. She runs through all of them in her mind, one by one. Slight changes to their bodies, slimness or muscle where there wasn't before. Dark where there was light, light where there was dark. Taric, Sona, Ezreal, Ekko.

The magic is flowing with more ease than she had expected. She feels her brow relaxing as she concentrates. She leans away from the fire-red hair she had given herself before, and this time branches the opposite way. Longer hair, fluid and blue. Blue, she thinks, desperately, blue like mana, like he pretty marks on Ezreal's cheeks that she has had to hide away today, like the surface of the sea that always sparkles with light. Something to put out the fires she may make again.

She had not intended to cover more than her own party, but it feels natural to move onto the next, onto Katarina and Riven.

She lets out a breath when she is done, one she had not realized she was holding. She crosses her arms defiantly, setting her gaze on an entirely different Katarina. “There,” she says. “Pleased?”

Katarina smirks, a strange familiarity on the face of a stranger. She cannot seem to hold back a laugh, and even Riven's shoulders quiver slightly. “Very,” she says, and throws open the door.

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They do not sneak through underground tunnels, but instead walk straight through the slums. The streets get busier and busier the further they get. Lux is vigilant, watching her comrades to check their illusions, checking reactions to them, feeling out her own magic.

Katarina does not go over the plan as much as Lux would like. The woman quiets each time they are near crowds, which turns out to be nearly the entire walk. The crowds get bigger and bigger the further they go. Past the slums, into the city center.

It is alarming to be so close to the heart of the city again, but Katarina leads them further. The crowds cease to be random civilians crossing paths. Soon they are just as much a part of the crowd as all the others around them, all moving forward with the flow of foot traffic, unable to stop or move an inch without bumping shoulders with a stranger.

Ekko's hand reaches for hers instinctively – he looks as surprised as she does when she glances down, but offers a tentative smile and does not let go. Ezreal's hand grabs her other, moments later, and Lux can only meet his scowl with vague amusement.
There isn't time to linger on the small, sweet moments.

They reach the coliseum.

It's an imposing building, tall with decorative jagged spires. They are uneven, but Lux does not mistake this as poor craftsmanship. There are intricate carvings into the borders between each story, depicting fierce battles. If not for the horrors they told, they would almost be beautiful. And completely ruined by large banners advertising *The Fleshing.*

Lux remembers this from Xin Zhao's files. She whispers, vehemently, “why are we here?” But Katarina is too far ahead to hear her. Ezreal's fingers tighten around hers.

The crowds hardly thin out at the front desk, no matter how many people bustle past them, buying and flashing tickets, filtering up stairs and through doors to what must be the seating around the arena.

Katarina steps aside, letting others pass by as Lux and the others find each other and regroup.

“Your tickets, everyone,” she says, fanning out a set. They each take one. “What a special event you’ve been given the privilege to witness!”

She doesn't have to explain further. The words are printed on the tickets. The vastayan fox. There is some kind of nine-tails, nine-lives pun for advertising, which Ezreal is quick to point out as an improper mixing of myths.

Lux cannot muster amusement. It is deeply unsettling for Ahri to be help captive, advertised, like this. A person should not be entertainment against their will, and the fact that it works churns her stomach. The fact that the crowds are here, laughing and cheering and chatting amongst themselves. Every delicate inch of positivity that Lux feels for Noxus wash away with moments like this.

She cannot help but picture Xin Zhao here when he was young.

“And such nice seats,” Riven deadpans, not even invested enough in the act to look at Katarina as she speaks. Her whole body is tense, on edge to be surrounded by so many people. It must have been some time since she was in public, let alone being bumped by each passerby.

Katarina leads them downstairs, and they wade through the crowd through even smaller walk-ways and aisles on the way to their seats. They are close, just a small partition keeping them from the wide arena. Past the partition is a wall of guards, shoulder to shoulder. They stand so still with their spears that they could easily be mistaken for statues, for empty armor, but Lux can see the minute movements of their breathing. She can see the flash of their neck between helmet and cheaply designed armor.

The arena is vast and round, the floor made of dirt and little else. Despite this, the seats are comfortable, more high quality than Lux would have expected.

People file in all around them. Not just warriors, overly dedicated to the cause, overly fascinated by violence. But civilians. Mothers and fathers and children, cheering like they are going to watch a play.

Katarina does not point, but nods to a set of booth seats. They are five stories up, the only seats so
high. They are decorated so carefully that Lux does not need to squint to comprehend who sits there. Swain and Leblanc, taking their seats with Beatrice ever-present on Swain’s arm.

Her blood runs cold.

“I’ll kill him,” she says, the thought occurring to her as naturally as the tide turns. She is not afraid of being overheard with how loudly the crowds overwhelm the arena.

Ezreal, though he does not look like Ezreal, looks her way, alarmed.

Ekko says, “uh.”

Katarina, however, does not seem perturbed in the slightest. “That’s my right and I’ll thank you to leave it to me. You’re here on a rescue mission. Or did you forget?”

Lux cannot think of a witty retort, and does not want to give her anything else. She swallows her annoyance and tries to settle her stomach.

“Breathe,” Ezreal murmurs. She knows how to regulate her own breathing without help – the reminder is condescending. Instead of being annoyed she just obeys. He holds her hand, and she feels mana flowing between them, regulated through his crystal without a second thought.

The announcer steps into the arena, his voice projected into the cheering crowd. Lux can hardly hear him over the whistling and hollering. “The vastayan fox,” she makes out, and after a long, dramatic pause, “and an old favorite, out of retirement!”

Chapter End Notes

I'll keep myself brief here, but I'm getting "You ready, Starlight?" tattooed on my fucking eyeballs okay
“Not yet,” Katarina says, again.

Lux shifts in her seat with discomfort. Ezreal's hand on hers is no longer a comfort; she feels as if he is holding her down, as if he is afraid she will launch herself over this partition if he doesn't hold her in place.

Ahri is four consecutive fights in, and exhausted. It would not be quite so bad if she were well rested and well fed, but Lux is certain the past two weeks have not been as kind to her.

She is more powerful with each death she causes, but it does not replenish her lost sleep, does not give her muscles time to recover.

In the arena she tears a man's throat out with her teeth, her eyes glowing an eerie white, all the color gone from them. The markings on her face are looking less like whiskers and more like scratches with the blood that streaks across them. At least it isn't her own.

Her hair is messy, as if it has not been let loose from the same braid for two weeks, even in sleep. It is matted and knotted and frizzy with the wind. Lux has always thought Ahri's fighting was so elegant and careful, her beauty kept intact by calculated movements.

She can hardly wrap her head around this animalistic violence, not when she knows that the killing is what keeps her human. She cannot wrap her head around cheering for it. The only context she could accept is that it is what is keeping Ahri alive, but she knows the audience does not cheer for that. They scream louder each time her body heaves with the struggle of raising herself back up off a body.

“Not yet,” Katarina says after the ninth battle, clearly growing weary of reminding her.

On the arena, Ahri's body heaves with every breath. The announcer calls out his mock sympathies to her, to the audience. She nearly falls, catching herself at the last moment. Lux cannot imagine she is hearing a word the man says.

The old favorite is coming. Ionian versus Ionian.

Ahri's ears twitch. Her eyes are sharp as they dart to the lifting gate, but Lux sees the unnatural light in them flicker in recognition.

Zelos exits the gates. He is in poor shape, malnourished and in dirty clothes. His hair is long, but not cared for and tied back sloppy. The set of his shoulders is tight as he grips a sword in each hand. He is resigned to this, Lux thinks. To killing or being killed.

How long was he in the arenas? How many men did he have to kill? How many Noxians? How many other captives?

How long did he sit in a cell before being thrown back into it?
Each possible answer is tragic in different ways. Lux watches the way Ahri's body straightens up in greeting.  

Zelos bows to her. Ahri bows back without hesitation, without fear of a surprise attack. At the very least, the Noxians cannot take this from them.

Katarina takes in a deep breath, beside Lux. “Well,” she says, rising to her feet, but does not finish the thought.

Lux feels like she is being thrown into a storm. She opens her mouth, but is instantly cut off by Riven lunging past her in a flurry of cloak and hood, vaulting over the partition and into the arena, just as Lux had wanted to do herself.

The guards are too startled to react quick enough to her. Not that it matters. The blow comes not from Riven, but from behind them as Katarina surges forward, pushing her knives into the backs of their necks. She takes out two guards, and as they fall, Riven is already grappling another.

Lux does not know where Talon comes from, or how, just that the four guards down the row that step towards Riven are quickly face down in their own blood, and Talon is already moving on to Riven's other side.

Lux looks back to see Taric and Sona making their way forward and then past her, climbing over the partition as well.

“Now or never, I guess,” Ekko says, though Lux can hear the swallowed back fear. He follows them as if he is not injured, as if this is in any way his fight.

When Lux looks to Ezreal, he manages a shrug for her, then rises together with her. They have to let each others hands go to climb to partition. In the arena, Lux is struck by just how many guards there are. They border the entire arena's perimeter, and that's just the ones stationed to keep the audience safe. Who knows how many more there are?

Katarina moves fast, digging her knife into another guard and leaping to him to retrieve it. Once inside the arena, she falls shoulder to shoulder with Talon and Riven.

“I have to drop it,” Lux says. Katarina is terrible at explaining her plans, and Lux would like to say she deserves whatever fallout she gets from that. She does not think anyone could mistake Katarina or Talon's knife-work, not with the exposure it's gotten from the League of Legends. Still, she does not want extra guilt on her shoulders.

“Do it,” Katarina says.

Lux's illusions fall away like broken glass, like chipping paint. They wash away into nothing, and Lux feels the distant pressure from holding them in place release. She should be more tired, she thinks with no time to linger in the confusion.

There is a hush that falls over the crowd for just a split second. Then they are in uproar, yelling and cheering in equal measure. Only in Noxus, Lux thinks, would the patriotic cheer to see an enemy.

But that's what the arena is for. To watch enemies die in. This audience revels in the suffering of combatants, even if it comes in exchange for numerous Noxian lives.
“The cavalry’s here,” Ahri calls out, to Zelos. They are still too far apart for him to take it, but she throws her hand out towards him anyway. “Time for us to go, yeah?”

The confusion is clear on his face. Even Ahri is sounding startled and too openly relieved.

In Zelos' eyes, there is a vague recognition – Lux is sure even captives in cells know of Champions. But even if he recognizes Lux, recognizes her Demacian companions, there are more in her party. Including some of his own captors.

His eyes flit around the arena as if searching for an explanation, as if seeking comfort in anything familiar and finding nothing.

Except perhaps the guards, rushing towards them. They seem to spur Zelos into action. He hurries to join Ahri, the two of them facing the guards directly across from Lux's group that are running across the arena grounds.

Lux looks up past them, to the booth. Swain is on his feet, shouting down as he leans over the railing. She cannot make out his words. She wishes he would fall. Beside him, Leblanc is standing as well. Lux wonders if this means she is just as surprised.

She had known they would come to the dungeon looking for him. How much of their information is hers? And where is she getting it? Somehow Lux has trouble suspecting Katarina. Her mind races, but she knows now is not the time and has to force herself back into reality.

Swain points down at them, Beatrice leaping from his arm and flying their way.

“So what's the plan, exactly?” Ezreal asks, already firing on approaching guards. Unlike most of the others, his magic does not pierce their armor, only slowing them down.

Katarina's trio splits up. Katarina's knives launch into a guard, then her body follows to knock him down, already throwing the next knife to the next guard. For every guard she doesn't hit it seems as if Talon is already there, a coordinated dance of silent communication, each protecting the other, both protecting Riven. Protecting all of them.

“Don't die,” Riven says, “and follow me.”

The raven swoops towards Riven, her talons outstretched. Riven blocks her with a gauntlet-clad arm, not so much as wincing as the exposed part of her arm still takes the scratch. Lux twists her baton, forcing it fluid as she throws. Her own magic frightens her, but it does what it is supposed to, passing through Riven like air before it is called back to Lux's hand. For a moment just long enough to duck her head and shift her arm to a better angle, Beatrice is repelled by Lux's shield.

Ezreal follows up, shooting Beatrice away from Riven with precise aim. The raven is fast enough to dodge, but it's retreat gives Riven the time to see clearly. She does not waste time with gratitude, just nods towards the entrance gate Zelos had been brought in through. “That's the way.”

They have to fight their way there, guards swarming them from either side. They are decidedly thinned out from Talon and Katarina, staying further behind to take them out. Ahri and Zelos take down far fewer before they are falling back to Lux's side, but she cannot blame them. They are in no condition to be fighting at all, let alone playing defense for her.
Ekko is struggling. He keeps up with their movement across the arena, but Lux can see the way he is only dodging and ducking from guards, leaving them to others. Taric and Sona make up for him, the both of them moving as if keeping to the group's fringes, deflecting and redirecting the enemies, striking them when they can.

Sona's etwahl has turned to a small harp that she can carry in her hands, no longer splayed flat, and the way Sona tugs its strings is vicious, the sharp cuts she leaves on the bodies of those she never touched haunting. Those piercing chords are nearly all Lux can hear beyond the clinks of armor and the screaming, chanting audience.

Some guards have abandoned giving chase just to quell the audience, having to keep over-eager civilians from joining the unexpected battle. Lux does not let her hopes rise to the sight of the few who fight back against the guards, does not allow herself the faith that it was for anything more than the right to attack her.

“Just survive,” Riven tells them, grunting out the words as she impales a guard on her broken blade. The edge of it is blunted and jagged, ripping out of him with none of the grace a normal sword has. Even Zelos seems to wince at the sight of blood pouring over the engraved runes down the side.

“Survive and escape. That's all that matters right now.”

Lux allows Zelos and Ahri to pass her, not wanting them to be unprotected at the outside of the group.

Now, Lux thinks, seems like a good time for fire. This should keep some away, keep them from being followed. If she can get the wall high enough, maybe it will even keep Beatrice away, though Ezreal is doing well to keep her back, practically walking backwards with his focus on her.

The fire had come naturally when she had called for light, and so she calls for it the same way she always does. She thinks of something the keep the enemy back, something to keep the rest of them safe.

What she gets instead is water. At first she thinks it is light, a her heart bursts with a quick wave of relief, only to crash back down into disappointment. The shimmering of the lights on the surface had tricked her. What she conjures is a tidal wave from her wand, water from seemingly nowhere crashing down to the arena grounds, fast enough to trip up the closest guards.

Water is no help at all, she laments, watching as Ezreal stumbles on uneven terrain as well. He opts to avoid it completely, and disappears – then reappears at her side, on the dry ground.

She hears him mutter, “nice,” so quietly that she believes it sincere.

The dirt ground beneath the guards is turning muddy, slowing them in their armor. Lux hears footsteps on stone before she processes that they have reached the gate. Riven and the others ahead of her are inside the hallway and moving on quickly. In only a couple of feet, Lux will be there, too.

Katarina jumps from atop discarded body to body, as if disdainful of the mud on her shoes more than blood. Lux thinks of playing pretend like the floor was lava as a child, but there is no fondness to that thought when lava feels just as real a risk of her magic. “Maybe past your own allies, next time?” Katarina suggests, annoyed.

Talon keeps pace with her without complaint, but says, “good thinking.” Much too quickly he is up at Lux's side. He grabs her arm and, ignoring Ezreal's shout of protest, shoves her back towards
Katarina and the chasing guards.

There is no time for indignance. Lux calls the magic again, almost in a panic for how close the guards are. Katarina bounds past her as she is casting. Lux bites out, “I don't like using magic out of spite, you know.”

Katarina laughs. “You've had nothing but spite in you for years,” she says, and Lux cannot retort. Instead she unleashes her magic again, conjuring waters as fast and strong and cold as she can. The feel of it is so drastically different from the white heat of light, from the uncontrollable bursts of fire. It is fluid, but torrential, bringing the guards crashing down at her ankles as she turns to catch up with the others.

The sound of her boots on the floor is a comfort, but she knows their pursuers will be upon her soon. Colder, Lux thinks, hearing the sound of their armor as they clamor back up to their feet, hearing the splash of the mud as they pull themselves up from it. Colder, she insists to herself, pushing the light away from herself as hard as she can, pushing out her magic with as little familiarity as she possibly can. She thinks of Anivia on the fields, of Sejuani frozen in the Citadel. Of drawing her light from the icy air of Freljord.

She flicks her wand upwards, and ice sprouts from the ground at her beckoning. Sharp, jagged spires climb from floor to ceiling, blocking off her pursuers completely.

It has also blocked nearly all the light to this hall. There is a dim blue tint to the room, but she can only make out the faint traces of her party, catching their breath.

“Won't hold long,” Lux says. She is not sure if this is true or not.

“Need light,” Riven says.

Lux hesitates. She begins to say, “I don't–” but Ezreal grabs her hand.

Abruptly, Lux remembers the caverns, so long ago. Violet crystal lights on Ezreal's flushed cheeks and his magic capturing hers so easily it had angered her. She feels the pull this time, with every opportunity to reject it, but to regulate her magic through his gauntlet is nearly second nature.

Maybe she has been wrong about his gauntlet. It is not a magic borrowed, just a focus. A regulator. The magic that flows through it is Ezreal's, unique to him and no one else. No lost kingdom could compare.

Her magic is spread through touch between them, his gauntlet bursting into brightness.

They don't spare a moment. Riven still leads down the straight corridor in a hurry, Ezreal rushing up to keep pace behind her, arm held out to light the way. His other hand does not let go of Lux's, and she is forced to push past Taric, Ekko, Sona, then Ahri and Zelos. She does not like the ragged sound of breathing from the two, nor the quiet pained intake from Ekko.

They will rest when they are able, she assures herself.

Though the path is straight, the light helps. The footing is uneven and sloppy compared to so much of the arena's ornate design. When guards begin to filter in, their footsteps echoing down the way,
the light allows Riven to take care of them with ease. The green glow of the runes on her sword would not be enough to light the way, but they are still vivid as the sword pieces itself together again.

She swings as wide as she is able in this space, and two feet away the guards still fall as if toppled by the wind. She jumps to the first, blade driving into his chest. She moves faster, now, as if her balance is better with her sword in one piece, whirling to follow suit on the next bodies before they can rise.

Lux still sees the way her body struggles to rise back up. Even so, they run towards the distant light.

They break into a room no bigger than a cell in the dungeon, and gated off just the same.

“Of course they remember to lock it behind them,” Katarina complains, her voice coming from so close behind Lux that her shoulders jump.

Taric steps forward, shield rising and shoulders dropping in preparation to ram the iron bars. Instead, Sona passes him. It takes one strum of her fingers, lithe across the strings of her harp. The bars fall, an opening sliced by a clean line. Lux pictures blood beading up at the edge like it does when Sona cuts flesh, but shakes the image from her mind.

Riven has to reorient herself for just a moment, and then she is off and running again. These rooms are lit by torches, and Lux feels her magic slipping back into herself like it had been borrowed and unspent, Ezreal’s gauntlet dimming slowly.

Riven’s voice is a hurried snarl over her shoulder. “Tunnels?”

Talon is the one to call back, “not from here.”

They pass down halls, eerily devoid of guards. Lux wonders where they have moved to, certainly lying in wait somewhere.

“Then we split,” Katarina says, firmly.

“Split up?!” Ekko repeats in disbelief.

“Easier to run as one,” Talon says, like a practiced motto.

“What about illusions?” Taric suggests, with frightfully little urgency.

“I can’t,” Lux insists. She is too afraid to trust what feels like a deep well of mana inside her. Her mind feels too frenzied to work with the resources.

“Both,” Ahri says. Her voice sounds much too haggard. “Disguises as we split into smaller groups.”

“They'll know where we're coming from,” Ezreal says.

Katarina groans, impatient. “Then kill them and move on! Hurry up and make your decision.”

The passing scenery is shifting into something similar, hall by hall becoming more like the dungeon. Holding cells for combatants must be near. And surely, the exit.

Lux wants to scream, but forces it back. “Fine,” she snaps. Her illusions snap into place with finality,
crashing over everyone without any of the thought or finesse of before. There is no artistry to these
disguises in her urgency – they cannot be what they were before and they cannot be themselves,
either. They are sloppy, she knows.

“Good enough,” Talon says, gaze flickering across them.

“It'll wear off the further you get from me,” Lux reminds them with no energy for kindness.

Katarina does not respond. She does not even give them time to determine their groupings – or a
rendezvous point. She just joins Riven at the head of the room they are in, the two of them
shouldering open a door to the outside.

The sun is blinding compared to the dim firelight indoors, and Lux has to squint to get her bearings.
The half-circle of guards around them is no surprise, nor is their quick dispatchment.

Whatever Leblanc knew, it didn't include today's actions. She would have been more prepared. She
would have known better than to underestimate Katarina and Talon like this.

They move fast, but no longer as a group.

Lux expects Ezreal to cling to her side. She is not sure if it is panic or relief that floods her when he
grabs Ekko by the arm and tugs him away with Sona. At least they have a medic with them.

Taric is the one that comes to her side, calling for Zelos to join them. The Ionian man's eyes are wide
and frantic, but he obeys. Lux can only spare a glance around, but already knows that Katarina,
Talon, and Riven will be stuck together like glue.

The only one left is Ahri, who meets Lux's eyes across the distance. Her clothes are torn and her skin
covered in dirt and scratches. The roll of her body is a feigned attempt at confidence as she cocks her
head back and brags, “I'm the fastest.”

“Stay with us,” Zelos says, already taking steps backwards to get out of the area. Perhaps he is
latching on to the closest thing he has to a comrade here. The only other Ionian, the only other
captive.

Ahri shakes her head. They all accept this far, far too easily. The others are already out of sight, and
they need to follow suit.

Once more, they leave her behind to make time for them.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this was pretty soon after the last, but...
They do not run into as many other guards as Lux had expected. Perhaps Ahri did well to thin them out. Or maybe they are just the most fortunate of the bunch, maybe the others are against bigger numbers.

Her mind desperately wants to conjure up those images. Ezreal is not as strong as he thinks, not as immortal as he was in the League. Ekko is hurt. She has to put her faith in Sona, and even that is impossible to take comfort in.

Lux does not want to have traded her for Zelos.

She does not want to have traded any number of her own people for Zelos.

It is difficult to worry about the three Noxians. She cannot deny that a part of her suspects them. Going through so much to help her rescue Zelos, then splitting off alone. If they are just playing her, it would be easy for them to report straight back to their leader, now. It is suspicious that they did not branch off to keep an eye on Zelos – or on any of them.

What Katarina has done, if she is sincere, is vast and terrifying. She will be as much an exile as Riven for opposing Swain so openly, for allying herself with Demacian representatives.

Lux wishes for that sort of bravery.

She does not want to get married.

It feels like such a minuscule problem.

The guards that do chase them only appear early as they flee, still recognizing them, still suspicious of anyone out of place, no matter their appearance. They are able to shake some of them with hectic weaving through surroundings – others they have to kill.

As they filter into the busy, clueless crowds on the street, it is harder to be seen. Ahri's plan was smart. There are even guards that Lux brushes by like nothing, guards shouting and calling out false descriptions of who to chase, looking right over her head as she bustles past with as much of a civilian air as she can manage.

“We should leave the city,” Taric murmurs. His arm is pressed up against her just to be sure they know exactly where the other is. Zelos is trailing behind them, sometimes stumbling up against her back as if shoved by the busy market street crowd, but Lux knows it is just another assurance that he is there.

“How will we meet up with the others?” Zelos asks, and Lux looks back in acknowledgment.

“Dowsing, if they don't find us first.”

It is hard to argue with Taric's confidence.
Escaping through the city border looks difficult. Unlike the guards roaming the streets, flowing to and from the coliseum, the ones stationed here have time to examine each passerby closely. They hear each report instead of just those shouted loud enough.

Lux knows her illusion could not muster invisibility on the three of them after how carelessly she has spent her mana. Even now she can feel her illusions pulling at her from the distance and knows the others cannot be far from her, even if they are out of sight. She cannot risk dropping their images to protect only her own.

Zelos pulls the two of them aside before they reach the inspection. “We wait for a merchant cart,” he says. “Less suspicious to come and go with purpose like that. We may even be able to sneak into their cargo unnoticed.”

“We don’t know how long it will take for that opportunity to arise,” Lux points out.

“And it would require quite a distraction,” Taric says, considering.

“Maybe I could alter the illusions so we appear as guards ourselves,” Lux says, with no real confidence in her ability to do so believably, nor to follow up the picture with a convincing act.

A moment later there is a thunderous boom nearby. The ground shakes beneath their feet, rubble on the pavement jumping and falling. Lux sees a smoke cloud in the distance.

“Good a distraction as any,” Zelos says, “but drop the plan and rush it.”

Guards run in the direction of the smoke, leaving fewer behind. Lux imagines they will have to take them down, but she is proven wrong again. Noxians are an unruly bunch, and though it does little to improve her opinion of them, she is grateful for it now. A hundred waiting civilians, merchants, travelers, surely less a threat than her group, all have the same idea.

The crowd becomes a restless wave, moving too quickly for the remaining guards to manage, overwhelming them, pushing past them, shoulder to shoulder. They flow through the checkpoint yelling and cursing, taking the opportunity with the same brevity of fleeing criminals. It is easy to meld into them. Lux loses sight of Taric and Zelos but trusts she will find them again, and the opportunity is too perfect to let slip by.

She wonders which of her own caused the explosion.

They have to keep moving.

Many of the civilians filter out into caravans, whether planned or in solidarity of their crime. Lux moves forward as swiftly as she can on foot, putting as much distance possible between her and the city. A scene like that and she is sure guards will be on the road as well.

She makes it just past the line where the forest begins to the south of the city, and keeps in the shallows until she finds Taric and Zelos. It does not take long, the two of them hurrying to catch up to her. Lux watches the sapphire in Taric's hand dim as he pockets it, and the three of them make their way further into the shade of the trees.

She feels her illusions on the others slipping away the further they go. They are not keeping pace. Each step further away feels like pulling at the restraints of her heart, gut-wrenchingly forcing herself
to choose her mission over the people she is worried for.

“I think we should head to the Institute,” Taric suggests, as if this is nothing, as if it is not his lover and his best friend that they are distancing from. “Neutral ground.”

Lux points out, “it isn't, anymore.”

He does not have a retort for this, but even so, that is where they head.

The exhaustion weighs her down, but they travel for a full day without stopping for rest. She hopes the others are smart enough to do the same. She knows that it is in part from Taric's magic, keeping them healthy enough to keep from collapsing. Particularly Zelos, who shows deeper fatigue than the two of them combined.

Her illusions fade away without her realizing, and she is so distracted by the ache of her limbs that she is not consciously aware of when it happens; to her own group, or to the others as she loses track of them entirely.

When they finally concede to rest, only because Taric cannot push aside his own exhaustion to support Zelos over his shoulder any longer, Lux is the first to take watch in the sunlight. Her head nods, heavy on her shoulders. Her eyelids close for moments frighteningly long.

She falls asleep. Thankfully, the arm that jostles her awake, though rough, is not the enemy.

She still attacks, reflexive. Talon pulls away as soon as her eyes snap open, dodging a panicked burst of her light. Beside her, Taric and Zelos are still asleep. The sun is setting – she must have dozed for hours. This mission is far too scattered for her to revel in the guilt. She only has room for the relief as Katarina crouches down to offer her water from a canteen.

“You moved fast,” Riven says, and Lux is not sure if it is praise or a complaint.

Lux takes a drink, then hands the canteen back to Katarina. “Have you seen the others?” She asks.

Katarina shakes her head, then straightens up. “If they're smart,” she says at length, “they'll have made use of my distraction.”

Lux is still too tired to keep quiet for the sake of looking hyper-competent. She mutters, “so it was you.”

“Well,” Talon says.

“The Crimson Elite is more than just the three of us,” Katarina says, sniffing like she is offended.

Lux blinks. Both at the title, and the idea. She had not considered that Katarina had followers beyond these two. She supposes it is not surprising, given the popularity of her father. With her own fame, before and after the League.

So Swain is not so universally approved of. But it is still hard to picture her followers, however many there may be, approving of this alliance.

“We'll have to do some trimming, though,” Talon says.
Riven looks like she wants to say something, but only gets as far as “your,” before Katarina’s glare cuts her off.

Her eyes are as sharp as her knives, arms crossed over her chest. Her lips purse tight. “Indeed,” she says, leaving no room for the conversation to continue.

They allow an hour longer of rest for Zelos. Taric is allowed to sleep for half that time, then woken gently by Lux’s hand on his face.

“Wake up,” she tells him, as soft as she is able. “We need you to find the others.”

He is quick to shake off the sleep. The sapphire he draws from his pocket is a mesmerizing shade of blue.

He does not need any combined efforts find those so familiar to him.

“Closer to the mountains,” Taric says. “Opposite from us.”

They are too far into the forest to see the clearing by now, but Lux still finds her gaze lifting in that direction.

“Traveling west.”

“You can tell that much?” Lux asks. Her gaze flickers over to Zelos. Even with less reliable ties to him, the magic had been so much weaker. The difference is staggering for something she had found so impressive to begin with.

“Sona keeps crystals of my own with her to make things easier,” he says, and Lux is surprised that it is fondness more than fear that paints his expression. “Ekko is with her, and Ezreal. He’s just as easy to find.”

Lux tenses and forces her expression even, “easy?”

Taric looks thoughtful, taking a moment to articulate his thoughts internally. “His magic,” he says, eventually. Then takes another unbearable moment. “It isn't precisely like mine. But I imagine he could learn. There are... Similarities.”

“Because of that gauntlet,” Lux murmurs.

Taric nods. “I can't ascertain if his magic was always going to grow this way, but he's been filtering it through that crystal for so long, now. It's the beginnings of gem-craft.”

“Fascinating,” Katarina says, dryly.

Lux scowls, but still changes the subject obediently. “And Ahri?”

This time Taric holds his hand out for her. He knows her, but not as well, Lux supposes. She takes his hand and watches the sapphire shimmer.

She watches his brow furrow with increasing worry, and all he is able to offer is “Alive. Outside the border. I think.”
“I'll take it,” Lux says, hoping to soothe the creases of worry across his brow. It only somewhat works.

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They make their way further west, eventually having to leave the cover of the trees. Going west, then north, instead of cutting across has added time to their journey, but Lux is firm that it was in their best interest.

“How many of you are there?” Lux asks eventually, as they walk.

Talon looks to Katarina as if asking her permission to answer. Her lips pull into a thin line once more, but somehow this must mean yes, because he says, “perhaps two hundred.”

Lux has been working with such small groups for so long that the number is daunting. She has handled enough military missions to know that two hundred is nothing, in the long run. But when she is used to groups like this...

“Impressive,” Taric comments. Lux cannot imagine he has any frame of reference at all.

But to have those followers no longer becomes about the inheritance that should have been hers. Katarina has leadership skills. Lux still remembers the visceral image of Katarina and Jarvan storming across military camps, side-by-side. Each imposing and each commanding authority. A prince and a general's daughter, as if the roles were equal.

Katarina does not carry the pride like she should. Instead her gait takes on a harshness and she bites out, “soon to be one less.”

“Well,” Riven says, “she is a snake.”

“Ha ha,” Katarina says, completely flat. Then, quieter, “she's chosen her side, then. I was right to keep some secrets from her.”

It's easy to piece together, and Lux winces at the betrayal. She does not know how close Katarina is to her sister, but even with the distance between herself and Garen the idea is terrifying. All the worse because she knows it is inevitable.

As Demacia turns against its mages, he will turn with it. She does not think he has ever questioned his loyalties the way she has.

At least he cannot disown her the way Sejuani disowned Ashe. Not if she marries his prince.

***

The Institute is unguarded. They had avoided the Noxian military camp, dangerously close, but it had been so still and quiet that Lux cannot imagine they are still being pursued.

She knows that in war you have to draw back to prepare your counter-attack. That sometimes you have to let the escaped be.

It is as surreal as ever to see the grounds so empty. The stone floors are dusty and coated in fallen leaves and overgrown patches of grass and moss. She still half-expects to see crumbling walls and
collapsed roofing, but there is nothing of the sort.

“Home sweet home,” Riven says, as sarcastic as ever.

“We can rest here and regroup,” Katarina agrees. “Though I’d dissuade you from staying in your own units.”

“If anyone is following us, they’d be a fool not to check each room. I don't think it will do any harm to pick one that's familiar,” Taric says, sounding vaguely amused.

Lux says, “I don't think anyone is coming.”

Katarina and Talon depart to find them something to eat, whether that means hunting or foraging, Lux is not sure. They have had the most help in all of this, the most allies to help in their escape from behind the curtain. They seem far less tired than herself, Taric, and Zelos.

Lux does not have any appetite, but knows she will need to eat.

The grounds are like a ghost town. Taric and Zelos settle into an old filing room, tucked away so that Taric can give Zelos a proper medical examination. Riven seems to settle on playing lookout for them, sitting outside the door, legs crossed and sword in hand.

Lux does not know how to talk to her, and so she does not.

She wanders the halls slowly, her footsteps quiet as if she is worried of sneaking up on someone. She opens each unit door she passes with idle curiosity, taking in each abandoned room. Some are devoid of furniture, others left as they were. She sees bugs scurry away from the light she lets in. Few of the doors are locked. Some of the locked open anyway, hinges long-since broken and unmaintained. Some rooms show blatant signs of looting from wanderers.

Her own room is as she left it, minus small trinkets that must have been stolen away. The furniture is stained and dirtied from absence. The frills at the trim of the couch are confusing after so long of military beds, cheap hotels, and sleeping in the dirt. Her bed, with its ornate headboard and one-of-a-kind quilt is a mysterious stranger after sleeping on a bare mattress on the floor of an abandoned brothel.

She has Zelos. They escaped. They made it.

She slumps against the wall, sliding down until she is seated on the floor, and stares at the patch of light on the floor, slipping in through a small gap in the curtains. She tries to formulate a plan for what to do next but only manages a jumbled incoherent mess of concepts in her mind before giving in to sleep.

Lux stirs, but the presence is too familiar for her to be on edge. The room is dark beyond her eyelids. A warm body presses into her right side, smelling like dirt and sweat. Her eyes flutter open only briefly, unable to even focus on any features in the darkness. The vague shape of Ezreal slips beside her, his arm wedging under hers, his head coming to rest on her shoulder. At her other side, Ekko's smaller frame slouches down, just an inch of space between them at the hips, but his head still falling against her arm.

She hears music in the distance, and allows herself to drift back off to sleep for now.
I know you guys put up with a lot of typos but, like, thank god I at least managed to catch a sentence that contained "as possible," three separate times before posting this.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Lux wakes properly in the middle of the night. The dusty quilt from her bed has been spread over the three of them by someone; Ezreal is still at her side, though Ekko has slumped down, his head pillowed on her lap, over the blanket.

She brushes hair from his face as gently as she is able. She doesn't see any injuries on him beyond the bruises up his arms. It is with thick guilt in her throat that she realizes she does not recall if he had those in the arena or not.

She had hoped that the Institute would stop there from being so many children of war. But without it, she is creating one herself. The zero drive at his back is cracked, a hairline fissure up the casing.

Ezreal is the next to wake. He lifts from her shoulder, rubbing at his eyes with one hand. As easy as anything, when she turns her head to face him, he kisses her. Like reflex, his eyelids still heavy with sleep. She knows this will have to stop soon, but for now feels helpless to it.

"Sorry," Ezreal says, his voice low and rough. He clears his throat as quietly as he can with a glance down to Ekko. "I wanted you with Taric's magic," he explains, apparently not apologizing for the correct thing.

"It's fine. I prefer when you don't cling to me so incessantly," Lux lies, looking away from the sky-blue of his eyes, set on her with too much care.

"Ah," he says. She cannot tell if he is convinced or not, but he unlaces their fingers and slips away from her to stand. His body cracks louder than his voice when he stretches, and after glancing down at her once more, he exits the unit.

She stays still as long as she can to let Ekko rest, but her legs protest, and it is her uncomfortable shifting in place that wakes him. She almost expects him to fluster and apologize for the position, but dishearteningly, all he does is jolt upright, eyes darting around the room. "Ez?"

"He got up a short time ago," Lux assures him, trying to keep the annoyance under wraps.

Ekko relaxes again, but the curious look he gives her shows how unsuccessful her control was.

They leave the unit shortly, wandering back towards the filing room she had last seen Taric and Zelos in. They bump into the others sooner than that, out in the courtyard along a breezeway, in front of other units. There is a fire burning under the starlight, an inch out into the courtyard, and meat cooking over it by Riven's hand.

Ezreal is wedged between Sona and Taric, and appears to be captivated completely by the older man. The two of them are trading gems back and forth and whispering fervently. Sona's etwahl is spread over her lap, but her fingers are not idly plucking at the strings for once; just resting at its edges for comfort. Ekko takes a seat at her other side, striking up an attempt at conversation that quickly devolves into asking how to say things in sign language, word by word.

Talon and Katarina are absent, though Lux can only assume they are on some sort of lookout or scouting.
And there is Ahri, curled by the fire, all wrapped up in her tails, her arms a pillow on top of Zelos’ lap.

He meets Lux's eyes, but seems just as confused by this as she is.

Lux takes her seat beside him, overly aware of Ezreal's gaze distractedly following her across the fire.

She waits for Zelos to break the silence, but he does not. She cannot imagine the bitterness of this. Years of captivity and arena fighting, all to punish his sin of asking for help that never came. To finally be rescued so sloppy, with half the team made up of the same people who put him in the dungeon to begin with.

“Well we’ll take you back to Ionia,” Lux says. “We're going to go through Zaun and catch the first ship out.”

He nods. His fingers are combing through Ahri's hair, slow and careful.

“I know of the League of Legends,” Zelos says, eventually. “And I know that the Institute of War has fallen.” Lux nods, and for a moment he hesitates, looking uncomfortable. He centers himself with a glance down to Ahri, working around her ears. “I don't know anything else.”

“Irelia will be able to give you much clearer history lessons,” Lux says, carefully. “And I'm sure there are many things she'll want you to hear from her perspective over mine.”

She does not say this for his sake, but for Irelia's. If she wants to foster this alliance, she needs to be dedicated to that goal at every step.

“Then I won't tell her what you tell me,” he says simply, and Lux blinks. There is really no room for argument.

She tells him first of the effect of the League of Legends itself. Of the stasis that wars entered. Of the conflicts that still arose, and the manipulation from the Institute that curved the spoils to themselves. The infiltration from Leblanc as Swain's right-hand woman and her disguise as an administrator.

How much more prepared Noxus is for this war to resume than anyone else.

“But we can be allies,” Zelos says, breath catching.

Lux looks him over. His hair, too, has been finger-combed with care and patience. It is tied back much tidier than when she first saw him. She wishes she could say the color has returned to his face, but it is much too soon for that.


His response is instant. “Of course.”

“The only way to forge peace is through communication,” Taric interjects, apparently listening. Lux tries to look his way but gets distracted by the way Ezreal is curled in on himself, his knee hugged tight to his chest. Unlike Taric, he is not listening, not even watching Lux anymore. He is just staring at his gauntlet, turning his hand over as if he expects it to look different one of these times.

Zelos offers a tentative smile. “I agree. If we all just keep ignoring each other and holding grudges, nothing will ever change. I know that it's hard to be the first to put bad blood to rest, but... No matter when it happens, as long as it happens.”
“No matter when it happens, as long as it happens,” Ekko repeats. Then turns to Sona expectantly. She looks amused, and signs something to him – Lux imagines it is that phrase or an approximation of it. He tries to mimic it back, and Lux watches Sona take his hands in her own to make corrections.

“War is inevitable,” Riven says. She is beginning to distribute food to everyone. “Treaties are broken, every time. Alliances fall apart. Anything you do is only temporary. It lasts until someone benefits too much from ending it.”

“Great,” Ezreal comments, sarcastic, and despite sarcasm being her main method of communicating with them until now, Riven's eyes flicker his way in disapproval.

“Even if the alliances are ever-shifting,” Lux says, “I think that's worth it to strike down mutual enemies. Temporary reprieve is better than none.”

Riven is frowning, like she wants to say something but does not want to deal with the reactions to it. After a moment of internal debate, her pride does not let her stay quiet, and she says, “the weak will say anything to justify relying on the strong. Whatever you need to tell yourself to crawl to someone else for help.”

Lux seethes, and is frankly impressed with how much emotional energy she is able to muster up for it. She had not expected much respect from Riven to begin with, but blatant insults still call her anger forward. She knows how personal the matter is to her, but for her to face such betrayal from Noxus and still hold their ideals, perhaps even more firmly than Katarina herself, is infuriating.

Before she can say anything she regrets, Zelos interjects, “I don't think that's wrong, though?” Riven's eyes narrow at him, but he does not flinch. “Being physically stronger does nothing to prove you are correct. Right and strong are different concepts. Strength is something to take pride in, certainly, but I don't think that opposing someone who is both wrong and stronger than yourself is anything to be ashamed of. At the very least, I refuse to be ashamed of it.”

Riven does not look like she knows how to process this. Her brow furrows at their complete opposite philosophies. Lux is sure Riven is intelligent and passionate enough to debate this to the end of the world, but where to start? Lux understands how she feels, somewhat. It can be difficult to argue with someone who speaks so tactfully.

“It would be more shameful,” he continues, though Lux almost wishes he would not for how deep the crease of Riven's brow is becoming, “to accept something terrible just because it is done by someone powerful.”

Surprisingly, this puts Riven more at ease. The tense of her shoulders diminishes, and though she does not respond, she focuses on eating without argument.

Lux tries to calm the indignant racing of her heart, watching the fire. She has to force herself not to look past it, even when she sees the restless swaying of Ezreal's feet and the constant movement of his hand and gauntlet.

She has to stare down at her lap as she eats, instead.

Katarina and Talon return in time, and Taric and Riven silently rise to take their place on watch. Lux wonders when they decided the order. Why she was not included.

She doesn't ask. She has already slept away most of the day, though, so as others filter away to rest in left-behind beds, she remains by the fire.

Sona is one of the first to retire. Ekko keeps himself busy, tinkering with his zero drive as well as he
can without proper tools and chatting with Zelos. It is a rather one-sided conversation, mostly just Ekko talking about things he remembers seeing during the Institute's days. Matches and champions and the things they could do.

In a quiet lull, Ahri rises, off to find a more comfortable bed, and Zelos follows her so instinctually that Lux almost mistakes it for her magic.

Ekko is decidedly focused on his device, and so the only one to exchange a look with is Ezreal, over top the low embers. She is not able to meet his eyes for more than a second before looking away.

Lux can't say she blames Zelos. Ahri is beautiful, and he has been in isolation for far, far too long. There is nothing shameful in taking comfort where it is offered. Even if the thought of it does make heat rise up her neck and into her cheeks. Her gaze flicks back up to Ezreal, but if he is at all flustered by the thought, it doesn't show. Like he often does, he meets her gaze, even and unreadable until she looks away once again.

"Fire's low," Ekko says, without looking up at it. Maybe he is just eager to distract them from their awkward tension that he is stuck in the middle of.

Ezreal reaches forward with a stick to prod at it with, but Lux does not even think before pouring her magic into it. Focused light can spark fires with ease, after all. This is nothing new for her.

It comes out fire. There is hardly anything left to burn, but even so the flames rise at her command. She exhales, lowers them to a more natural height.

It feels strange. It is something she has to do with far more focus than her magic usually requires. Every push of mana feels more like an effort to stifle herself than a manipulation of what is around her.

Curiously, she raises her hands, using them as a focus for visualizing. The fire rises, too. Dangerously high, were she not in control of it. She thinks she could go even higher, but does not want to be attracting unwanted attention. At least there is no smoke.

She lowers the flames as she lowers her hands, then spreads them apart. The fire splits. Just like the circle of flame she had used to snare Leblanc, familiar and not, it goes hollow in the middle, a burning ribbon cutting out a circle in the ground.

As her hands come back together, the fire merges back into a more natural state. It does not spark quite the way fire should. The glow of its base is unnaturally light instead of the expected blue, and Lux tests pushing that heat out further and further towards the edge of the flames. As the flames heat, so does her skin, from the inside and out. She stops only when it is painful, when nearly the entire flame is an ethereal white.

Its color snaps back to normal. The pain dissipates from her palms. She did not have to focus this from a movement of her body.

Abruptly, Lux remembers that she is not alone. It's as if an acute tunnel vision falls away in an instant.

Ekko is watching her, looking too awestruck to verbalize anything.

Ezreal's expression is still infuriatingly unreadable. "Glad you're feeling better," he says. Once again, Lux cannot tell if it is a slight or sincerity, and he takes the moment to excuse himself to rest in private. He knocks Ekko on the shoulder lightly as he leaves, but does not spare a glance to Lux.
Ekko does not seem to find this strange, and spares Lux a glance before returning to his work. “You going to sleep, too?”

“No,” Lux says, staring at the fire. “Not yet.”

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The journey to Zaun takes time with so many in their party. Zelos does not admit to needing breaks frequently, but there is a stark difference between forced combat and the endurance of long distance traveling.

It is long and without incident. Lux passes the time, joining Ekko in his impromptu lessons in sign language from Sona. When she bores of it, Taric is quick to step in. Even Ezreal manages to drop whatever fight he may or may not be having with Lux long enough to take a shift of teaching. Though she does not miss how much more attention he pays to Ekko than herself. When Ezreal is teaching, Lux is more of an observer than a student. She watches from the sidelines and does not complain.

Surrounded by comrades is not the ideal place to fuss with him.

They use her illusions in Zaun and spread out across two different hotels. Noxian soldiers would not be a surprise, here.

It is a week before the next ship to Ionia, and getting permission to board it takes hours of sweet talk and bribery to obtain. Lux cannot blame anyone for this. Of course they are keeping their ports closed, save for the most trusted trade ships.

In her hotel, Lux is roomed with Sona; Katarina and Riven down the hall. It is nice to fall asleep and wake up to soothing harp music. She wonders if this is what it is like for Taric, living with her. A ceaseless melody. She also wonders when Sona sleeps, but each morning she looks bright eyed and rested, and Lux is not sure how to ask. She does manage some stilted conversation, mostly checking if Sona is okay and receiving generic responses such as, ‘yes, and you?’ Much more than that and Lux loses track of the meaning.

The second hotel is too far to uphold her illusions from a distance, and so it is her job to deliver meals to their room as they shut themselves away. The scene she opens the door to is similar each day. Ezreal and Ekko are in a room with Talon. Though Talon keeps to himself, Ekko and Ezreal often seem to be mid-argument, sometimes even rough-housing like children. Taric is with Zelos and Ahri, and their room is quieter. Mostly Zelos and Ahri just rest and Taric tends to them as a healer. Once or twice Lux catches Ezreal in the room with them, but knows he has his arcane shift to make it there unseen.

The ship ride itself, when it is finally time, is uncomfortable. Ezreal says it is nothing, and regales them of the tale of how he found his gauntlet. It is a bold story of risks and triumph, the way he tells it.

Lux can only think it is sad that he has settled on a magic gauntlet when what he was seeking was his parents. All the story reminds her is what lengths he was willing to go to, only to have reality crash around him, forcing him to give up.

She also thinks that he should not open with, “this is nothing,” tell his tale, and then spend the rest of the journey complaining about how uncomfortable the ship is.

And she should not find this so hopelessly endearing.
When Irelia sees Zelos, she scatters papers across white marble steps. Lux feels as if she is intruding, watching their deep embrace.

Then an odd silence, neither of them knowing how to proceed from here. As if taking comfort in business, Irelia addresses Lux. “A deal is a deal. I'll do what I can to convince the rest of the council.”

Lux bows, deep. Taric follows suit, and though unaffiliated, Ezreal does as well. The Crimson Elite stay standing straight. As Lux rises, she sees the way Irelia looks them over with open suspicion.

“A temporary alliance,” Katarina says, before Irelia has the chance to voice her concerns. “We don't intend to disguise that we're only working together until Swain is out of the picture. But we don't come with war-ships.”

“Not you, perhaps,” Irelia mutters, but then says: "better the enemy you know than one you don't.” She is looking at Lux as if this is her fault. As if this is a betrayal that she will not forget. Irelia sent her away to keep Noxus off her front steps, and yet here they are.

Soraka's voice cuts through the tension like a sharp knife. “You're in time for the the Lunar Revel,” She says, approaching with an arm-full of the papers Irelia had dropped. (Irelia lets out a quiet cough and apology, taking the papers back.) “I'm sure your urgency can stall a couple of days for the celebration?” (Irelia coughs a second time, this time giving Soraka a decidedly resentful look, knowing better than to argue. Lux has not forgotten Irelia's stance on Lux's presence in Ionia.)

Lux wants to say no, but Sona plays one soft note, so solitary that it sounds like a child's resigned plea. Like someone already expecting to be told no. The idea that Sona is asking Lux's permission somehow strikes her has preposterous.

Then she remembers that in Demacia, she is all-but a princess.

“Yes,” Lux blurs out. “If you'll have us, we would love to catch our breath.”

Irelia keeps any complaints she has to herself and sets them up in the unfinished apartment complexes. Zelos leaves with her, naturally, and the way Ahri joins them seems more tied to Irelia than to Zelos. Ahri and Irelia had already been close - one of many families forged through the League of Legends.

Lux looks over Ezreal and Ekko, bickering over the master bedroom. Taric and Sona are out in the outdoor hall of the apartment, resting their arms on the railing and enjoying the calm of the weather. For what must be the hundredth time, Lux cannot help but think this is the calm before the storm, the calm at the eye of the storm. Like all calms, it will not last. (Taric is discussing the sunny winter weather, laughing low with his hand around Sona's waist.)

Riven, Talon and Katarina, have all vanished. Lux would be worried about this, but she is sure they are well aware that this is not the time to pursue domination. They are probably settling into their own units.
Irelia did not ask how many units to give them. One for Riven – Lux is not sure if this is favoritism or pragmatism. One for Talon and Katarina, as good as siblings. One for Taric and Sona, their relationship no longer any sort of secret, now that they reside together in Demacia.

And for herself, Ekko, and Ezreal, a two-bedroom unit.

Lux doesn't ask what this is supposed to imply. Irelia knows about Demacian affairs. She has to. From petty noble's gossip and ex-champion tabloids to political marriages, there is no way she isn't well aware that this is not a proper arrangement. But there is only one bed in each room.

At least Lux knows she can trust her not release any records on the matter.

In time, Ekko meanders away. Taric and Sona drift off like a beautiful painting taken down and moved to another room. Perfect scenery, kept to themselves, somehow unmarred by all this mess.

Not like Ahri, who's hair is still a bit of an uneven mess even after brushing, who's eyes dart from side to side with the alertness of a fox who has feasted on flesh too recently to think like a human. Not like Riven, who sometimes flinches if you get too close even though she could kill you just as fast. Who can hold a steady gaze until you get within five feet of her before looking every bit the feral animal that Ahri borders on being. Like Katarina, weary and wary and crimson with the weight of blood and scars, or Talon who is too sharp to ever rest, losing himself in the deep claws that sink into what he clings to, now.

Not like Ekko, who chose something so aimless and left his home behind, left his family just to follow Lux like a loyal lap-dog.

Not like Ezreal, who is carrying his heartbreak on his sleeve, carrying it in his open palms, melding into it and fusing with it, living in it, the same way he does the artifact that had to take his family's place.

Ezreal, who sits on the bed with his back to the wall, head slanted towards the window beside him.

The winter sun is too bright; he keeps his eyes shut. Something about this scene strikes Lux as comfortable. Among all the upheaval, among the wreckage of her life that she is wading through every single day: here is Ezreal, on a freshly made bed of white sheets and a thick duvet. With his hair haloed, with his shoulders slouched and one knee pulled up to his chest. With bare feet and his jacket discarded, his loose T-shirt pooling down the sharp angles of his body.

The stark contrast of his dark clothes doesn't stop him from looking right at home, here. He is relaxed against the backdrop of white walls, and white bedding, and white streaks of sun slanted across the glass window panes. White glow at the edges of his hair and face and shoulder.

Blue sky and blue eyes.

Lux's shoulders jump, startled by his lazy gaze.

She expects him to tease her for staring. She wants him to ask her to run away with him one more time.

He asks, “ready for what comes next?”

Lux remains in the doorway, leaning against it lightly. “Of course,” she says. The disbelief does not
show on his face, but she knows it is spread under his skin. “Of course,” she repeats.

His expression does not change. His gaze on her does not falter. She refuses to shift her weight with the wave of self consciousness that crashes over her. She used to think it was so terrible for the summoners to see in her mind, to read her moods and hear what was at the condensed core of her soul. They knew better than to spread it around, but it didn't change how invasive it felt, how ugly it was to have your depths seen when your shallows had been so carefully crafted.

She used to think Ezreal couldn't read her. (He probably couldn't, she thinks. Not back then.)

She waits for him to say something wrong. Something intended to comfort her, in its own way, but sure to be unsuccessful.

Ezreal waits, too. His eyes do not change, but the blue on his cheeks is ever-shifting, glowing and fading and waxing and waning.

When he finally breaks the silence, he asks, raising an eyebrow and curling in one himself just slightly, “don't you want to talk about it?”

“How's your magic?” Ezreal asks, changing the subject. But there is something to the way he turns his head back to look out the window. There is a distance to his voice, something far too light and airy for the one who held her when she had fractured over it. If anyone else had asked, she would tell them, growing. She murmurs, “overwhelming.”

His eyes flit her way, then back outside.

Lux thinks of Taric's words on gem-craft. Of the way Ezreal's gauntlet has taught him his own magic, then taught him how to borrow from the world around him, from the people around him. She remembers Ezreal's face in the dark of night, cheeks lit by dancing embers. Firelight the only light in his glossy, shadowed eyes, staring down at his gauntlet, turning it over and over.

She asks, quietly, “and yours?”
Ezreal looks at her for a long moment. She sees his chest rise and fall with a deep breath and almost expects a proper answer. He only shrugs.

Once again they are left in uncomfortable silence. The room's brightness and clarity only makes Lux's heart sink further. It really is a lovely apartment. Small compared to anything she is used to calling home, but the empty space strikes her as full of opportunity. It is not the empty space of someone indecisive or the empty space built just to show off money. It is empty because it has not been filled yet. A new home is a beginning.

Ezreal is still staring.

She misses home. Oddly, all she can think of is the empty room in Ezreal's home, waiting to be filled.

“Wanna sit?” He asks.

Lux crosses the threshold of the doorway and sits ginger on the edge of the bed. Obedience comes second-nature. So does etiquette. Knees together, ankles crossed. She smooths her skirt. Tucks hair behind her ear. All the good-girl rituals she was raised with. She hears Ezreal sigh from behind her.

The bed shifts, and moments later she is swallowing back a gasp as Ezreal's arms wrap around her shoulders. He falls to his side like dead-weight, pulling her down with him.

Lux kicks her shoes off, slow and deliberate. She enjoys the sound of them clattering to the floor, and pulls her legs up onto the bed. Ezreal shifts closer to her. She can feel his breath in her hair, his knees at the back of hers. His chest to her back and his arm dragging its way down to rest on her hip.

Suddenly she is ready to talk about politics. About anti-mage propaganda and war and – perhaps not her marriage, no, but so much else.

Ezreal yawns into the back of her head.

She thinks of blue, instead. In her mind she lists the beautiful shades of blue. Shuriman magic, the sea, the sky, the pale Freljord flurries. Taric's sapphires and lapis lazuli and aquamarine. Mana, flowing like a river between herself and Ezreal's gauntlet and back again.

The mana that is a flood to wash the world over, to crash harsh waves into the planet until it erodes away.

There is a part of her that looks forward to this. The same part of her that dreams of burning up everything she hates about the world and tearing apart every system that chains her down. Even if she feels at home in the light, warm and safe in Ezreal's arms, she knows both of these things are temporary.

Zoe looks cute and I'm excited...! Wish she had more, um, interactions with people besides Lux and Ezreal and Aurelion Sol, given that there are a bunch more celestials, but... That's fine... I guess...
Chapter 30

Soraka comes by in the morning with clothes for them. Lux is grateful to wear something fresh, even after the chance to do laundry.

“Happy new year,” Soraka says, as she helps Sona get dressed.

It's jarring to realize that January first has come and gone without Lux even realizing. Like being pushed out of her own body from behind. Where was she on the evening of the new year? On a dirty mattress in an abandoned brothel? Or was she sleeping on uneven ground, shivering in a tent?

Ionia's new year is weeks later, but it's nice to get the chance to celebrate.

Lux watches Soraka tie the obi around Sona's waist, a golden shining piece of fabric with an intricate bow in the back. She watches Soraka comb Sona's long hair and separate it into loops, clasped with more gold. Golden accessories and a red dress – colors that remind Lux of autumn more than winter. A season of change more than a season of death.

“The Lunar Revel is for new beginnings,” Soraka says, as Sona rises. “Honor the past, celebrate the future.”

Sona twirls slowly, long sleeves flowing.

Winter is a season of survival, Lux reminds herself. Of making it through the harsh winter.

Lux's own dress has a different style to it; a different skirt, but it is still ornately patterned. White and shimmering gold. Lux just hopes she doesn't get it dirty. She likes its simplicity – its modesty.

“Would you like me to do your hair for you, too?” Soraka asks.

Sona raises her hand, signs something Lux wishes she could read, but imagines is a second offer.

“If you don't mind,” Lux agrees, and twirling her hair around one finger is more habit than it is self-consciousness. Play pretend. She wonders if Soraka falls for it. She doubts anyone else here does, anymore.

It feels strangely intimate to have fingers in her hair. She likes the sensation of it, though she isn't close with Soraka. She closes her eyes. Lets Soraka sweep her hair off from the nape of her neck, all to one side. Fingers comb through it, working through tangles, pulling it tight and clipping it up. She weaves small clips into the ponytail, shimmering butterflies like they've landed in her hair.

Lux checks herself in the mirror. Her hair has grown. She still wishes it could be cut short.

Outside, the others are waiting. Ezreal, seemingly for once, is not interested in staring at her until she feels awkward. He scans her up and down, then scowls and turns his head away, as if somehow offended by the sight of her. Lux doesn't entirely blame him, but she is tired of the hot and cold treatment. They have been sharing the bed, innocent save for their tightly entwined fingers.

He does not look entirely out of place in Ionian clothing, but she can't place why. The clothes are less intricate, chosen for how active he is known to be, chosen for how little he is known to care for
modern traditions. (He could talk for an hour about ancient ones. He will, unless you stop him.)

Taric looks nice in anything, Lux thinks. It's in how he holds himself. His are the most formal of the three. Ruby red and gold, carefully chosen to match Sona's.

Unlike the both of them, Ekko does not appear to have festival clothes. Lux almost suspects Irelia of having custom tailored clothing for all the ex-champions of the League of Legends – perhaps she was just unprepared for a tag-along extra. The clothes are still unmistakably Ionian, and unmistakably don't suit him. He seems pleased, even so.

Lux doesn't blame them for choosing less formal clothing for Ezreal and Ekko. She is sure they will be a mess by the end of the night.

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She is correct, for the record. Ekko spills sauce on his shirt, splashes water all over himself at a game booth, and burns a black speck into his pants playing with sparklers. Ezreal burns several black specks into his.

Ahri joins them, briefly, then flits off again. Irelia only has time to say hello before she is needed elsewhere. Zelos, she explains, is not keen on crowds just yet.

Soraka stays the longest, but even she eventually succumbs to the countless bows from civilians and calls for her attention. (They see her on stage, later, playing her flute by herself, but don't dare venture into the crowd she draws.)

The streets smell like food, and Lux indulges in far too many snacks, only encouraged by the others continuously handing her more. Sona offers her a tray of small steamed buns – Lux takes one before passing it on to Ezreal. He takes one, then gives the last to Ekko. Later, Taric offers her a drink. Lux takes a sip before reflexively passing it to Ezreal. He drinks, but does not pass it on. Lux catches Ekko's gaze as he rolls his eyes.

There are paper lanterns filling the skyline with color to match the bright outfits of everyone around them. Lux is used to public celebrations raining down confetti, used to blue and golden flags fluttering in the wind, draped over every building. In Ionia things are different, somehow tidier but no less vivid.

Some booths have small games, others are advertising social groups and organizations. There is a dance performance. Lux is used to ballroom steps, sweeping movements to show off the frilly dresses, string instruments quiet in the background. The music here is on flutes and harps, but it is loud – as overpowering as the dance is subtle. Fans flutter through the air, hands sway softly, until the sharp flick to open the fans, until they slice firmly through the air like a rift in reality.

Ezreal nudges her. He doesn't explain himself, just looking away when she looks over.

The night comes clumsy, dragging itself through a spreading watercolor. The fire reds gives way to violet until it's washed away by a deep blue sea. Stars freckle the surface; Lux feels like she is drowning peacefully beneath it.

Sona and Taric break off from them for some privacy, for the time to enjoy the festival by themselves.
There are drums, now, performances in the distance. Loud, pounding drums that tune out the heavy thumping of her heartbeat. The dark of the sky parts for fireworks, more intricate than those she glimpsed so briefly in Zaun. Of course they are. They are put together by more than street children with skills they taught themselves and materials they scrounged up from nothing.

The three of them sit on the steps of a hill to watch, Lux in the middle, Ekko a step below her, and Ezreal still standing to her side.

Bursts of light have always been a part of her, but now the fire is, too. The fire, and the sea of the sky – all of it. The air is cool in her lungs, refreshing. She can smell the gunpowder and smoke in the air with clarity. It doesn't mix with the smells of the food stands, doesn't warm from their heat.

Everything is separated as if by clear lines, as it should be. Maybe her nerves are just shot out after all the mess she has been through, but tension leaves her body.

The walk back to the apartments is slow. Her feet hurt from the wedge heels of her shoes. Her scalp sort of aches from the tightness of her ponytail. And the obi of her dress is tight – she hadn't realized that when Soraka told her to inhale that she would squeeze it hard and tie it shut. It's loosened over time, but not much.

Ekko doesn't slow down to wait, and he's long-gone by the time they reach the empty courtyard. Ezreal keeps pace with Lux, until she sits down at the edge of the walk-way.

The courtyard has a garden. Not many flowers, but aesthetically pleasing stones, vines curling over them like they have been trained in their swirling patterns.

Ezreal hovers beside her, and Lux offers him a smile. They have been quiet most of the day, following crowds, following Ekko's whims.

“I'll be up shortly,” she assures him.

He doesn't reply, at first. He is quiet, looking stern, arms crossed over his chest.

Then he says, “do you want to get drunk?”

Lux feels her shoulders jump. She tilts her head to look up at him. His eyes travel down her nape into neckline of her dress, then back to her face. He shrugs. “Ahri left us drinks. Think she planned on coming back and hanging out, but plans must have changed.”

“No thank you,” Lux says as diplomatically as she can. After a pause, she adds, “but I'll keep you company, if you would like.”

“Sure,” he says.

He leaves for a moment, and she is alone in the cold. The crowds and colors and heat had almost made her forget that it's winter. She rubs at her arms, shivering. The apartments aren't meant to be in use yet – they are dead silent in the night.

She hears the final drums of the final show, then crickets and wind in the grass.

Then footsteps, a bit uneven as Ezreal returns with arms full. He has disposable cups, bottles of – something with a label Lux can't read – and bags of sparklers.
He sits beside her, shoulder bumped up against hers, and pours himself a drink. He makes a face after drinking, but drinks even so, and does not even scowl when Lux giggles at him.

Lux resists as long as she can, but eventually reaches across him for a bag of sparklers. He leans backwards to give her room, raising an eyebrow down at her. It's a silent reminder that she could have asked instead of stretching herself over his lap, which she pointedly ignores. She straightens, and pulls a sparkler out.

She lights it with magic.

Ezreal is watching her sidelong.

“What?”

He doesn't look away. His cheeks are red, but she thinks it's the alcohol. “Nothing.”

The sparks climb higher up the string, eating it up so close to her fingers that it's the burn that makes her drop it, and a sudden palm of water, in surprise. Ezreal snorts. Lux can't hold back her smile, but rolls her eyes as she draws out another.

He watches the stars, this time, instead of her sparkler.

He does not call her out when she is so distracted by his profile that this one burns her fingertips, too.

He does not call her out when she pours herself a drink. Or a second.

The warm that spreads through her body feels as liquid as the drink, though it's more pleasant a sensation than the alcohol's taste. It is sweet with a terribly bitter after-taste – all the more reason to keep drinking. It makes her drowsy and relaxed in a way that she cannot recognize as herself, yet cannot feel anxious for. If she were alone, she would never want her guard down like this. If she were with anyone else, she would not want to be seen.

But she looks at Ezreal, struggling now to light a sparkler, and dissolves into giggles, leaning heavy into his side. She lights it for him, and watches it flicker and burst between his spread knees.

She watches it travel, and this one dies before it reaches his hands. She watches its glow fade. She knows better than to say it, knows that if they are going to have this conversation at all, it shouldn't be when they are drinking. The words still slip out, water through fingers, alcohol through lips, mana through a crystal. “You shouldn't bother chasing after me all the time.”

“I guess,” he says, noncommittally. His expression is blank, though his eyelids are heavy. She expects this to be the end of it. He doesn't show his frustration, but she knows that it is enough to overwhelm him, enough to keep him from even bothering to explain himself. But he adds, “Guess I just figured it'd be the other way around.”

Lux wets her lips, overly aware of them, of the breeze chilling her whole face. “What do you mean?”

“When we first started dating and I didn't write or visit or anything. That's how I thought it would be.” He takes a moment to take a drink, head leaned back, tilting the cup. Lux watches his Adam's apple bob on his throat as he swallows. She swallows, too.

“Well,” Lux offers, but cannot really think of a justification for it. She knows it is far less than what
she has put him through, but there is still little she can say in defense of ignoring your new girlfriend
for three months.

Ezreal laughs like he understands, loud and unashamed. “Figured you'd be pissed, but didn't think
about it too much. Would've done it again.” He pauses. Adds, “would again,” like an afterthought
that he is only just realizing.

Lux is silent. It sounds like a luxury to only worry about a self-absorbed boyfriend. She isn't even
sure she would hate it as much as she would pretend. She would never have to open up to him if the
situation never demanded it.

What a petty dream. Of all the things to fantasize about.

“If it were like that,” Ezreal says, “I'd want you to be mad.”

Lux thinks the him in that situation would not want to be chased. But the him who is not in that
situation does. She would like to think that is still worth something. Just like she would like to think it
is worth something that she loves him so unwisely, when she knows the only path to him is to burn
down too much else.

Ezreal says, “I know it's pointless. And I'm not doing this forever.”

“Of course not,” Lux agrees, feeling herself tense.

“But I also can't just watch you run into danger like an idiot all the time.”

“I think,” Lux says, “that you just want to run into danger, too. I think you're jealous.”

His eyes scrunch up as he laughs. The unspoken implication that he is more jealous of her for being
in danger than of the Prince that she is marrying might sting him more, if not for the alcohol. She
doesn't think she would have made the quip at all, without it. Her cheeks feel warm, not with
embarrassment, but drink.

“Pretty tired of getting hit in the face for you, though,” he says, at length.

“And I'm tired of worrying about you,” Lux says. She does not think about how these are on very
different scales until a moment too late, and for some reason these are the words that make Ezreal
hesitate.

“You don't really need my protecting. And I don't really need yours.”

He's wrong. At first Lux thinks he's so, so wrong. He is so careless with himself, with his safety. He
likes the risks too much and – maybe Lux does, too, but at least she represses it.

But he's only ever in danger because of her. Piltover isn't at war.

Not yet, anyway, Lux's mind is quick to assure her.

In her silence, Ezreal continues, “that's how it should be. I mean, both people being totally capable
on their own.”

They've veered off topic, but Lux is in no mood to steer them back.
Ezreal looks over to her. His eyes are a bit hazy, a foggy blue, now, like the early morning of the season. The shimmer from his cheeks almost reflects at the edges of his eyes, and she realizes that the reason she can see it clearer and clearer is because he is leaning towards her. Or she is leaning towards him.

He kisses her gently. He presses against her soft and warm, and more delicately than she has ever known him to be. His lips taste like the sweetness of the alcohol, and his tongue tastes like its bitterness.

“I give up,” he tells her, kissing the corner of her mouth, kissing her jaw.

“I gave up a long time ago,” she says, and tilts her head away to give access.

He kisses her neck once, but then snorts and laughs a warm puff of breath against her skin like he is belatedly processing her words. “You're so dramatic,” he mumbles, nuzzled against her side-swept hair.

She wants to tell him he has terrible follow-through for someone who has given up. For someone who knows she doesn't need protecting. He still follows her, he still kisses her. She tries, but the thoughts are behind a haze. She feels dizzy. Maybe he means it as a warning. Maybe he means this is the last time.

She wants to tell him how furious she is at Garen, though the thought comes on so suddenly that it startles her.

She doesn't get the chance – Ezreal draws back, then leans in again to press their foreheads together.

“I give up,” he says, again. “I can’t keep doing this. I’m not stupid enough to keep doing this. I know you think I am, but–”

“–I don't,” Lux interrupts. “You aren't stupid.”

Her skin feels cold when he stands up, but he offers her a hand. It isn't much help – they both stumble when she rises. She hadn't realized how distorted her balance was until she needed it, but now it's a struggle to make it up the steps.

Inside the apartment, kicking her shoes off is heaven. She lets out a long sigh of relief, sleepy and uninhibited.

Unprompted, Ezreal helps her untie the obi of her dress in the hallway. She should have at least loosened it long ago, and breathes in and out as if appreciating her lungs for the first time. The fabric slides over her shoulders, sliding down. She pays it no mind as she begins to remove the clips in her hair, one by one. When she takes out her ponytail, Ezreal reaches out, buries his fingers in her hair and loosens it. It must still be a mess, but she still trusts that he will lean in and kiss her again.

With eyes closed, she feels his fingers slip away.

She opens her eyes back to the shadowed apartment. The pale walls and carpeting look lilac in the dark. Ezreal steps away, towards the bedroom door, but when she steps after him, he stops.

“Go room with Ekko,” he says. The firmness of his voice would sting more if not for the way he
She is too tired to argue. She watches him enter the bedroom, watches him close the door soft.

Ekko stirs when she comes into the room. He sits up, rubbing at his eyes, confused. “Lux?”

She feels like crying, but thankfully cannot hear the traces of it in her own voice. “May I sleep in here for the night?”

He only nods and yawns, scooting to the edge of the bed to make room for her. She strips down to the thin white under-dress beneath her festival clothes, then climbs into bed beside him, leaving as much space between them as she can.

The bed shifts as the two of them move in place until they are comfortable. Ekko asks, amused, “have you been drinking?”

“A little,” she says.

He laughs, then yawns again and buries his face into his pillow.

After a moment she tells him, “I'm sorry,” though she would not be surprised if he is already back asleep.

“For what?” Ekko asks.

“The usual,” she says. “Getting you so caught up in all of this. You just wanted to learn more about Jinx and look how far you've been dragged.”

“Following is different from being dragged,” Ekko points out. He tilts his head to face her, moonlight coming in through the window to paint lines on his face where the paint has been washed off. “It's not like you're in control of any of the shit going on. You're just in the middle of it.”

“Language.”

“No.”

“Why are you so intent on following me?”

“Curiosity, at first,” Ekko says. He still sounds amused, like the way she is talking to him is somehow funny. She doesn't feel as drunk as she had earlier. Tired and spacey, perhaps, but much more lucid than earlier. (Ezreal's lips feel like they were a dream, now, hazy and unreal.)

“Curiosity,” she repeats.

“Know the world to change it. Or something like that. But, I don't know, anymore. I just like you.”

There is nothing childish in his voice. Nothing romantic or longing, either. He does not say it hoping for any response. Just matter-of-fact. He cares for her, so he helps her.

“I'm glad we met,” she tells him. “But you can't just chase someone around if there's nothing in it for you, anymore.”
He grins, but only briefly, his eyes drooping and shoulders sagging back down in relaxation. “Go to
sleep, drunky. Or I'll make you sleep with Ezreal.”

Lux retorts sarcastically, “oh no,” before she realizes what she's said. She flushes.

Ekko takes a moment before he realizes, face scrunching up. “Ew.”

They both laugh together, though not as quietly as she had thought. Ezreal knocks on the wall
connecting their rooms, one thump of protest at the sound. Ekko kicks at the wall in retaliation, still
laughing.

They quiet, and the room only slightly spins, and then Lux is able to drift off to sleep.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The ship rocks heavy along the waters all the way back to Zaun. The weather is stormy outside the windows, rain beating up against the panes so hard that Lux almost expects them to shatter inward with the force of it. It is thunderously loud, and the group of them in contrast are quiet and still in the flickering dark of the cabin.

In Zaun, the smog is thick in her lungs. She always forgets this sensation until she's deep in it again.

“You need to go home,” Lux says, for what feels like the hundredth time.

This time Ekko does not argue. He frowns, gaze downcast, then looks up to her with a smile that does not quite reach his eyes. “Yeah,” he says. “I know.”

“You have a lot to do,” she tells him, though she is not sure, exactly what. She does not know what Zaun needs. That's up to him. “But I'll leave this with you, okay?”

Part of her thinks she should meet his parents. Apologize to them. Hell, she should probably grovel at their feet for forgiveness. She is far, far too afraid to actually do it. Priorities, she assures herself, but does not believe it for a second. Priorities.

She writes him a brief letter, finished with a careful cursive signature. “If you need to see me in Demacia,” she says, trailing off. By now she imagines he could waltz past security at the military bunkers without being stopped, but it is better safe than sorry. Besides, it will help if he comes to her family. She has always been too important to be reached by any kid off the streets who wants to meet her, and it's only going to get worse.

He holds the letter tight, holds it in both his hands like he is afraid of losing it. “I'm coming to the wedding,” he tells her. Even his grin does not sit quite right on his face. His gaze darts over to Ezreal, looking far more worried about him than about Lux. (She can't blame him. She is not the sympathetic one in this situation, she knows.)

Ezreal speaks up, his voice jarring after not hearing it for nearly the entire journey back. “I'll walk you back,” he tells Ekko.

Ekko nods. “Alright.”

There is an awkward beat as Ezreal steps up to Ekko's side. His eyes are on Lux with an uncomfortable intensity, yet all of a sudden it is over. He tells her “congratulations,” over his shoulder, as dismissive as a casual goodbye. She knows this means he is not coming. Thank heavens. She can't imagine the nausea she would feel, knowing he is in the audience.

Maybe he will watch it over the crystals. She hopes not.

When the two boys leave, the only ones left are Sona, Taric, Riven, and Lux.

From Zaun and Demacia is predictably quiet with this bunch. It rains, but they are able to get
carriages for most of the trip. Sona does not play her etwahl, and most of the conversations she has with Taric are whispered, his half hushed and brief between them.

Sitting across from Lux, Riven is silent for most of the ride. The only time she speaks is after a long stretch of staring out the window, when she glances up and catches Lux watching her.

“Aren't you going to talk?” Riven asks, though she says it with a grimace. Lux remembers trying to befriend her, even if only for appearances, during their days in the League of Legends. She supposes even their time together lately has seen a more talkative Lux, with Ekko around. With Ezreal.

Rain is drumming on the windows more gently than the storms of the sea.

“No,” Lux says.

Riven does not seem to care enough to reply.

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Jarvan's hand rubs at his forehead as if trying to smooth away a headache.

Lux doesn't blame him. He had been elated to see her well, but there was no way that mood was going to carry through the rest of the conversation. Where she has been. What she has done.

And, of course: Riven leaning against the wall, mirroring Xin Zhao's position as if she were just another guard.

The good news Lux brings is heavily outweighed by the bad. Irelia has agreed for Ionia to ally with Demacia. But to get her to agree, Lux broke Zelos from Noxian captivity – openly, brazenly. She outed Katarina's rebellion, she instigated this war to move faster. To speed up what she is asking for help from seems so counter-productive, but Lux has no time for regrets.

For a long moment, Jarvan is without words. He sighs, opens his mouth, and in the end settles on just gesturing in Riven's direction.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I'm not leaving,” she says, preemptively.

“I'm not asking you to,” Jarvan assures her, at the same time as Lux says, “no one will ask you to.”

Jarvan gathers himself. He sits up straight, clears his throat, and finally wipes the exasperation from his face. “If the crimson elite are our allies, I won't turn you away. It's no surprise they would one of them here to keep an eye on things.”

Riven turns up her nose and looks away. None of them point out that her options on where to settle are limited, given her banishment from Noxus.

Jarvan addresses Lux next, though given the question, she is not sure why. “And the others? Katarina and Talon?”

“Zaun, for now.”

He nods. He looks pale and sick. Perhaps the season, Lux thinks. Even the prince is not immune to a cold. (It has been hailing off and on, today. Lux wants to step outside and feel the wind and the ice
and search for electricity in the air, but she does not entirely know how.)

There is something relieved in his tone when he averts his eyes and says, “then she isn't here.”

Xin Zhao clears his throat before Lux can question him, and Jarvan nods.

“I'll make arrangements for you,” he tells Riven, then nods to Lux. “You're dismissed. I recommend you get your rest. We have our own arrangements coming soon, and after that...”

A wedding and a war.

Riven snorts. “You're dismissed? That's how you talk to your fiance?”

Jarvan does not bother defending himself or apologizing to Lux. She doesn't mind. They both know what this is.

***

She goes home. To her own, actual home.

Her mother greets her with open arms. Lux is not entirely used to physical affection from Lilia, and tenses in the embrace. She feels the slight jolt from her mother, surprised, but not enough to comment on it.

“Were you caught in the storm, dear?” Lilia asks, brushing wet hair from Lux's face as she pulls away. She does not ask about the infinity that it feels Lux has been gone for, or about how she chose the military bunkers over her own bedroom for so long.

Lux doesn't remember how to play this game. She doesn't remember what to say to be a cheerful daughter. “Yes,” she tests. “It's... Quite torrential, out there.”

No, that wasn't right. Torrential isn't the right word for hail, is it? It's different from water. She knows the difference; she's done it before with her magic, she's touched it in the curse Lissandra left in Sejuani.

That feels like so long ago. And to think, Ezreal had been mad at her for that. She laughs at the thought, a sudden, quickly cut-off laugh.

Both her parents are staring at her. There is confusion and discomfort written across their faces, in the lines of their wrinkles and the angle of their brows. But not worry. Of course not.

“Your brother should be visiting, soon,” Marcus says, if only to break the tension.

“It's lucky he warned us,” Lilia adds. “I was able to make sure his room was prepared, and yours as well, while I was at it.”

Lux doubts it was anyone but a maid. They don't generally come to the main Crownguard mansion, but she wouldn't put it past her mother to call them over special when there's a chore in need of doing. It's hard to feel the intended guilt when she knows her mother went through no special effort.

So maybe she doesn't write home so often, Lux thinks, hardly keeping the scowl from her face. How is Garen still the star child? Garen is in bed with an enemy, quite possibly literally, and Lux? She is
marrying the prince of the kingdom against her will. She deserves the praise, she deserves the approval of her parents.

Maybe it's because she's a mage. How fast will her own family turn on her? Why is she not surprised?

She wishes the world were parchment, held easily between her own hands to be torn to shreds.

“Thank you, Momma,” Lux says. “I really appreciate it.”

She does not.

Lilia still smiles, the expression practiced but unfitting, like it is a strain on her lips.

She dismisses herself to her bedroom. It is much too clean for her mother's work. It has been dusted, the bed made fresh.


Her room is warm, the heat from the fireplace downstairs rising up through her plush carpeted floors. She sinks into her bed when she sits on its edge, feeling the texture of her quilt against her leg, hearing the sound of three separate blankets shifting against each other under her weight. Against her heels, the frilly bed-skirts.

Outside, the hail has turned back to rain, and the sun is setting through thick grey fog.

It's quiet. The grandfather clock in the hallway ticks by the minutes so loudly, but all it does is remind her of the silence.

***

For one month, time passes slowly. The weather improves in increments. Hail returns for two more days, then one week of rain. Then the fog.

“It's expected to be sunny,” Jarvan assures her. He smiles like this is any comfort, as if they have an audience that needs to be convinced that Lux is a blushing bride-to-be. As if she has had any part in planning this wedding.

It has been a rotating flurry of a hundred planners. They bring her flowers and color swatches and menus and jewelry, but never questions. They take her measurements, but not her thoughts. None of this is really up to her, none of this is for her. It's for public consumption. It's all calculated.

Riven doesn't fall for it, and snorts loudly. She is standing opposite to Xin Zhao again – as she has been for most of the month. Lux thinks she just doesn't know what to do with herself. Maybe she feels better guarding the door. Feels better being vigilant, even if there is no real reason.


Noxian military camps are spreading, closer and closer to the Institute. Like it is the divider instead of the kingdom's land, they have stayed just beyond it. But they grow, like an injury swelling beneath the surface. Festering camps, ready to storm across that border.
Demacian troops are stationed nearby to prevent it. The Kingdom's borders are all under strict surveillance and protection.

Lux would much rather discuss this than the cut of her dress, but she has been locked out of these conversations. Instead she just gets planners tugging at her hair, testing different styles with different veils, different dresses held up in front of her. She would much rather dedicate her energy to deciding squadron formations than deciding which smile will be best, and whether or not she should pretend to cry.

Sometimes, in the privacy of her bedroom, she thinks about the wedding she would plan. As if that had ever been on the table.

She thinks of a Summer wedding instead of the white Winter. Somewhere warm and bright, with light coming in through vivid green leaves. For once she could abandon all the theatrics and dramatics. Somewhere private, with a strange, but small group of people invited. In other words: the opposite in every way from what she is getting. She does not let herself linger in these thoughts.

***

She finds out Garen has arrived only by the sheer volume of his voice. She can hear him from the hall near Jarvan's office. Not enough to make out the whole sentence – just the anger, almost swallowed back for his prince, but not quite. Katarina's name.

Xin Zhao's firm voice quiets him, and Lux lets herself into the room.

Jarvan and Riven are both standing side by side, as if one had stepped in front of the other defensively, only to have the other push their way forward again. Xin Zhao is at the opposite side of the room, just slightly in front of Garen as if he needs to hold him back.

The room falls into a hush as the door closes behind Lux, all heads turning to look at her.

Jarvan looks embarrassed, clears his throat, and leans back, nearly sitting on the edge of his desk.

She does not need to hear the conversation to know what he brother had been shouting for. That he wanted Katarina – whether to ascertain her safety or to endanger her himself. He probably took it out on Riven.

She does not know why her chipper persona kicks in now, but it does in full-force. She smiles brightly, knowing it fools no one, and asks Garen, “walk me home?”

Outside, the sky is blue, but the air is permeated with mist. She feels damp. The wrinkles of her clothes are no more visible than usual, thank goodness, but they feel cold and uncomfortably heavy in each area they bunch up.

It is impossible to tell, from the grimace carved into stone on his face, if he is equally uncomfortable with it. It's the only face she's ever known him to make.

She feels tense beside him. Feels small and young, yet at the same time takes comfort in his footsteps than line up in rhythm with hers. The silence is their comfort, their normal. There is no language she cannot speak, no guilt.

Resentment, maybe. She wonders if he resents her, too. She cannot remember the last time they were
alone, the last time they had a conversation with any semblance of sincerity.

“For the record,” Garen says, abrupt and just as gruff as always, “I'm sorry.”

She laughs, light and quick, hand over her mouth. “What for?”

Her brother looks down at her sidelong, his mouth still a thin line. “Don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pretend.”

Her step falters. Her smile doesn't. She is vaguely impressed with herself for something that used to be such a given. “I'm not,” she lies.

Garen lets out an unconvinced grunt.

People on the streets nod to them with smiles. Before, it would have been to Lux. She's about to become their princess, it still should be to Lux. But instead, eyes flit away from her nervously, look to her brother like a source of comfort.

Physical strength is more comforting than radiant magic, now. Might over light. He has always been a wonder, a hero, but – she has never felt out-shined by him before. This is new.

“You need to do what's right,” Garen tells her, and a laugh bursts out of her, uncontrollably sudden.

“Do what's right,” she repeats. “Don't pretend.” He doesn't have anything to say for himself, even when she mutters, “make up your mind.”

“I want what's best for the kingdom,” Garen says. Lux imagines a day-dream brother who says he wants what's best for her. Perhaps one who asks her what she wants.

“Is that why you were yelling at the leader of your kingdom about your girlfriend?” Lux asks. “Who is, of course, a figurehead of the enemy.”

He doesn't have anything to say to that, but there is a fresh crease in his brow. Eventually he mutters, “I'd kill her, given the opportunity,” as if this is his saving grace. This is what redeems him.

What's strangest is that Lux almost understands. Not quite the direction of it, but maybe the emotion itself. (She's always liked Ezreal with blood on his face. She likes the adrenaline of combat when he by her side. She likes the simplicity of life or death, in the moment, likes the reprieve from all the other troubles in the world.)

“Would you marry her?” Lux asks. In another world she is a childish sister, teasing her older brother, sing-song until his cheeks are red. “Given the opportunity.”

Somehow the idea of it is hilarious. Katarina as a bride. Her brother as a groom. Their reckless dance of swords and daggers replaced with a careful wedding dance. It's comical, really.

“There's no point to this conversation.”

Lux concedes that this is true. The things you can't have don't matter. A perfect world doesn't exist,
just this one. And even it struggles to exist, torn apart by the magic inherently poured into the people born here.

“The people need hope,” Garen says. She does not dare to look at him for a long stretch after this, but when she finally does there is something like fondness on his face. It vanishes when she meets his eyes, like darkness scattering in light's wake. “If we're to face the threat of rune-war again.”

Lux breathes in deep. “Am I the hope, or am I the threat?”

The way Garen asks, “how could you be a threat,” is flat, like it was not really a question at all. Perhaps it was an accusation.

This is not the conversation she wants to have with her brother. For the last time, she imagines what family is supposed to be. Reassuring smiles and safety in familiarity. But he is nothing more than a familiar stranger.

They walk through busy streets until the streets are busy no more. Until the bustling bazaar is replaced with rows of mansions, spaced apart by tediously landscaped gardens. Lux feels herself falling behind Garen, her pace slowing, steps irregular.

The neighborhoods of the nobles are so quiet. There are no playing children, no loitering youth, no gossiping adults. Birds, sometimes. Birds, and the wind. Nothing else.

Her voice is only a whisper, but she knows it has no competition to reach him. “Please,” Lux murmurs, “don't make me do this.”

He is not the person to ask. He cannot do anything, would not do anything, even if he could.

Garen does not reply.

***

She misses Ekko. With how long she had wanted him to leave her, it is almost a surprise. There is a distinct ache in her chest that she thinks could be soothed by telling him about her day. By telling him of all the minuscule things she fills her hours with when she does not have anything to be doing. By not telling him what she is thinking, necessarily, but enough that he understands anyway.

How terrible, that on her wedding day, she will not be able to speak with him for all the ceremonies. How terrible that their reunion will be from such a distance.

Quinn salutes her in the hall of the military barracks.

Lux salutes back, reflexive. She feels as if she is pushing down her friendship, burying it in the back of a closet, piling on top of it until it is gone. This moment will pass, she tells herself, her eyes traveling away from the other woman to look straight ahead as she walks.

Other soldiers salute her, but avert their eyes quickly. These moments will all pass.

Her expectations crack – Quinn turns on her heel to step in pace with Lux, following her the opposite direction she had been going.

“Oh man,” Quinn says, “am I going to have to start bowing, or what?”
Lux does not know what expression she is meant to wear for this. She looks up at Quinn and her own face feels synthetic. She knows it is blank, like she cannot recall how to control it.

Quinn smiles, encouraging and small.

Lux wants to cry, but instead mirrors the expression. Quinn's presence is such a comfort, but the tension does not leave her body. She feels as if the world is raining invisible spikes of ice, as if they are needling into her arms.

“No,” she says, “I don't think that will be necessary.”

Quinn walks with her down the length of the hall. She must know how idle Lux is, right now. Must not be doing anything important.

“It's,” Quinn says, then swallows. She quiets, considering her words and frowning deeply at the task. Her tone does not carry any sincerity when she comes up with, “it's such an honor. Isn't it?”

“Yes,” Lux says, stiffly.

Quinn knows better than to voice her thoughts. Here, of course, but Lux suspects that for as honest as Quinn is, she knows better than to criticize this even were they in private.

But it's too late. Lux knows how Quinn thinks. She knows, because she was in Freljord with her. She has seen first hand the way Quinn makes a fool of herself in misguided romanticism, thinking marriage should be for love over politics. That is can be.

Lux tries to remind herself of Ashe's wisdom. A political marriage is still for love. And Lux loves her people, doesn't she?

***

A week before the wedding, Lux enters Jarvan's office, and again, she does not bother to knock. This is as close to lashing out at the situation as she can get.

Xin Zhao is not there to scold her. Riven, too, is absent from her self-designated station by the door.

But she is in the room. She is seated at the opposite side of Jarvan's desk. Lux holds her breath, keeps the door propped open with her palm behind her back so it does not close loudly.

There is a map spread across his desk with pins in it, surely piercing through to scratch the pretty surface of his desk. But they aren't paying it any mind. The two of them are talking in quiet, hushed tones. It isn't about combat or strategy or politics; Lux knows those tones too well, from him. Whatever it is, they are too wrapped up in it to notice Lux.

“Nightmares?” Riven is asking. Her voice is low, not-quite a whisper and not-quite caring.

Jarvan answers like an admission, “sometimes.”

Her brow furrows, as if she is annoyed by this, but she cannot decide what to say about it. She settles on a dismissive, “there's no reason for that.”
Second-hand indignation rises up in Lux's chest, hot and sparking. Jarvan only laughs, eyes traveling from Riven down to the map. “Yes, I think so, too.”

She doesn't remember what she came here for. She leaves as quietly as she came.

***

She can't see his face, but she knows that the warm body over her is Ezreal. His skin burns, her own skin burns beneath him as his hand climbs under her nightgown's skirt. The sensation of it is just out of reach – the hardness and weight of his chest pressing down on hers, and his other hand, lifting her leg, fingers digging greedy into her thigh. She can feel them, but it is distant. Like the sensation is buried beneath the thick duvets on her bed.

She can smell his skin, can feel him pressing fingers inside her. His lips part on her throat, tongue running up it – she writhes against him, grasping at her bed sheets that feel real, feel soft and smooth and cold when the rest of the moment is hazy. Her voice won't come out. She can hear his breathing, loud and low, a quiet bitten-back grunt, but he doesn't offer any words.

Her body shifts with his movements, rocking easily into the pace he sets. She is burning up, feverish, dizzy, like being drunk.

Lux wakes up.

She is sweating beneath too many blankets, alone in her bedroom. Outside her window the sky is pitch black; she can't see the moon or the stars through the thick fog.

Three more days.

Ezreal will not be there. She knows he won't. The relief of that thought is all it takes to put her back at ease enough to go back to sleep.

***

The dress and hair style are decided. An up-do, a bun with tight braids around it. Her veil will be tucked into her hair where its pulled, attached to a comb separate from the crown. The pull of her hair is painfully tight, the teeth of the comb sharp and pressed too hard against her scalp. The dress is all white – no golden trim, this time, nothing special or unique about it. It's pretty. Beautiful, even. Big and uncomfortable, the bodice tight and the skirts layered and wide. Surely the dream dress of any young girl, of even herself.

She hates it. She nearly tears every piece of it off, yanks out strands of hair in her eagerness to get it loose. She has to compose herself before she steps out from behind the changing partition in her room. She smiles nice for all the planners as they take everything back from her and rush off with their last-minute check lists.

Two more days.

She visits Jarvan again, this time careful to knock so she doesn't interrupt anything.

When she steps inside, she sees that Riven has stopped standing by the door. Now she leans against the wall by the window, closer to Jarvan's side.
So many people are in the habit of hovering at his side. Xin Zhao, by order, but Lux thinks he would do it regardless. Shyvana, often even when her orders specify not to. Poppy and Quinn, when given the chance.

Well, it's natural for a prince. Riven is an impressive addition, though, all things considered.

He greets her as warm as ever, which is to say, his stress only barely outbalanced by his kindness. “Lux.”

She closes the door behind her. Then says, firmly, “I'm cutting my hair.”

“Oh.” Jarvan says, in a way that is so distinctly unbothered that she does not think he realizes what this means. His planners would be screaming in panic, and he is so far removed from it all that he does not even realize the fuss this will cause. “Alright.”

“Did you come here just to announce that?” Riven asks, skeptical but not annoyed.

“Yes,” Lux says, only just realizing it is true.

Riven laughs. Openly, her shoulders hunching as she bows her head, nose crinkling.

“Are you coming, by the way?” Jarvan asks her, as abrupt as Lux’s visit. Now Lux wants to laugh, for the startled expression that flits across Riven's face, quickly replaced by annoyance. (And for how silly it is for Jarvan to be asking her at all.)

Riven says, “of course not,” and Lux almost thinks there is relief in Jarvan's eyes. She does not understand why.

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One more day. Well, a matter of hours, really. She should be sleeping. She should be resting.

She should be happy.

Instead she is sitting at her vanity, cutting her hair. She won't let those planners touch her hair again. She'll make it too short to even tie up in a ponytail.

Lux has never cut her own hair before. The back is probably uneven, and she keeps the strands in front of her ears longer. She likes the comfort of them framing her face – it's familiar enough to stave off the instinctive panic. (Lux has never been good with change, not as good as she pretends.)

I'd like to have short hair, Lux remembers. Then you're so dramatic.

And then: want to run away with me?

Lux leaves the feathered strands of hair all across her floor. She dusts more from her shoulders, from her collar, down onto her desk. Pale gold. Worthless.

She leaves the mess behind her. Fractures the light across her skin until she is gone, gone, into the early morning.
Chapter End Notes

time to go
Invisibility settles over her skin as easily as her traveling cloak. The feel of fabric brushing up against her exposed neck is new, sending shivers down her spine. Her magic comes so easily, but nausea rises up in her stomach. She can feel her body trembling, can see it as if observing herself. (Ironic, she knows, when she can stare down at her own limbs and make the light betray reality.)

Planners are in her home, whispering to each other to keep from waking anyone. Faces she has never seen, the ones who work even further behind the scenes. The ones who make decisions without ever shoving their hands into her hair and squeezing cloth tight around her body. Another wave of nausea washes over her, a seething rage too intense to be subdued. Soraka's clothing had been tight and uncomfortable, but chosen so carefully just for her. She had scarcely minded being dressed in clothes that kept her breath short with the knowledge that they were a way of welcoming her.

Not here. She won't let it happen by the hands of strangers. She won't let hands that fear her touch her.

There is no relief of freedom when she bursts from her home. She does not know if there ever will be. Even so, she flees. The Measured Tread says that a Demacian does not retreat – but what does it matter, anymore? Apparently a Demacian does not have magic. A Demacian does not have free will, does not have a choice, does not have a love of their own.

There is no relief, because she knows that this will not end well. There will be temporary reprieve from the horror of what she's just done when she crashes into Ezreal's body, she is sure, but then will come the repercussions. She will have to accept that this time she truly has barred herself from life that she was raised for.

The finality of it is going to hurt when it settles in. Right now she is nauseous and numb, and grateful for it.

She takes a horse. A pretty white thing, obedient and quiet. Her invisibility covers it with ease, no matter how pointless it feels. The dust it kicks up, the footprints it leaves behind, the sounds of it running. There is no covering those up with light. With any element. Vibrations, her mind provides, overworking itself on any distraction it can latch onto. Light and heat, vibrating pieces of the world, so small and so fast that you can't see them, but you can manipulate them. Heat is vibrations. Sound is vibrations.

This is what frightens her the most about her magic. Too many lines are blurred.

The edge of her kingdom flies by.

She has to avoid the Demacian military camps beyond the border. They sprout up like stubborn weeds in the distance, lights and sounds at the edges of the horizon as she leads herself further north.

She is afraid, she feels so sick that she feels she might vomit, but even so exhilaration is in her veins, pulsing through every inch of her body.
Daylight breaks and sunlight warms her cheeks, and she is going to see Ezreal. Maybe they will watch the failed wedding on a crystal, together. She imagines them laughing, curled into each other, sitting on the couch so close that her legs are swung over his lap, so close that his hair tickles her face as she doubles over. So she will become a disgrace to Demacia, but for once, for once in her life, she will let it be what it is.

So maybe wars will ravage the land, but that should never have been on her shoulders to begin with! So maybe her family will mourn her – well, then they shouldn't have pushed and pulled her apart until she broke away! Come what may, she knows that she and Ezreal could always get by on their own. They could be explorers together, no matter who condemns them. No matter what the rest of the world is collapsing in on itself over.

And if he decides that he is done, even without the walls of her nobility between them, that he is finished – she thinks she could accept this. She would not want to run back to what she is leaving, even if the future is uncertain.

She knows it will be harder than this, she knows it will be more complicated, more devastating, but it is worth it.

The sun is rising. Lux hears singing.

She tugs at the reigns, slowing her horse. Her skin feels clammy all over from riding for so long. She has to look down to make sure she has not somehow steered too close to the marshes, somehow not heard the splash of water or the crunch of old bones. But there is just dirt and grass beneath her; she has not strayed off path.

The singing is louder, behind her now, all of a sudden so close that a sharp shiver lightning-strikes up her spine. Lux looks over her shoulder, turning her horse around to face the creature before her, and the sound of it stops abruptly.

“Pleasure to see you again, Princess,” he says, his voice as oily as his skin.

She keeps her frown firm and tight, keeps her brow furrowed and keeps her grip on the reigns tight to hide her trembling.

“I am no royalty,” Lux tells him again.

He laughs, a hearty chortle with a hand over his stomach. Like he is playing-pretend at friendliness, mimicking the actions of the social without understanding what drives them. “Turning away from the light after all! And I thought you were more clever than this.”

Lux swallows. She climbs down from her horse for the sake of being respectful. She does not like the delay, but to leave it could be more dangerous. “I have my own light,” she says, as loftily as she can.

It's unnerving to speak with something so inhuman, something that knows so much about you without ever being seen. But there are some things she knows better than to question. If the ascended walk the earth alongside fallen celestials, she will take this creature for what he is.

If he was anything to be afraid of, he would do more than make snide quips between kingdoms.

The River King changes the subject, abruptly lamenting: “you're going to miss the ceremony!”
“I intend to. Let them find someone else to use as a pretty prop.”

“You won’t even make it to watch the broadcast,” he presses, stepping closer. Lux fights the urge to step back.

She had taken some reprieve in her fantasies of watching, but has to admit this is true. There is no way she would make it to Piltover in time. *Maybe it's for the better not to see, maybe—*

“The road is only there for a split second. She thinks with intensity that she must study it, she must feel it out, but before she can even begin, it is gone. So is the road, and so is her horse, and so too is the River King.
In a wash of water that does not dampen her clothes or hair, quite suddenly, Lux is standing in the ruins of a city.

She whirls around, trying to catch her bearings – trying to figure out where this river has carried her to.

The buildings are decrepit, abandoned with moss growing up their stone walls. But the walls are not smooth like modern architecture. They are cobbled together; evenly, perfectly, but it is old fashioned. It is something you might see in a book, might see illustrated in an old tome Ezreal brings back from an expedition.

But never in person.

The sun is still low. Little to no time has passed, but the temperature is warmer, here. Her stomach churns, and she still shivers as the morning breeze sends chills over her clammy skin. The only sound she hears is wind in over-grown grass, whistling through windows and doors that have long-since dissolved into nothing, leaving only arches and holes. There is a scurrying of bugs, perhaps.

The realization that she is here, alone, so far from anywhere she wants to be, is horrifying. The guilt pierces her as sharp as a knife in her gut. Self-blame is a stabbing pain. She let herself be tricked by some creature, just because she was desperate to flee, desperate for someone, anyone, to help her.

Her knees hit the cobble-stone path beneath her before she realizes, skin scraping. The pain doesn't register; even the burn of it is nothing.

Lux stares at her shadow as the sun moves slow. For once it does not just feel as if an hour passes in a brief minute. It is an hour, at least, that she sits where she fell, tired and hungry and alone. Maybe they are searching for her, by now. But there is no way they will find her when even she does not know where she is.

No footsteps warn her of the shadow that falls over her. She realizes the air feels strange too late.

There is no use wasting energy on panic. Lux stands and turns to face Malzahar.

He does not deign to touch the ground, and so she has to tilt her head. It makes her feel defiant, as though she has any energy for such an emotion.

“Where am I?” She asks, voice flat.

Lux almost thinks that he is startled for how long he stares at her without response. Nothing reflects on his face, but it is as if he is weighing his answer, as if he needs to think about the situation. She expects he will not answer at all – will offer something ominous and vague.

“Icathia,” he says, eventually.

Lux jolts, a full body shiver sending sparks all up her body.

It's too far, impossibly far. She's read the files, she knows that no one can make it here. And those who have...

Malzahar's eyes glow under the shadow of his hood. It feels strange to call this expressionless being
a creature of madness, but it is the only word she knows for it. Those who come to Icathia come back broken.

But he is here, and he is calm and quiet. And she is here, and all the cracks in herself were caused by others.

“Come,” he tells her.

She does not know what to do but follow him through the ruins.

She wonders if this was part of his visions. The idea that he has foreseen all of that which overwhelms her so much disgusts her. The path of her life that seems to steer itself against her will, unpredictable, as she grapples for some semblance of control. All the while there are creatures like the River King, people like the Seer, watching and accepting and knowing every moment of it.

Yet through all of this indignance, there is something calming about the air. It is clean, untainted by hextech or chemical or anything human at all. Nature has overtaken what humans built, and eerie though it may be, the curls of the vines are beautiful.

It is true isolation. Finally, a true escape from everything.

If Malzahar wanted to kill her, he could have already, a hundred times over. Here and in Zaun and even during the Institute’s reign. He never cared about their rules.

It's strange to see the patterns of cities she knows in this unknown place. Small houses of different shapes and sizes, all lined up. Fences at the edges of sloping hills. The way they begin to space further and further apart must be some kind of city center. The paving is overgrown by nature, less treaded than the paths by the houses. Between each stone laid on the ground there is sprouting grass, clovers, and daisies.

She tries not to step on them. If it is just her and Malzahar here, and he does not touch the ground, then she does not want to be the one to do it. In the back of her mind she wonders: then why are the paths near the houses less overgrown? Who walks those roads?

There is a structure. Perhaps it once held purpose, perhaps it was only decoration. There are few alive who could guess, let alone with accuracy. (Would Ezreal know? In all his travels, has he seen something like this?)

Malzahar holds his hand out, beckoning her closer. When she draws close, he retracts it. There is no hurry to the motion, just a simple avoidance of contact.

Yet when she stands in front of him, he leans down. He bows his head, and the warmth of his forehead tapping against hers is startling, as if she had expected him to feel like ice.

He, too, gives her a gift.

***

Riven is laughing. It's a harsh, vicious sound, but with very little mirth to it. It is equally sincere and disbelieving.

Jarvan is dressed for the wedding in his perfectly tailored tuxedo. It does not suit him. The planners
have done everything they can to make his hair and the shadow of his stubble look clean and tidy, but there is a roughness to him that has always been imposing, and they know better than to sacrifice it just for one day.

“She could be in danger,” Jarvan snaps, pacing.

Xin Zhao is still in armor, but it has been freshly polished to look nice on the sidelines of a celebration. He reaches to Jarvan, touching his shoulder with a familiarity rarely shown in public.

“She ran,” Riven says, cutting like a knife, then laughs again. “You couldn't tell she wanted to bolt? Then you're an idiot.”

Jarvan shoots her a look of intense frustration, the lines under his eyes deep as trenches, but says nothing.

“What is it that you're always saying about retreating? Not to, right?”

He takes to ignoring her, now. He steps away from Xin Zhao to pace the room. The compassion and worry on his face slips away the same way Lux's masks always do – slivers of reality yanked out when they become a burden. “She must have known.”

“I don't see how she could,” Xin Zhao says, but it's stilted, like he does not have any faith in the words.

“No?” Jarvan asks, wryly.

“So what if she knows?” Riven interrupts, and this time what little humor she had is gone. Her voice is firm, eyes narrowed and body tensed. But she steps in front of Jarvan's pacing to stop it, and touches his arm to soothe him without hesitation. He does not flinch, just tenses, momentarily brittle before his hand comes to rest over hers, appreciative. “Knowing doesn't put her in danger.”

“You think she would try to disrupt it?” Xin Zhao asks, and as if startled by his presence, Riven and Jarvan each take a step back from each other.

“Why would she?” Riven asks, her arms crossing over her chest and suddenly overcome with interest in staring down the opposite side of the room.

“She wouldn't,” Jarvan agrees. He breathes in, then out, long and slow.

“Not wanting to get married doesn't mean she's going to turn against her people,” Xin Zhao says, quiet. The admission of knowing what she wanted – what she didn't want – a palpable weight over all of them. “I think it best we don't leap to conclusions and fuel panic. She's run away. This is all.”

“It's too late,” Jarvan mutters, bitterness creeping into his tone. “The public perceives her as a threat. We can't undo that with optimism.”

“The angle of a helpless princess could be powerful,” Xin Zhao says. He does not sound like he has any faith in it.

Jarvan takes a moment, runs a hand over his face, then straightens himself up. “We try,” he says, decisive. “Whether we can sway the public or not, this is the truth I will stand by. We have no reason to fear her, only to worry for her.”
Lux feels her legs buckling, but now Malzahar's hands are gripping her arms hard enough to keep her grounded, to keep her upright. She does not mistake this for kindness, only impatience. There is more, flooding her mind, answers to questions she hasn't asked. Time is moving, moving, and the seer pushes each moment through himself and into her.

Malzahar does not need to show her the king's speech. Only the reactions to it.

On this day of celebration, a thousand faces across the audience fall, eyes and hearts full of fear. She sees Jarvan turn his back to the crowd during the speech, fists clenched at his side, jaw set in fury. He trembles with indignance. She sees Xin Zhao look up to meet Jarvan's eyes, both of them scowling deep and helpless to oppose the king's condemnation.

Faces flicker through her mind, so fast she cannot read their expressions. Quinn is in the audience, her hands in front of her, trembling like she wants to grab something and choke the life out of it. Shyvana stands straight and rigid, her lips pursed until she turns her head to the side to curse. Poppy's eyes are wide, disbelief unable to be hidden away behind professionalism. Her mother, hiding her face in her father's arm, a hand over her chest as she sobs dramatically – and her father, murmuring stilted and shallow words of comfort while others in the audience stare to them with equal parts sympathy and fear.

Garen stares down at the ground, biting his lip so hard it bleeds, brow furrowed so deeply that Lux almost thinks he has regrets.

Sona and Taric sit side-by-side in her mansion, watching it play out over a crystal. Sona's eyes are wide, concern etched into her face and the way her hand squeezes Taric's painfully tight. He is silent, but his chest rises and falls dramatically with the concentrated effort to breathe.

In Zaun, Ekko watches on a crystal behind a shop window, surrounded by street kids his own age that groan and mutter of boredom. His hands slam against the glass, leaning forward in disbelief, as if a closer look at the projection might change things.

Caitlyn is watching on a much smaller visiopathic crystal mounted on the wall of her office; she stands up, pushing off the surface of her desk with flattened palms, breath catching. In a tavern, Vi is yelling at other patrons as they complain about the broadcast, missing the announcement completely as Janna tugs at her arm, desperately trying to get her attention.

The flicker of Ezreal is so fast she almost misses it; he sits in his home, curled in the corner of his bed with his knees pulled up, a book resting in his lap at an angle that makes it clear he is no longer even pretending to read it. He is not even watching, not hearing her condemnation. Not hearing of the mobilization of Demacian troops.

In Ionia, Soraka holds a hand over her mouth to cover a delicate gasp. Irelia scowls, and maybe it is worry and maybe it is another betrayal, but she grips her knees with white knuckles. Zelos stands behind Irelia's seat, his hand on her shoulder, but just looks helplessly confused.

Impersonal fleeting visions of other champions pass before her eyes, people she has only spoken to twice. The world keeps spinning, time keeps moving. Leona helps her comrades train without a battle in mind. Ashe and Tryndamere are storming through a flurry of snow and hail that seeks to
stop them, lost in the white with their hands clasped tight in opposition to the elements.

Swain does not have access to the broadcast, but he is barking orders to soldiers, motioning frantically. Leblanc watches him, and smiles a pleased smile.

Aster is with his fellow soldiers, men lined up beside him, behind him, and to his front they lead a resolute march towards the Noxian camps.

Prove your might, the king insists, as the rest of the world moves without him. Prove that we don't need the mages who would betray us in a time of need, prove that we won't make this mistake ever again. Prove that Noxus is not the pure strength they project, that magic only misled us into hoping for it.

Noxian armor, shoulder pads thick and spiked, heavy and cold, bump against Noren's shoulders, war cries filling the air so loud that the Demacian camps must hear them from afar. Their military march is not so unified, but their hunger is, their need to satiate the violence within them. At Swain's orders, they march towards Demacia,

This, Lux realizes, was going to be her wedding day. Whether she were there or not, this is what Jarvan spoke of when he thought she had learned of the secret kept from her. Of course a day of optimism would be used to launch an attack. Of course it would.

She repeats this in her head over and over. Of course. Ezreal is not watching, he doesn't know she is gone, he doesn't know she fled and now he won't even know that it was meant to be to him. Of course. All she wanted was to escape from it, and now she is as good as a criminal, an exile like so many others, a threat on the loose with her evil magic corrupting her. Of course. Of course.

“I didn't foresee you here,” Malzahar says, almost curious, almost anything at all, as he is drawing away from her. His words are as jarring as the sudden cut off of the visions. The images flit away, and in her mind she reaches for them, desperately trying to cling to anyone she knows as if she could send a message back for them to trust her.

“I thought you could see everything,” she says, still breathless, chest heaving with exertion. Her mana is all in disarray. It's like yanking at invisible threads in the air to pull it back inside herself, to wind it up in spools to use how she pleases, later.

As if ignoring her completely, as if having a conversation with someone else entirely, he continues, “there are others here. Those I've been able to bring.”

Void cultists, waiting around distant corners, hidden and quiet until they know why she is here. She cannot sense anyone nearby, so they must be a ways back.

Again, he guides the conversation along however he pleases. “Your magic has grown.”

“Yes, well,” Lux says, trying to gather herself, trying not to completely fall apart again. “There are many things I've learned I'm capable of.”

“You've accumulated power like curses.”

Lux frowns, tight, but somehow cannot take this as an insult from him. He isn't so petty.

“Magic is formulaic,” she says, dismissively, “so I can learn it.”
“I can show you more,” he says.

Lux has fought the the image Demacia has built of her kind with every fiber of her being. She has fought from being power hungry in the fear she felt each time her magic changed. She has fought from being a danger as she learned only to learn, never to abuse.

Where did that get her? What does proving them wrong do for her? All the plans wasted that she'd wanted to burn to ash. The laboratories, the experiments, the lies and lies and secrets. The institute of war grounds that she had imagined crumbling as if abandoned for a thousand years. The whole world, shredded like a useless letter.

Malzahar's hands glide lower, his fingers resting light against her forearms, and he leans down again. She tilts her head, pressing against his forehead with her own. There is no reason to fear knowledge. No reason to fear what he can show her; it's only reality.

Her vision goes black. She hears the scurrying of too many insect legs and wants to wrench away, whirl around to spot whatever creature is large enough to step so loud. She is frozen in place.

But there is no grass they skitter through, hardly even a ground that they touch. Everything here is not here at all. It is just cold, cold and empty. The darkness slithers over her skin like ink, sticky and consuming, restricting and vile.

The sky tears open. In the contrast of the light and dark she can understand it. Her mind can make sense of the way it differs from the elements she knows, from the magic that comes naturally to her. It is instinctual, it is easy. Not like fire or water or anything else she is sure to learn in time, the dark is like flipping light. It is relative to light, and so it is a natural part of it.

Balance, the Ionians are always saying. The Kinkou Order, and then Syndra who insisted on learning magic beyond the comfort levels of others. Why did they stop her? Her power was frightful, but this is balance. Light and dark, Lux can grasp them both.

The dark disgusts her, though she understands it like she understands herself. She wants to reach towards the tear in the sky, the violent rip that shows this awful void a world with sun and clouds and harsh wind that brings sleet and snow. She wants out, they want out, and – Lux understands the nature of these visions. Malzahar can see the future, but is only sharing with her the present.

They want out. A rift is open.

When she focuses, there is the yelling of a hundred men, swords and the disgusting squelch like crushing a bug beneath your feet at a hundred times the size. But even so, more creatures push their way out like blood from a wound, gushing forward to stain the new world.

“You want out, too,” his voice says in the dark.

He's pushing into her mind. She tries to push into his back, but does not know how, does not know how to exert that pressure or how to deflect it.

She is so tired of fighting things without really fighting them. She is tired of condemnation when all she ever did was what was demanded of her before what she wanted.

She has always wondered what Malzahar was like, before the void touched him. Wondered what
sort of a person he was as citizen, as a seer, as a human man. She wonders if she can reach those parts of him at all. She wonders how much of himself is lost to this.

Fine. If her own kingdom wants to say magic is as harmful as the void, then let it be. Why should she pour so much energy into proving wrong something that should never have been in question?

She wants to learn more, wants to understand all of it. The fear of losing barriers between herself and her magic and everything else in the world would not be so frightening when the process completes. When she knows everything, understands everything, controls everything. That will not be so scary at all.

The vision fades away, color and sunlight ebbing back into her vision from the edges until finally she and Malzahar are standing in the city center of Icathia. There are others watching them, now, cautiously arrived during his spell. Two dozen bodies at most, nothing strange about their figures or forms. They are just people, like any other, but all with dark purple cloaks the color of an off-memory midnight. They wear their hoods up to shadow their faces, but unlike Malzahar there is no mystic glow to them.

Just believers. Followers and supporters that he has cultivated.

Malzahar is smiling before her. For once, a dry quirk of his lips. It looks unnatural with the way the rest of his face is untouched, as if he does not remember any part of what a smile really is beyond a verbal description in his memory.

“I've wanted you from the start, child,” he whispers, his voice rough and jagged like a cliff side to be pushed off of. This is wrong, she knows, very, very wrong. But there is validation in those words. “When you throw all that light from yourself, what's left?”

“Nothing,” Lux says.

One voice rises out from the small crowd, a woman with long pale hair spilling out from under her hood. “Welcome,” she says, like reading from a script. It echoes all around her, men and women, young teenagers all chiming in, “welcome.”

Even this is a trap, Lux knows. She knows. But she wants to sink into it and take what she can. Take whatever she is able and get out. She is strong enough to do this. She assures herself this on repeat in her mind.

Black overtakes her mind again, overtakes her body. She is used to illusions changing her form, used to her appearance changing and disappearing. This time her mana twists up unbidden and wraps over her, not like a layer of light, but like a second skin. Intrusively, the black crawls up her legs, her skirts, her blouse. It stains her hair and enters her eyes and lungs like the thick smog of Zaun.

The dark washes over her, and Lux closes her eyes as she allows it, but she thinks of blue so she will not forget. Her anchor is the deep blue sea, her anchor is the pouring rain outside carriage windows. Her anchor is the blue glow of hextech that can set back time, the cloak cut into feathers, the arrows of ice. The halo of light around the stars each night.

Her anchor is the ever-shifting shimmer of magic on Ezreal’s cheeks as he sits safe and oblivious in his empty home.
Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure what to say here, but I don't like not leaving author's notes. I hope you are enjoying My Favs Suffering: The Fanfic.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ezreal watches the news every day. It helps that it's broadcast non-stop, splayed across the sides of half the buildings in Piltover. It helps that the journals don't waste anyone's time with articles about anything else, anymore.

He is used to his home being a quiet haven, but he can't allow the reprieve anymore. The sound of the news becomes an ever-constant white-noise, ruining his home, tainting it, but he can't bring himself to shut it off.

This war could breach his own city, he tells himself. The battles always spread, and Zaun's alliance with Noxus is far, far too open to think they won't get involved.

In February, the Noxians marched, and the Demacians met them. Ezreal had not fallen into this obsessive news-watching yet. He had been aggressively avoiding the news, avoiding everything. He did not find out about it until nearly a week later, when Janna had tried to console him over lunch. She had offered comfort for something he had not even known to be concerned with. (He had been busy, he had lie, and she had not pushed it.)

Lux is missing, and somehow this is over-shadowed by battle.

Somehow her vanishing has faded into the background of the siege. The priorities of Demacians do not surprise Ezreal, not really, but the disgust still feels like a fresh wound.

Janna recounted the original broadcast for him. The way Jarvan hadn't been able to stand obedient at his father's side. The way he had turned his back like he was rejecting Lux's condemnation, rejecting the orders to move out. Rejecting them in the tiny, minuscule way he was able – which is to say, a way that failed to change anything. Rejecting them without speaking out.

The troops had met each other halfway, just past institute grounds. Snarling swordsmen went face-to-face against their equals, their inverse, their enemies. Rivals they had never known, yet trained all their lives to face.

There were countless injuries, but blessed few reported casualties. Ezreal had known even then that it is only a matter of time. Medics had spread to the camps on both sides; reinforcements, too. Ionian soldiers brought from overseas, bringing alchemy and apothecaries more familiar with the chemicals that will surely be unleashed soon.

So Ezreal listens to the news.

He misses only caring about ancient history, misses the feeling of it speaking to him so much more personally than any current events. (Hell, at this point he misses the conspiracy theories within the Institute of War, misses the corruption of its administration, and misses making lists of confidential records to force Lux into stealing for him.)

Garen's squadron deployment is announced. Ezreal only rolls his eyes. How many squadrons are sent to their death without that kind of public fanfare? Literally all the other ones. It's ridiculous. He
can't understand the patriotism of those who cheer, as if one hero will change anything against those numbers.

He would have, before. That was how the Institute of War had worked. It's as if people have forgotten true battlefields, remembering only the flashy dramatics of the Fields of Justice.

Sometimes, in the quiet of the night, when there is nothing new to be reported on and the sound is quiet – when the glow of the crystal keeps his living room dim, Ezreal wonders where Lux is. There is a part of him that wants to believe she is on another secret mission. Infiltrating with the Crimson Elite. Targeting Swain back in his own home, without ever having to face his armies.

But this does not explain Jarvan's indignation.

It does not explain Valor's surprise visit to his front door with a hastily written note tied to his ankle that asks: *where is she?* (Ezreal can only respond to with an *I don't know* that takes him three days and three impatient morning visits from Valor to muster the energy to write.)

There are long stretches of nothing between battles. Then some days, as if pushed by a second-wind, Noxus surges forward, trying to force their way closer to Demacia, inch by inch. These days are the reason he cannot turn off the news.

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By March, the Noxian camps have edged nearly four miles closer. It does not sound like much, but Ezreal sees the bigger picture. They are pushing, and Demacia is giving. *Big strong army*, he thinks, *but not strong enough.*

The endless fight between the two factions has always confused him, if he is honest. Why Demacia is their sworn enemy. Noxus wants to expand, wants to rule everything. This he understands. Before the Institute of War had interfered, they had already breached Freljord, breached Ionia. They had been spreading out like a disease, their greedy hands reaching out in so many directions without ever wearing themselves thin. But Demacia had stood strong against them. Perhaps not to help anyone else, perhaps only save their own self-righteous skin, but even so they had declared themselves the other side of the coin. But they had never been as strong. That had always been a misconception. Something no one liked to acknowledge, and Ezreal isn't sure if was denial, or propaganda from their leaders, or *what.* But Noxus has always been winning. Noxus has always been stronger. And why wouldn't they be? Their creed is survival of the fittest. Their entire way of life revolves around the concept. Not justice, which can be twisted up, misused and abused, but at its core is built to protect the weak. To let them thrive.

Sometimes he wants to pack his bags and leave, but he doesn't know where to go. This never used to be a problem. Maybe he has gotten too used to having guidance and goals. Or maybe the threats are simply too big to walk away from, this time. Maybe the idea of coming home to ruins is too scary to go looking for something long-lost on purpose.

Death counts don't give names, and the journals come out too fast for details. The man he had met in Noxus could be dead, could be outed, could be anything. Only the famous will be reported on, Ezreal knows, and this is not any particular comfort.
His birthday comes and goes. He's never cared to make a fuss, but Janna and Vi insist on taking him out drinking. It's – fun, if he has to pick an adjective. It's fun.

Vi gets into a fistfight with some idiot who tries to get handsy with Janna. Janna will not stop handing Ezreal drink after drink, will not stop draping herself over him just to see Vi fluster because he is the one man she can't bring herself to punch out just to alleviate her jealousy. Eventually Caitlyn has to retrieve her, dragging Vi away with one hand and burying her own face in the other. Vi is drunk enough to nearly start bawling as Janna just waves her off with a smile.

“I'm playing hard to get,” Janna explains, though Ezreal had not asked. He arches an eyebrow, but does not question her as she hands him another drink. “Unlike,” she says, and has to scan the room to find the buyer, “that young lady over there, who delivers this gift unto you.”

The girl in question, across the tavern and sitting with a group, blushing terribly when he winks at her. This is not the first free drink of the night. It is not the last. There are pretty girls and pretty boys that fill the tavern, all eager to celebrate the fame of ex-champions and local celebrities.

Jayce shows up late in the night, uninvited. Ezreal suspects because he could feel it in his bones that people were flirting with Ezreal, and knew deep, deep in his soul that his purpose in life was to steal the attention for himself.

Ezreal is not grateful. Ezreal had not wanted to run from the affection, was not desperately searching for an excuse not to kiss anyone, not to take anyone home. He has not spent the night distracted by every pretty blonde he sees, his stomach falling impossibly lower each time they turn their head and are not who he had hoped for. He is not an idiot, after all. He is not. He is not.

Jayce and Janna walk him home together, both far too close to him no matter how stubbornly he insists he does not need a shoulder to lean on. He stumbles, but does not fall. Not until he is home, where he does not let them put him to bed; where he insists on collapsing onto the couch in the glow of the quiet crystal broadcast.

Janna pets his hair, her hand an eternal cool breeze against the alcohol flush of his skin. He stares up at her and dreads the sympathy, dreads the it's okay to be worried, it's okay to be sad. The empty promises of made up solutions and results.

She only pets his hair in a soothing silence until he is dozing off, then leaves a glass of water on the coffee table for him. She takes her leave with Jayce, and whatever conversation they have is hushed and distant, soon lost behind the gentle closing of the front door.

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In April, Swain arrives. Word carries back to the capitol where it is relayed over broadcast – his near delirious speech just behind his front lines, raving like a paranoid mad-man about their spies sent after him. About how he will not fall for this trick, about how he knows what she's capable of.

So he knows that Lux is missing, Ezreal thinks. And he has leapt to the wrong conclusion, too. Someone so stupid does not deserve to be a general. If she were going to take that sort of action, she would have already.

Jarvan is interviewed one last time by local journalists. He will join the fray, as well. A leader cannot hide behind their troops. For too long, he says, he has left his men alone when he should be right beside them. His eyes are bitter and cold, the set of his jaw defiant, and he says: “I will be bringing
my own aides. The best mages that I know. The best warriors that I trust. Please believe in me. Believe in us. Believe in them.”

Beside him, Sona and Taric bow. At his other side, Xin Zhao, shoulder to shoulder with Riven, does the same. The applause is scattered and uncertain, made worse by Riven's refusal to bow.

Ezreal packs his bags, and for the first time in months, allows the light of the visiopathic crystal to finally flicker off.

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Ezreal has to cross the mountains to make it to the Demacian military camps. The pass would take him much, much too close to Noxus, and that sounds like too much of a risk, even for him. Risks are no fun like this. When he is alone, when the only treasure to be earned is living.

In times like this, he wishes he could do what Lux does. He wishes he could turn invisible.

But he has his own set of skills – skills that take him over the mountains without getting himself killed, and that's impressive enough in itself. He gets some bruises on his knees, on his legs and arms from jumps a bit too long, from landings not-quite perfect, but nothing is broken, nothing is bleeding.

After months of endless chatter and updates, it is hard to go so long with nothing but his thoughts. The quiet settles into him like a black hole in his chest, desperately taking in every sound of his surroundings and consuming it for nothing.

Lux has been missing for months. This is not an infiltration mission. They would not have drawn attention to her disappearance if it were. There are plenty of places she would be welcome, but he has a hard time believing that even a close friend would keep her presence hidden from Jarvan at a time like this.

He isn't worried, he tells himself. It's none of his business, it's got nothing to do with him, and he's done with this.

Someone else has been through these mountains. He is grateful for the distraction as he follows barely-there footprints and plants with too many cleanly-picked berries. Noxian assassins, sneaking around to flank their enemy? No, the signs are not enough for that. This was one, maybe two people, no more, and a sneak attack of that number would be quickly squashed.

Ezreal has no choice but to continue on, shoulders tense and ready for a fight.

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The military camp is vast. Ezreal pictures these things as temporary – tents as small as what he had shared with Lux. Small fires for cooking meals and circles of soldiers sat around them like old friends. But this camp is its own city. Rows of tents are laid out in careful patterns, large meals being dished out by soldiers, volunteers, and the uniformed medics who aren't busy tending to the wounded that lay in the largest tent of them all.

Ezreal has no trouble breaking the grounds; he is a champion too well recognized for suspicion.

From most.
Some volunteers eye him up and down like a ticking time bomb. Medics shy away, averting their eyes. It's his magic, he realizes, belatedly. Those closest to their home are afraid of it. He bites back the urge to set off sparks from his gauntlet, bites back the annoyed boo.

The sight of Taric rushing towards him is an instant comfort. Ezreal feels his shoulders finally relaxing. It's like a harmonizing vibration, crystal to crystal. He does not linger on the clarity of this sensation; he would like it to be their friendship alone that puts him at ease.

Taric sets his hands on Ezreal's shoulders. They are so large and heavy in their comfort that Ezreal feels small under them. Taric's tone is not nearly as soothing as the touch as he demands: “what are you doing here?”

“Helping?” Ezreal says, but knows it comes out uncertain. He doesn't know. He'll be the first to admit that his travels are rarely meaningful, but this is a new level of following his gut.

“This is no place for children,” Taric says, then looks to instantly regret it, biting his lip but not bothering to recant it.

Ezreal does not point out that he is not a child, that he was not a child even before his birthday, and that he has been a part of this war ever since he was first accidentally summoned onto the fields of justice. “I'm here,” he says, “you can't change that. So tell me what I need to know.”

There is some kind of fondness in Taric's eyes, even when his face remains as stern as a disappointed father. He keeps one hand on Ezreal's shoulder, guiding him to another large tent.

Taric looks tired. Ezreal cannot look at his face for long before he has to look away, gritting his teeth. He has always appreciated Taric's compassion, even if he does not like to say it, would never emulate it, but this war is one he could die in. That thought is so overwhelming, after the League of Legends, that Ezreal can hardly process it. These people could die, and their deaths would be permanent.

And it would be the loss of not only his life, but of his magic, the last of its kind.

Ezreal flexes his hand, feeling where his gauntlet gives and where it is firm against his arm. It's like a second-skin, now, the glove and the crystal.

His own secrets, he cherishes. Secrets only he knows are precious treasures. The world will not change by him knowing and the world would not change if they died with him. But he does not like the feeling of responsibly that comes with learning someone else's secrets.

He shakes off the thought, stepping closer to Taric like taking comfort in his shadow.

Taric lifts the tent flap for him, ushering him inside. Jarvan is seated on the ground, predictably exhausted. Xin Zhao nods to them in greeting, standing guard as always – then double takes at the sight of Ezreal. Ezreal snorts, but if he is honest, he is the one who wants to double take.

He knew of the alliance, but it's still strange to see Katarina, Talon, and Riven, all seated just feet away from the prince of Demacia. Sona is in the back, her etwahl sitting over her lap but her fingers resting still just above it. She must have played recently, Ezreal thinks, for the calm in the room. And for Soraka, sitting beside her, with a golden flute on her own lap.

This would all be so much easier if it were only them that had to fight, not all those nothing-special
soldiers.

Jarvan stands up in a hurry when he sees Ezreal, closing the distance between them in three long strides. He asks, “have you heard from her?”

Ezreal wonders what sort of relationship he is supposed to have with this man, but cannot be bothered to think long enough to settle on an answer. He doesn't care what's expected. Ezreal shakes his head and forces his expression neutral. This comes easily, like stepping away from himself, like arcane-shifting two feet away and leaving a hollow husk behind.

Jarvan cannot do it so well. His face visibly falls, gaze dropping to the ground in open disappointment. There is worry still etched into him, even when he returns to his seat to pour over papers of higher importance.

Katarina and Riven both rise at the same time, as if by silent communication, and move to sit across from Jarvan. Whatever they begin to whisper amongst themselves is drown out by Talon, calling to Ezreal with a cool sort of incredulity, “you want to fight?”

Ezreal isn't sure how to answer, because the answer is no. But why else did he come here? Just to have an eye on his friends? To watch from the sidelines? (He is done with this, he reminds himself. He is done following people like this.) He tries to sound confident; jerks his head to the side. “Yeah. Got a problem?”

“Yeah,” Talon says, and Ezreal tenses, ready for a fight. He feels Taric's hand grip his shoulder again, and relaxes against his will like a reflex under it. Talon adds, with a dry nod towards outside: “a big army.”

Ezreal isn't sure if he's supposed to laugh. Thankfully a sharp, solitary chime from Sona's etwahl draws his attention to her, and once he is looking she signs come, sit. Taric gives him a final pat on his back, ushering him to go.

It's heavenly to rest his legs. He likes the strain of a journey, but the tension of the climb has taken its toll. At least the nerves about the “assassins” ahead of him is gone; Katarina and Talon had stayed in Zaun. They must have come here by the same path.

Are you alright? Sona asks him. He nods, and she returns it with a wry smile. She signs, emphatically, I am tired.

Then she nods to Jarvan's broad shoulders, to the women crouched beside him, and brings a finger to her lips in a silent command. Be quiet. Listen.

“His magic is keeping our archers' arrows off of him,” Jarvan is saying. “We need to lure him out past the front lines.”

“He knows better than to give me the chance,” Katarina scoffs. “He's too afraid to face me.”

Riven crosses her arms over her chest, exasperated, as if she has heard this line countless times. “We know.”

“I'd love to arrange the duel you're hoping for,” Jarvan tells her, “but it's less realistic by the day. Their reinforcements arrive much faster than ours. He knows better than to make an open target of himself.”
“Their army is stronger,” Riven translates.

There is an uncomfortable silence. Jarvan does not answer her, just mutters, “if Quinn were here...”

Talon interrupts, voice sharp with impatience. “Then call for her. You have far more power than anyone else here, so I don't see why you sit around lamenting over the decisions you aren't making.”

Jarvan doesn't answer this either.

“What about Ashe?” Riven asks. “You're allies, aren't you?” She says the word like it is dirty, like she cannot bring herself to respect it.

Jarvan holds his tongue once more.

Soraka is the one to break this silence, her voice soft and authoritative all at once. “There is more to the world than just your war,” she says. “Not everyone can be moved like chess pieces.”

This does not answer any one of Ezreal's questions, but apparently it meant something to Jarvan, because he tells her, “it's fine,” in a tone one might use to console someone. She hadn't sounded upset. Jarvan shakes his head as if to shake away the train of conversation.

So he is still an outsider, Ezreal thinks. In the tent with all the heroes, sitting in with the privileged, he is still an outsider, grabbing at scraps to make sense of the conversations had without him.

Sona bumps her shoulder into his. He looks up at her and watches her eyes scan the room, checking for who else might be looking. When she is sure that no one else is paying them any mind, she puts her finger to her lips one more time.

She signs: *a rift has opened in the mountains. She signs: Quinn has been there to fight the beasts.*

Taric comes to join them, sitting to Ezreal's other side, and instead of whispering, he signs as well, stilted and slow with lack of practice, but readable. *The warriors need hope, not another burden of threat.*

In silence, the three of them share secrets. The comfort in this is almost outweighed by the fear.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guess what Ezreal is the main character now. Surprise.
As it turns out, war is very different from combat on the Fields of Justice. Not only in how much more widespread it is, but in how much slower. In how Ezreal spends just as much time wondering what, exactly, he should be doing, as he does overwhelmed with everything around him that begs for his time all at once.

Ezreal has always recovered from his own injuries with sheer stubbornness, but now Taric shows him the proper way to bandage injuries and how to set a broken limb.

“Healing magic can do what hands can't,” Taric tells him. “But it's better to be prepared.”

“For what? Losing your magic?” Ezreal asks, appalled by the concept.

Taric shakes his head, but looks to consider it anyway. “No. Although that is something to be mindful of. Magic can come and go and change.”

Ezreal knows this all too well. Who was it that had declared Lux was a light mage? Who had been stupid enough to think that was a rule she had to follow?

Taric says, “it can be lost, I suppose,” then nods to the wounded Demacians without regard for who among them is listening, “and it can be refused.”

Ezreal has never heard of someone losing their magic, though he can already imagine that plenty of Demacians will claim as much. Slip on their disguise of normalcy and reject their own blood. It's pathetic.

He can imagine what Taric means, though. He is the last one to know the magic he knows. In this world, magic is so often unique. Lux's magic is different from Ezreal's. Different from Swain's, from Leblanc's. Sona's healing is different from Soraka's healing is different from Taric's healing.

Taric's magic is tradition. Taric's magic, though from another world, is one that is meant to be taught and passed down, repeated in each new generation. Taric is the last to know it. If he never makes it home, his world will lose it, completely. If he does not pass it on, this world will lose it, too.

“Anyone that rejects something that can help them this much,” Ezreal says, decisively, and with equal disregard for their audience, “is an idiot.”

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Even when true battle breaks out, no one will let him onto the front lines. Each time, he volunteers, swallowing back the nervousness at the chaos, and each time, someone is there to push him back with some menial task that doesn't need doing.

He has come to terms with the new finality of death. He has washed blood from Lux's hands and watched her walk right back to the body of an assassin to dirty them again. He has killed soldiers with her, hand in hand in a heavy Zaun rain. He is not afraid of dying. Everyone else seems to fear it far more.

He is tired of pacing the grounds, looking for some way to be helpful. He is tired of finding something to do, and hating it. He is tired of feeling the pull of mana in the distance when the others join the battle, and he is tired of the quiet exhaustion that they drag back with them.
But he is always glad they come back.

Today is not quiet. Today his task, a tedious distribution of medicine to the bedridden wounded, is interrupted by shouting. It is only one or two voices at first, then more. There are high shrieks and rapid conversations, too quick to even eavesdrop on.

Ezreal doesn't wait to be filled in. He follows his gut, and chases after the others.

From the screaming, he had expected the battle to have reached the encampment, but it has not. It still takes him time to get to the armies, even in his rush. Once he is there, the terror is no mystery.

“Sion!” Swain calls out, like he is commanding the soldier. “Carve my path, lay the road to my new kingdom!”

A figure looms, taller than any other soldier. Sion is a patchwork warrior. The swing of his axe is slow and heavy, all momentum that tears through anything in its path. There are dead bodies on the ground, their armor sliced through like nothing, cracked like the brittle bones in the marshes. Demacian armor, slick with blood and viscera.

It isn't just Demacians. He sees Noxian armor, too, bodies just as torn, blood just as red. Ionian armor.

His breath catches in his throat. His legs freeze beneath him – for a moment the only movement he can manage is his heart pounding in his chest. The battle is still surging around him, idiot warriors raised with no self-preservation still rushing in to meet the same fate. Some are trying to fight the Noxian soldiers around it, as if a man of Sion's size could just be avoided.

He searches for anyone he recognizes; it doesn't take long. They stand out.

Katarina is behind Sion, behind a row of Noxian soldiers, back-to-back with Talon as Riven tries to fight a path to Swain for them.

Jarvan is easy to spot in the crowd that parts around him, Xin Zhao keeping his back safe. Jarvan's lance pierces Sion's shoulder in a swift, clean throw. The line it draws through the air is interrupted abruptly by sinking into flesh, only to be ripped out again with a yell tearing from Sion's mouth.

There should be blood. It should be pouring from the wound like a wine bottle uncorked. There are only droplets, a light sprinkling over the ground below.

Sion tosses the spear aside, and Jarvan lunges after it. To his left, Taric's shield is raised, blocking a downpour of Noxian attacks. Axes deflected with deft movements and careful footwork, his weapon rarely drawn in return. To Jarvan's right, Sona. Her fingers tug and pull at the strings of her etwahl, and with the movements enemies are bound in place, weapons frozen mid-swing, feet tripping over themselves.

There is nothing to do but dive in.

Ezreal shifts, leaping from his place to Jarvan's side. He does not bother with a greeting, firing at Sion while he has the opening before stepping back.

“You shouldn't be here,” Jarvan says, but the relief in his eyes betrays him. They can push Ezreal back in misguided care all they want, but he is strong, and they all know it.

Garen emerges from the crowds, one of the few brave enough to stand against Sion. His body is tense, dropped low in a familiar stance, sword drawn. “There's no use telling him that,” he says.
Ezreal does not understand, but agrees none the less.

“That thing shouldn't be here,” Ezreal retorts. His adrenaline is pumping on high. It's almost easy to joke, to distance himself from the danger as if it is nothing new. The same mindset as on the fields; leaving fear behind.

Sion knows his target. He focuses on the prince, without a care for what he hits as collateral. It's a matter of avoiding getting caught in the chaos, of staying out of the way. Jarvan dodes in short movements, conserving energy. All his strength pours into the swipes he takes to knock Sion's axe away, unable to block the hits and instead redirecting them with momentum.

Ezreal's magic burns Sion's skin as he keeps shooting from a distance, but the juggernaut hardly seems to notice, even when it boils and burns in patches. Garen can hardly get a hit in, unable to get too close.

Suddenly, Ezreal realizes that Sona and Taric are no longer beside them. Ezreal whirls, losing himself in scanning the crowds for them. He is almost immediately punished for it as Jarvan knocks into him. Whether he had expected Ezreal to move out of his way or meant to push him from harm, they fall to the ground together all the same. Garen leaps to their defense, swinging in time with Sion's strike.

Garen's sword cuts deep into Sion's arm, sinking into the flesh but unable to slice all the way through. Sion flinches, nearly dropping his axe mid-swing. Ezreal shoves at Jarvan with all his strength, then teleports away at the last moment he can.

Three feet back, he watches the axe fall to the ground where he had been. Jarvan hurries to his feet, immediately rushing to strike Sion while he is unarmed. Ezreal rises too, and as he does feels the sting of a cut across his left arm. He had shifted away too late. It isn't bad; he flexes his hand and it burns, the blood that pours down to his elbow hot and slick – but he can move it with no trouble.

Garen struggles to retrieve his sword, Sion's large hand clamped down over it, trapping it in his arm with complete disregard for the injury.

Ezreal's magic feels so ineffective against him, but even so, he fires, careful to keep his distance.

It is the stillness that catches his attention. Just beyond the side of the field that Sion has all-but walled off, the battle has stopped. This is where Taric and Sona have disappeared to, the two of them back to back, facing out into a motionless sea of Noxian soldiers. The crowd is parted, and Ezreal can only barely see past them: the twirl of crimson hair and violet vines snapping up into the sky.

Talon and Riven are playing shield to the opposite side of Katarina's fight. The jarring quiet only lasts a moment before it is interrupted, soldiers realizing that even if they will not be able to interrupt this duel, they can still fight other soldiers.

In his effort to keep distance from Sion, Ezreal feels buffeted by Demacian soldiers, rushing past him, heedless to the way their heavy armor knocks him off-balance.

Garen manages to get a grip on his sword, pushing it down hard, hard until Sion's arm is severed. The sight of the inside is not as nauseating as Ezreal would expect, not like the dead soldiers on the ground, not like the smell. Sion is clinical and dry inside, and his cry is one of rage, not pain.

Impossibly, Jarvan has not lost sight of Ezreal. He takes the moment that Sion has reeled back from Garen to strike, diving into him with his lance in his hand, pushing, pushing it through his chest with a fierce determination. Ezreal sees the resistance of it, sees the weight behind the shove, and when
Sion falls, Jarvan's gaze snaps up to meet his.

He calls out, “Ezreal!”

Just like on the fields. Ezreal knows what to do when an enemy is locked down; his body reacts like clockwork. He draws in magic from all around him – from the air, from the ground, from the flickers left behind by other spells. Then lets it go.

Sion rises against Jarvan, swinging an arm hard enough to send him flying until he crashes against Garen, the both of them falling, armor clattering loudly. Ezreal's magic slices through Sion's chest, boiling, searing him, cauterizing its own wound in an instant as it passes through.

This time when Sion falls, he does not get back up.

There were others caught in the crossfire. Behind Sion, Ezreal sees soldiers collapsing, not all of them Noxians.

He watches Katarina's head snap up to see it coming. She vanishes in time, reappearing beside Riven before lunging straight back towards Swain.

The soldiers are not fighting anymore. Demacians look to Ezreal too fearfully to fight. Noxians are too captivated with the duel unraveling ahead.

Swain's vines rise and fall like ocean waves, pulsing out from the ground, always a step behind Katarina's light footwork.

Ezreal tries to shoulder his way closer, but Jarvan and Garen both block his path.

“Let her duel,” Jarvan says, through gritted teeth. Oddly, it is Garen who looks impassive.

This pause cannot last forever. These small reprieves never do. Taric and Sona. Riven and Talon. The four of them are the only real force stopping a crowd from collapsing in on the fight.

Katarina's knives fly through the air, swiping against Swain's cane as he tries to deflect them. He moves too slowly, yet knows her patterns. The sleeves of his robes are torn, there are thin lines of blood on his arms, on his face.

She runs out of knives. There must be at least twelve of them around his feet; Ezreal doesn't even know where she keeps them. She cannot get close enough to retrieve them – the ground grows fresh vines around him when she takes even a cursory step in his direction.

A stalemate.

“Did you think you could kill me?” Swain asks, far too confident for a man cut and bloody. “When you needed a small army just to get this far?”

Katarina scoffs. There is exhaustion in every curve of her body, but few injuries. She is too fast for that. She retorts, “do you really think you would have made it this far without the Black Rose behind you?”

“It's natural for a general to have backing,” he says. A taunt, spitting in the face of her missing father. (He is dead, Ezreal knows. Missing parents are always dead.)

Katarina shakes her head, dismissive, as if flicking hair from her face is a bigger nuisance than this fight. “Then it's natural for me. You seem flustered. Tired, perhaps? Are you not sleeping well with
one eye open?"

He doesn’t answer, just calls for Beatrice to attack. The bird rises into the sky, then swoops down towards Katarina, as fast and sharp as any of her knives.

Katarina ducks down, rolling forward out of the way. She pushes back to her feet in a sprint for Swain, quickly closing the distance. As she gets close enough for his magic to bind her, she pushes off of the ground, palms slamming into the vines as they rise and pushing herself into a handspring over them.

Inches from Swain, she kicks his cane from under him, grabbing for a knife from the ground. His vines curl inwards, ignoring him as they wrap around her ankles, around her wrist. Katarina wrenches her hand out of the thorny grip, and in another harsh jerk, stabs her knife into Swain's shoulder.

Her hands are bleeding from the palms, scratched up raw by magic. She does not pay the pain any mind as she pushes Swain to the ground and climbs over him. Her hands grope clumsily for her knives without any of her usual finesse. Beneath her, Swain tries to grapple, but with his injured arm cannot fight off the pierce of three, four more knives into his chest.

It's enough to give Ezreal second-hand pain, his body aching more intensely at the sight of it than from his actual injury. The last thing Swain does is reach his hand out, a feeble movement, shaking in the air. He points to Sona.

Katarina's mouth moves, but Ezreal cannot hear what she is saying from this far. Swain is gasping for air, blood bubbling out of his mouth. He wastes his last breathes on curses as Katarina rises up over him.

"Now then," she announces. Her voice is loud, and Ezreal knows that she is only speaking to a certain audience. He sees the way her eyes travel only over her own soldiers.

The air feels heavy. Ezreal feels disgusted by the understanding that sinks like stones in his stomach. They should at least need to regroup, they should at least need to mourn a leader. Soldiers step over his corpse like any other to return to the fight. They step past Katarina like they have been her faithful guardians all their lives. Like she would not have been killed on sight for the past three months.

Garen says nothing, yet as if consoling him, Jarvan murmurs, “you knew this would happen.” He does not get a reply.

They close in around Sona and Taric, caught out in a bad position after defending Katarina's duel.

The movement of a fight is nothing new to either of them. They protect each other – Sona ducking beneath Taric’s arm as he swings his shield to block an attack from behind her. His movements are fast, in tempo with the song she plays as they try to escape the wave of attackers.

Ezreal does not see the attack itself. Just the way Sona’s spine arches, the way she opens her mouth in a silent gasp. The way blood blooms around her stomach, and the way her assailant steps back like he is shocked to have succeeded.

Ezreal has never had a panic attack before, but he imagines this must be what it's like. His lungs cry for clean air. His vision goes spotty. The smell of blood is sickening, something he cannot get used to, yet it's the air itself that is hurting him, like his chest is filling with miasma.

He feels as if he has only blinked, and suddenly Taric has forced his way from the crowd, Sona in
his arms and her etwahl resting over her. Xin Zhao helps to defend him, along with a flurry of Demacian soldiers quickly filling in behind them.

Taric's healing has not been enough to save so many of the men here – Ezreal shouldn't be surprised that it isn't enough to close Sona's wound. She grimaces, red hands over her stomach, blood spreading and spreading. This is the first time that Ezreal can remember wishing she had a voice.

Jarvan's command seems directed at anyone. Maybe it was meant for Ezreal. “Get Soraka.”

Ezreal turns, but only takes a step before his attention is drawn back.

A shadow falls over him from behind; Sion rises again.
Sion roars, alive anew, if you can call it life. Ezreal isn't so sure. The juggernaut takes one step forward – then freezes in place. Ezreal recognizes the magic under his feet in an instant as it binds Sion in a galactic swirl, as if the sky has been upended just to trap him.

Soraka is already here. Ezreal looks to her in time to watch her sickle cut through the air, swooping down. Magic rains down from the sky like falling stars called down by her command, like comets crashing down. They smash Sion down until he falls to the ground, pinned under their weight. They are small, they do not hurt him, but gravity is upended at Soraka's will. Ezreal sees her wince with pain, the punishment she faces for abusing her magic like this.

What, then, are celestials for? If they aren't supposed to take sides in the matters of men, if they aren't supposed to guide humanity down the right path? The thought in Ezreal's mind feels caustic and bitter, even for him, but he wonders what chance this planet has in the hands of humans.

Soraka approaches Sona, kneeling beside her.

Taric has never sounded so helpless as he does when he asks her, “help.” It is heart-wrenching to see him so openly devastated. It is impossible for Ezreal to steel himself from the tremble of Taric's hands.

Soraka's expression is tight with focus, though the tone of her voice is amused. “Don't be afraid. I've brought the dead back before. This is nothing new for me.”

There is a pit in Ezreal's gut, a nauseating black hole. Sona is shaking, curling up around her injury, biting her lip.

Irelia came back, Ezreal knows – but so did her blades, and he has seen Irelia lose her control over them at least a dozen times. So what will happen with Sona? With her etwahl that already warps his understanding of magic so effortlessly? Celestial magic is far, far beyond his understanding.

Sion is struggling. At the edges of his sight, Ezreal can see the soldiers keeping him down. He can see them strike him countless times, and he can see Sion's movements never faltering. He does not feel pain, he does not bleed.

Beyond Sona, spilling crimson in Taric's arms - beyond Soraka, beyond Sion, beyond the waves of soldiers clashing – the world is flickering. The light is playing tricks on his eyes, even when he scrubs at them, but he does not have the time to worry about himself.

Will Soraka be punished for swaying a war with healing? Is it different than if she fought for them? Who, exactly, decides to punish her? His mind is spinning fast, off-topic, and he feels like Lux. How do you make it stop? How did she? He can't command his own head silent.

Sona reaches out to Soraka and touches her arm. The fingerprints she leaves behind seem to slow his mind.
“I know,” Soraka tells her, smiling wryly. Her stillness is unnatural, with the world moving around her. “You aren’t dead.”

“Can you heal her?” Ezreal asks, as if her confidence gave him any room to doubt. He knows that Soraka's magic is not like Taric’s, not like Sona's.

“I don't need to, really,” Soraka says. Then, to Sona, she murmurs, “I'm sorry. I had hoped this would happen naturally. But it's time for you to wake up.”

Sona only looks confused, squinting up through her haze of pain. Her hair isn't carried by her magic anymore; it falls stringy and heavy over her shoulders like a cascade of water.

“I only know you because we are the same. I hope that you will know yourself when you are awake. I won't have your answers.”

Soraka's hands glow as she gently holds Sona's, moving them down to touch the etwahl together. The light spreads like shared body heat, engulfing Sona's hands, then streaking down the harp strings like a catching flame.

It shatters. As if overwhelmed by the light poured into it from both their palms, the golden instrument cracks and falls apart. Light spills out from each fissure until its container is gone completely, golden shards fading into nothing. From within, white light pours out, blinding. Ezreal has to shield his eyes with his arm, and sees others doing the same.

The world comes back bleary, ebbing back into existence. Shadows fade back in, shade by shade.

Sona's dress is still stained and dark, but her skin beneath the tear is smooth when she sits up, drawing away from Taric.

For a moment she just looks around, as if unsure of her surroundings. There cannot be anything wrong with her memory, because Ezreal sees recognition in her eyes when her gaze passes over him. But her wide-eyes still startle him.

The color of them has changed from a deep, warm amber. Now they are a pale blue, unnervingly different from what he is used to seeing.

Her lips part, but no sound comes out. She looks down to her hands, and in the realization that there is no instrument resting under them, her fingers flinch with surprise.

Strings still light up beneath her fingertips. Like an invisible wire from the air that lights beneath her touch. A lightning-glow line drawn in nothing, and a piercing chord played with it.

Sona pauses. Moves her fingers through the air again. This time the sound is less discordant.

The feeling of her mana is overwhelming. Ezreal can feel it circulating through her hair, her fingertips, the air around her. He can feel it flow through his gem as fast and harsh as a river, received and removed with a hurried desperation just to keep up. His head pulses with the discomfort of it.

Her long hair is floating again. It circles her like the eye of a whirlpool as she turns to face Sion.

She tugs at the strings in air, a short chime that Ezreal does not recognize the tune of. Glowing
threads bind Sion's limbs like puppet strings, pulling him off of the star-scape ground. Soraka's magic is still in place, but Sona's strings are strong enough to counter it.

He tries to yell, tries to roar, but the sound comes out choked.

One more pull and the song ends, abrupt. The threads slice through his body. It is frightfully simple; his limbs fall down to the ground as the stars give way to dirt and grass.

The battle is halted. There is hesitation to fight in the face of that kind of healing from Soraka. In whatever has changed in Sona.

Ezreal's vision is still hazy. The nausea hasn't gone away. There is something in the air, something dusty and sharp. Like specks of the world are flickering. He imagines this is what it would be like to see the mana flow in the air, but he knows that's impossible.

Sona opens her mouth as if to speak, but no sound comes out, and she does not appear surprised by this. Too many eyes are on her, cautious, frightened. Worried. Ezreal knows he is only one of many.

When the ground shakes, she loses her footing like the rest of them. Taric is at her side in an instant; if he is afraid of her at all, he hides it well, quickly putting an arm around her.

Katarina's voice shouts in the distance; Noxians begin to retreat, their footwork messy in the face of the earthquake. Some of them fall, but this is not Soraka's magic. Demacian soldiers and Ionian soldiers alike struggle to back away from a crack that is working itself open in the ground.

Ezreal pushes his way closer to it, fighting his way past those who hurry away. He wants to roll his eyes. Demacians don't retreat, they must be telling themselves, but he is one of few to push forward for a closer look. Cowards. (What can they be so terrified of? How much more fucked up can this day possibly get?)

It's nearly impossible to look at the cracked ground. All the flecks in his eyesight, all the blurred edges and nausea are coming from this hole. Ezreal has seen earthquake damage before, but this is not the same. The split ground only gives way to darkness, to a black so pure that he cannot see anything. He finds himself blinking rapidly to process it. He knows this hole is not deep enough to be so dark.

He hears something from inside of it. The sound of slithering and a skittering of bugs.

From the dark, a tentacle snakes up. It curls over the edge of the ground, an ultraviolet tendril grasping for leverage. Then another. The air is thick in Ezreal's lungs as the creature pushes up. He's seen creatures of the void before; enough to recognize one, even when it is different.

It has only one eye, centered in an aura of magic. It's pupil darts across the field, a frantic, yet cold scan, taking in everything it sees. Processing it.

Then it disintegrates a row of bodies from the ground, turning them into dust on charred earth. There is a beam of light, then nothing; just the smell of cooked flesh and the upturned ashes in the air.

Too many of them are familiar with fighting creatures of the void, even if this one is different. It isn't consuming with its mouth. It doesn't even have one to devour with. But it turns, and disintegrates another stack of bodies with the same hunger. There are screams; soldiers caught out.
Someone calls out *there's more*, and Ezreal turns with horror to see another tentacle slither from the rift. They move like enchanted vines, twisting and turning and pulling themselves out.

“They’ll just keep coming,” Jarvan shouts.

Katarina is at his side, impossibly sudden. Talon and Riven are still working their way through an uncertain crowd to join them. “How do you know?”

“Because this isn't the first,” Ezreal blurts out, not meaning to.

Jarvan turns to Katarina; he raises his hands as if about to reach for hers, but falters mid-way. “If we're divided, they'll overtake us all,” he says, imploring. “You know how strong these creatures are, untethered by the Institute.”

Katarina’s eyes shift over the tear, over the monsters given a wide-berth. She is calculating, scowling tight and furious. Ezreal can understand it. Her first decree as the new General is going to be an order not to fight the enemy, but to work with them.

She is not the type to sacrifice her own men. At the very least, she has this going for her.

Riven looks just as angry, but she still bites out, “it isn't an alliance, it's just a ceasefire.”

Talon does not seem nearly as emotional at the idea. He is tense, ready for a fight with his eyes trained on the void creature. “It's an alliance,” he says, dispassionately. “But I don't see how that's any different from what we've been doing.”

Katarina snaps, vehement, “it's different.” She taps her foot with an anxious impatience, perhaps at herself, before calling out, “don't allow the creatures passage!”

There is hesitance among the Noxian soldiers. Ezreal isn't sure if it's the order or her authority that is in question, but it is quickly shaken off. They surge towards the creature – idiocy – to strike. It is lucky that the Demacian and Ionian soldiers decide to do the same without command, flanking it.

After Sion, it falls comparatively easily. Four spears through its back and tentacles sliced off. There are casualties, but Ezreal cannot bring himself to mind them. Not when Sona is standing in the middle of all the movement, head tilted slightly to the side. She goes untouched, soldiers avoiding her like an invisible barrier separates them. Even Taric steps away from her to fight, unable to stand idly by.

Soraka has already moved on to help with the second creature. Ezreal tries to follow suit, but finds himself falling back to Sona's side. He feels as if all the adrenaline is sucked out from his body in her proximity, pulled right into the black hole inside him.

She does not appear to notice him. Her sapphire eyes are vacant, glazed over as she stares ahead at nothing. Even when Ezreal asks, “are you okay?”

When she doesn't respond, he reaches out to touch her arm. She jolts, and looks down at him. She does not sign anything to him, just reaches down to run her hand over where her dress is torn. She points to herself, expression questioning. Ezreal knows he isn't expected to have any answers for her, but he wishes he at least knew the question.

Sona raises her hands up as if her etwahl were still in front of her, fingers settling into their usual
positions.

Soraka calls, “Sona!”

The second creature is on the ground, laying still, and the crowd of soldiers circled around the rift in preparation for more.

Obediently, Sona pushes her way to the front, and Ezreal follows. They join Soraka.

“We can close it, for now,” Soraka says to her. “Though only a temporary reprieve. It's a door to be closed and locked. Do you know who you are?”

Ezreal's mind is racing with confusion – why Soraka needs Sona's help, what they are going to do when it opens again, and what will happen when the battlefield returns to a ground of soldiers at war. He doesn't understand anything that has been happening. Yet Sona nods.

Soraka raises her sickle into the air, and stars spread out across the ground. They fill the deep black nothingness of the void rift, the swirl of spinning galaxies stretching to cover it.

Sona pulls strings that do not exist. The familiar sounds of her harps still fill the air, threads lighting up under her fingers and then vanishing again. Ezreal is so captivated watching this that he almost misses the secondary threads. They weave from star to star over the void, like she is sewing it shut.

When the starlight fades, it's nothing but a crack in the earth.

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With the rift closed, the armies had backed off from one another. Only as far as their military camps, but this is better than nothing.

Katarina is waiting in their tent when Ezreal follows Jarvan inside. He can't figure out how she could have beat them back, let alone with Riven hovering behind her like a bodyguard, but he does not get the chance to ask.

“Don't mistake these for times of peace,” she blurts out, almost in a rush. She should be addressing Jarvan, but instead her eyes are on Garen. Ezreal wants to roll his eyes, but he does not have the energy to care.

Jarvan speaks like he is consoling a child. If Ezreal didn't know better, he would think it condescension. “Of course not. I'm sure there are many things you need to settle before resuming business.”

Sometimes Ezreal is not sure that these people are capable of feelings anymore. Knowing one another so personally and still sending their armies up against one another. Killing each others men and still speaking to one another like simple rivals.

Are they all just actors? Lux was raised like this, buried waist deep in it from the day she was born. It's disgusting, in a way that he does not have the patience to articulate.

The ceasefire will continue until Noxus is sorted out. There is still Leblanc to consider, in far too high a position to dismiss simply because Swain is gone. Internal conflict that for some reason Demacia is going to allow them the time to work out. Ezreal both does and does not understand why
one of them does not just kill the other here and now. The two leaders of kingdoms at war, so isolated, and all they do is bicker.

Maybe they need each other. If not for Sona and Soraka, only here by luck, the rift would still be spilling out monsters.

Katarina shakes her head, perpetually shaking hair from her face. She should just cut it, if it's always in her way, like that. Why, Ezreal wonders vehemently, don't girls just cut their hair when they want to?

She brushes past Jarvan, but Riven pauses when she follows.

“Walk us back,” Riven demands.


Ezreal does not miss the strange looks the group of them get, but no one asks questions or interferes. The luxury of being an ex-champion. It's rare to be questioned, these days.

Katarina leads them, Garen at her heels and Jarvan at her side. Riven, for some reason, takes up the prince’s other side.

Sona and Taric stay behind with Soraka. Ezreal isn't sure why he doesn’t. Maybe he thinks the three of them need some privacy and some rest.

He feels like a stupid tag-along child, trailing after Jarvan.

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They separate at the rift, or what once was. It looks like the simple result of a small earthquake, now, but Ezreal can still feel the magic under the surface. Like low vibrations, they resonate in his skin and in his gauntlet, nearly one in the same. The void, and the celestial magic pushing it back.

Riven and Katarina are a splash of crimson in the distance when Garen tells Jarvan, “you shouldn't get so friendly.”

*Like you're one to talk,* Ezreal wants to say, but bites his tongue.

Jarvan sounds amused. “I wouldn't call myself friendly with the general of Noxus.”

“That isn't who I mean.”

There is a fury in Garen's voice that Ezreal is unused to hearing. It is not composed, it is not dignified. It is not even frightening. It is clumsy and uncertain, and for once in his life, targeted at someone he is supposed to honor and respect above all else.

Jarvan goes quiet. It stretches for a long moment, the two men refusing to look at one another, refusing to say anything more.

Ezreal stares at Jarvan from behind, tall and broad-shouldered, and he is sure that he would not be able to read his face even if he could see it.
Garen's shoulders are trembling with his anger, and even after the long silence, he does not sound like he has cooled off at all. He bites out, “are you really so forgetful,” as he turns away, then stops short when his gaze lands on Ezreal. His glare lessens, eyes averting self-consciously, as if he had forgotten Ezreal was with them at all.

The rift is closed and Sona is healed. But Garen brushes past him, and the black hole opens up his chest again, empty and aching. The unconvincing smile Jarvan offers him as they return to camp does nothing to alleviate it.

Chapter End Notes

35 chapters of Ezreal Suffering, and his arc is only just beginning. Is this what you came here for??? Is it???????
In Demacia, Sona and Taric return to the Buvelle estate. They assure Ezreal he is welcome, but he doesn’t like the idea of being in that sprawling mansion. It is too big to be so empty. He wants to be alone, but he doesn’t like to be in places like that.

In open fields and forests, he can tell where other people are, and it is rarely near. In the ridiculous, over-sized homes of nobles, there are too many people. Servants and cooks, maids and butlers, all bustling around beyond each wall. Even if they leave him alone, they are still too close, and he is too wary of them to feel comfortable.

He just wants to be alone.

Jarvan offers him a room at the military barracks. He says it's down at the end, far from any occupied rooms, but something about that does not sit well with Ezreal, either. That's just replacing the servants with soldiers.

Instead he intends to seek out an inn, already preemptively exhausted by what he is sure will be an arduous search for anything with reasonable pricing. Demacia is like its own economy, separate from anywhere else's. (This could be said for many other features of Demacia. It is its own world, by force.)

Before he leaves, he takes in Jarvan's office for a final time. It does not mean much to him, but he still likes the idea of expanding the library in his mind. It is one more thing he can know, when he would not have, otherwise. The ornately decorated desk and the careless scratch marks on the surface. Bookshelves full of old propaganda, their spines all covered in a layer of dust. The worn sofa against the wall and the snags in the cushions.

He doesn't know why he isn't home in Piltover.

He wants to be alone. He hasn't minded the particular emptiness of his home in years. But he can't stop thinking of the empty room down the hall. He can't stop thinking about Lux's whispered secrets that only he knows. Or the secrets of hers that he doesn't know.

The ache comes like a physical pang in his heart, a twisted knife that he knows better than to pull out.

"I'm sure we can find work for you, if you'd like?" Jarvan offers. Ezreal suspects he is only saying this to make it less awkward that Ezreal has been hovering by the door for far too long. "If you're concerned about your time away from home."

"I'm not," Ezreal says, with as little emotion as he can manage.

He always thought he was good at this. Like stepping back from himself. But he looks at Jarvan's smile and Garen's tight frown, and he knows he has nothing on them.

Jarvan nods, patient, and far too amicable for a man who walked the enemy to safety so recently.

"We're family," Jarvan says. Ezreal feels his whole face contorting, eyes darting to Garen as if that could possibly help him get a handle on the statement, but of course the older man is looking equally
caught off guard. In the silence, even Jarvan realizes he's misspoken, and clears his throat. "Us Champions, I mean. You've helped us before for Piltover, but I would trust you to help us out of altruism."

"That's misplaced," Ezreal says, shrugging. Garen's expression has settled. Xin Zhao is very studiously examining the bookshelves without actually touching anything, as if it could remove him from the room. "I'm not particularly altruistic."

Jarvan smiles like he is humoring Ezreal by allowing this claim. Ezreal takes vindictive pleasure in lingering long enough to watch it fall, then turning to leave.

The door creaks when Ezreal pushes it open. Garen's voice rises above it, impossible to read as ever, "if you hear - if you find anything out. About Lux."

"I'd tell her fiancé before her brother," Ezreal bites out, and leaves. He hates them both.

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It takes until nightfall to find an inn that doesn't make him want to burn it down when he sees its prices. Maybe he wouldn't mind the pricier rooms if he knew how long he was staying. Maybe he should just camp out.

But he doesn't know.

He doesn't know how to pass the time. He doesn't know when to go home. He doesn't know what to do with himself. Over this stasis, he would even prefer not knowing how to make himself useful.

Maybe he should have taken a job from Jarvan, but if that's on the table, why not just go home? Why not just get back to his usual work? Ask Caitlyn for more to do? He is always turning down commission work with cartography, he knows he could easily overwhelm himself to satisfaction if he tried.

A small voice in his head tells him: Caitlyn would say no. Caitlyn would take one look at his face and see the exhaustion in every shadow and she would know better than to let him overwork himself just for a distraction.

Jarvan may smile nice and speak soft, but he does not look for Ezreal's best interests. His claim of family is as empty as Garen's.

He could travel. Find peace in the hidden places of the world as he unearths them. (Refuse to map them anywhere but his mind, refuse to share them with anyone.)

But he knows that he would just be searching, and he knows that he would not find her.

Weeks later, he wakes at sunset to a knock at the door. He fumbles his way to the door, swinging it open without a care for how rumpled his appearance is. He slept in his clothes. His hair is a nightmare. He never cares, he assures himself, so this is not unusual.

It is a Demacian soldier, her uniform plain. None of the custom flairs that come with high rank or nobility. Her expression is impassive.

"The prince requests your presence at the military barracks."

"Why?"
She looks annoyed by the question, scowling. Ezreal imagines that her silver ponytail is drawn too tight. "He has a dossier for you, and a visitor."

Ezreal knows better than to get his hopes up, but his heart leaps to his chest even so. He ignores the part about the dossier - he can reject that to Jarvan's face. He said he wasn't looking for work, not here in a foreign kingdom. (Does Jarvan think that is kindness? That their ties from the League makes Ezreal another pawn for his royal decrees?)

He steps into the hall and shuts the door behind him. The soldier begins walking, hardly looking back to make sure he is following.

"Why wouldn't he just send this visitor to me?"

She doesn't answer him, even when they sit in a wholly unnecessary carriage ride back to the barracks. Ezreal is used to people disliking him, but it usually comes after he annoys them, and that usually is done on purpose.

It does not occur to him until they are walking down the halls to Jarvan's office, drawing uncomfortable gazes left and right, that this is because he is a mage. In Demacia, this has already come to matter more than his time in the League of Legends.

She still bows before leaving him at the door, but her eyes are harsh with disapproval.

Ezreal stares at the door long after she leaves. He does not want to open it and face the finality. He knows it isn't her.

He opens the door without knocking. The room glows yellow from the lights, the shadows dark now that the sun has set.

Jarvan is hunched over his desk, over a map of Runeterra. At just a glance, Ezreal can see that he's tracking the rifts. One in Freljord. One in the sea. One by the Institute's old grounds. Xin Zhao is standing guard, and gives Ezreal a silent nod in greeting.

Across from Jarvan is Zilean, sitting quietly, eyes on the map and hands clasped together over his lap. And on the sofa, sprawled out and asleep: Ekko.

He understands Ekko, immediately. Here in search of Lux, no doubt. Perhaps he came while they were away, or perhaps he only recently made it. What he doesn't understand is Zilean.

Jarvan offers him a smile, and rises to greet him properly. Only to be interrupted by Zilean. "I suppose it's time to repeat myself."

"If you don't mind," Jarvan says, mildly.

Zilean turns in his seat to gesture for Ezreal to sit down on the sofa.

Ekko wakes when Ezreal nudges him aside, at first with an annoyed grunt and a light kick, then with wide eyes as he flings himself upright. The younger boy slurs out something incoherent, something that was either Ezreal's name, Lux's, or both at once.

"I don't know anything," Ezreal mutters, before Ekko gets a chance to try asking properly. He sits down, letting Ekko kick his legs over his lap as he slouches back down. Ekko lets his limbs fall too harshly. It's a minor way of lashing out, Ezreal supposes, all things considered. If it came from anyone else, he would be angrier.
As they settle, Zilean murmurs, "repetition," and quiets again as if letting tea steep.

The excited tension in Ekko's body betrays the way he rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Tell us again about Urtistan."

Chapter End Notes

hey i'm not too happy with this and it's crazy short but what can y'do.

uhh, what's the news? Swain rework is cool, miss his hobble but no real complaints. not compatible with this fic but it's gone off the rails with most things so that's fine. Irelia rework is the love of my life, love her eyebrows, wish they were as emphasized in her splash art as in her model. Wish her voice lines prioritized character and a little more cool wisdom instead of just 99% sass 1% character. Not sure how I feel about Kai possibly being her brother, definitely VERY disappointed if Zelos is dead, still longing to have my fic totally ruined by Zelos being introduced to the lore, proper. Icathia lore is good. Kai'Sa is a horrendously boring design and I will never overcome the salt of disappointment at how they wasted a cool character role in the lore on THAT generic skinsuit mess. It's legitimately awful. Annoyed that in the AMA someone asked 'what if she met her dad' and basically the responder spat in their face for even asking lmao. Also getting annoyed at the naming in this game. Big cast, sure, but maybe we shouldn't have a Kai and a Kai'Sa and a Kalista and a Jinx and Jhin all in one game, yeah?

anyway!! sorry for the sort of 'inbetween' chapter but i'm still kickin'
Urtistan rests to the far, far west of Runeterra. Its ruins are built on ruins built on ruins. For as far back as Zilean can remember, they have been building up over a lost past. When he was young, he hadn't thought they would join them - least of all in his lifetime. Instead he had just regarded the past with a exuberant curiosity.

How could the past have been the same? And how could it have been different?

To have fallen, he had thought as a child, it must have been flawed. Nothing like the Urtistan he knew. The Urtistan he knew was thriving. He remembers its buildings, all new and sturdy. He remembers paved roads and thin layers of sand wedged into every crack, blown in by the desert, snuck in through cracks in the border walls.

He remembers big families. Surviving together and alongside each other. His own family had been small. His mother, his father, his sister. Then there was the family that wasn't blood, neighboring them in the rows of houses all pushed together to conserve space. Aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers - hardly anyone kept track of blood for titles like those. They were all family. They had supported one another, held each other up.

His mother worked in the fields, keeping the family fed. His sister and he used to take baskets of her pickings, use them to make more baskets, and his father would sell them at the bazaar. His uncle next door made clothes and his aunt made shoes. The uncles to the other side of their home worked for the city, always patrolling and repairing the walls to keep Shurima out, though Shurima never came.

It was a city that flourished within its means. Perhaps a goldfish growing too big for its bowl, but too afraid to push out.

Zilean remembers studying the past, starry eyed, with all the curiosity inside of him pushing out his every breath. He would steal away any journals he could find that documented the past and rush them up to the clock tower, reading them as the shadow of the bell inside its arches traveled from one end of the small room to the other.

Cities collapse not by their own hands, but by the hands of others, Zilean learned. There was not much record of the wars with Shurima in writing, but there were illustrations carved into ruins. Those that could not be salvaged and built upon like a fresh foundation were unearthed, stones etched with glyphs brought to the wall workers for repurposing. (Zilean made sure to visit the wall most every day to be sure he did not miss seeing any.)

The desert dwellers left them alone, these days. But there was still a certain hesitance in the adults' voices when Zilean pressed the subject. None of them were old enough to remember the conflict, but they were old enough to remember the stories they had chosen not to pass down another generation.

Zilean was seventeen when he met the first traveler. Zilean had not longed for the world outside of Urtistan, but that did not make him any less curious about it. Even without desire to leave, there was still desire to learn. To learn, and to turn knowledge inward to improve his own home.

The traveler was from Icathia, arriving on a day of harsh sandstorms and taking shelter behind Urtistan walls. (Zilean distinctly remembers his sister laughing, saying he was just ducking in, as if
there were anywhere else nearby he could have been heading.)

He was a middle aged man with a youthful face hidden under his traveling cloaks. A merchant. Selling his wares and looking to buy weapons.

He had humored Zilean's curiosities and allowed the younger boy to trail him through the city, allowed him to sit beside him all day at the bazaar where he spread out a rug with his crafts on top. Zilean had been disappointed in the similarity of the items, of even the decorations patterning them.

"Our cities were built by branches of the same families, long ago. Were you expecting a difference?" The man had asked, amused.

Zilean had shuffled his feet. "Like night and day."

"That is exactly the kind of difference between us."

Zilean had not understood, and neither his family in his home nor his family in the homes nearby would shed any light on the man's meaning. However enigmatic, the man was still fascinating to Zilean, and seemed content to have a self appointed tour guide. Zilean showed him all the most popular crafters, though none of them had weapons to sell.

The man had looked so crestfallen that Zilean had brought him to the clock tower. Perhaps merely a childish attempt to cheer him up by showing off his favorite place. He had been surprised by how well it worked. They watched the sunset together as Zilean idly toyed with a hand-made cooking utensil.

"Do you know the difference between Icathia and Urtistan?" The man had asked, eyes not leaving the burning sky. When Zilean remained quiet he had said, "time. Just time."

"I don't understand," Zilean had said. He was not an impatient boy, by any means. He did not feel he needed answers right away. He only feared the man would leave before he finally got them.

"When the sun shines down on one kingdom, in another, it is night."

Zilean has not traversed the desert himself, but even he knows the size of it. "Urtistan and Icathia share the same days and nights."

"Shurima's eyes are elsewhere," the man had said. Zilean had flinched at the bitterness of his voice, thinking himself in trouble at first, then realizing where the disdain truly lay. "You thrive while the sun shines down on us. In the long night, you rest."

The man had lingered in the city for another two weeks. No one was able to sell him weapons on such short notice - there was no need for them to be crafted and ready. His disappointment had turned to frustration. (Far from the first time, the traveler yelled his desperation at a merchant, fist raised. He only lowered his fist, his voice, when his eyes met Zilean's in the growing audience. Zilean had turned, disappeared into the crowd without a word.)

When he finally left the city it was by the rough hand of city guards, with his things thrown after him so harshly that they shattered on the ground. There they stayed, left behind as he disappeared into the desert. Zilean had not had the heart to pick them up.

Zilean recalls eating dinner that night with his family. He recalls the awkward quietness of them all, and the thought that refused to leave his mind. The certainty that the traveler would not make it home alive.
There were other travelers over the next couple of years. Zilean does not recall any so distinctly as the first. Sometimes families, crying for the members they lost to the desert, seeking refuge from the Shuriman hands in their homes. Sometimes warriors, downtrodden and alone, always so sparse and weak that Zilean could not understand how they expected to change anything.

Urtistan began to make weapons to send them back with, but Zilean felt this was cruelty, in a way. Solely done for profit. Urtistan did not send back with them more help, more food, more soldiers.

He had been startled when the battle between Icathia and Shurima finally came. He had only just turned twenty three, then. Yet it had been fleeting. As if they had heard the distant sounds, almost mistaken for a sandstorm's shrieking, only for it to be over by nightfall. It was too distant to see from his clock tower, but close enough to watch through magic projections.

He had expected horrible. He had been prepared to watch young men die, watch innocents flee for their lives and be brought down. He had been ready for blood on sand and brutal, heart wrenching defeat.

He had not been ready for what the Icathians unleashed. The deep magic they had tapped into, leaned into, willingly conjuring up the rifts like saviors. They were twisting, unsightly creatures. Gnashing and disintegrating everything in their path, Icathian and Shuriman alike.

Zilean had quickly ushered the other mages from his clock tower, hardly before their frantic chattering began. He could still hear their panicked voices coming from down the stairs, none of them sure where to go or what to do next. He was no less certain.

But Zilean had spent his childhood looking to the past and found nothing like this. He paced the small room, desperately trying to think. His mind could only come back to the horrors they had just seen. He found himself summoning their image back with his magic more times than he could count, until finally the distortion of reality in the distance pushed back so hard that his magic could no longer reach it.

He could only think of the ruins his city was built on. Of the ruins it would become, and his wish to forestall it.

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"The rest," Zilean says, with a sweeping gesture, "I'm sure you know."

Ezreal's mind is racing, trying to discern what he was supposed to take from this. What this story of the past has told him that he didn't already know. It's fascinating on its own - there aren't many records from Urtistan left. Its ruins, and the ruins they were made from, were all lost to the void long ago.

He is trying to tie this story to the dossier that Jarvan apparently has for him. He feels like he is being asked to solve a puzzle with only half its pieces.

Zilean is a pitiable enough that Ezreal swallows back the impulse to be derisive. He tries to sound neutral instead of annoyed when he asks, "so?" Ekko nudges his leg with one foot; he jostles his knee in response.

"Think of it like a riddle," Ekko says. Zilean had seemed about to say something, but the man's attention drifts, now. Ezreal has always been unnerved by the way he is sometimes not entirely present. Trapped in the past.
Ezreal thinks this must be among the cruelest fates to grapple. Being robbed of the new and trapped with what can't be changed. He wonders what Zilean sees in this room. How far back he is seeing.

A riddle. Ezreal hunches over in thought, going over the story.

"Want a hint?" Ekko asks, and Ezreal swats at him dismissively. He doesn't need help - let alone from someone who already heard this story. That's cheating. His gaze lands on Zilean once more. His form looks so feeble, the kind of old no human should reach.

Ezreal blinks. "You said Icathia opened the rift... When you were twenty three?"

Zilean nods.

"But... Urtistan fell when you... Were older. Why didn't the void get to Urtistan sooner?" The desert is dangerous, Ezreal knows. But it is dangerous because of the void. Those monsters that spilled out from the rift so long ago have made it their home. Before them, it was only heat and Shurima that posed threats. He leans back again. "Actually, wait. That's... Even Shurima wasn't lost back then. Just Icathia was."


"In the desert?" Ezreal asks, his train of thought completely derailing.

"The sun and the sea," Jarvan says. He sounds as if he is reminiscing of an old children's tale. Ezreal hates being the last to know, hates all this skirting around information. He is scowling despite himself and feels his cheeks heating in anger. It is an awful habit of nobles to talk themselves in circles like this as if being direct would cause them bodily harm. Ekko has no excuse.

Maybe he picked it up from Lux.


Nami. The vastaya of the sea. Her entry into the League of Legends hadn't gotten a chance to be completed before the Institute had shut it all down. Poor timing, but Ezreal does not think she would have been allowed, anyway. He had already heard all the squabbling among administrators about her. No faction. She did not fight for power, and her own home, deep in the sea, was hardly under the jurisdiction of land politics. It did not need protecting, nor could they protect it if they tried.

So why had she been trying to join, if not to represent her home? If not to gain influence?

(Ezreal remembers meeting her, with Lux. He had stolen away processing papers without even needing to bully Lux into lending him invisibility. Still, she was his partner in sneaking around the Institute, his partner in hopeless curiosity about this system's inner workings and secrets.

They had sat at the edge of the water and talked to her as casually as anything, but the moment was burned into Ezreal's mind for how surreal it was. Lunch by the river - with a mermaid and his crush. Chatting about what to expect within the League of Legends and sharing sandwiches.)

What had she said she was there for?

With deep, dark eyes, she had stared down at her staff and said, "a moonstone. To keep us safe from the creatures in the dark."

Ezreal remembers connecting a hundred dots very quickly, remembers Lux shooting him a pointed look to be quiet, to not interfere. She had probably thought it would get sorted out properly. He had
not been sure of it then, but now he is certain that Lux had come to the same conclusions as him in an instant.

Only she had been smart enough to know that they were just theories. That they were just children playing guessing games with other people's lives. That the connection between the moonstone and Lunari was just their grasping at straws. And whether their guesses were right or not, she had thought it would all be solved in time, without them.

Instead, in the wreckage of the Institute and the world scrambling to put itself back together, their threads of fate had never entwined.

"Okay, so… Shurima and Urtistan didn't get wiped out by the void even when the rift was first opened. And… The vastaya in the sea protect themselves from a rift with a moonstone."

"I'm sure you can guess where moonstones come from." Jarvan says. Ezreal is annoyed that the older man points down at the map on his desk anyway.

He aggressively looks away to answer, "Mt. Targon. I mean, probably. Back when the Lunari weren't heretics." There is a stretch of quiet, and Ezreal frowns.

Mt. Targon rests close to Shurima. Mt. Targon, where they speak to Celestials, where the moonstones are blessed to repel void.

Ezreal murmurs, mostly to himself, now, "so it was… Shurima was protected by Mt. Targon. By the existence of the Lunari. Just by being - it's practically in their shadow. That's why it took so long for the void to get past Shurima. To Urtistan. But whatever set up was working must have stopped working."

"Very good," Zilean says.

"Great, so, can we get to the point? We've figured all that out, so. Now what?"

If Zilean is offended, he hides it well. "We look to the past to see what was lost. Why it weakened. This was my mistake, back then. I could only fathom the future holding answers."

"And why are you dragging a kid into it?" Ezreal asks, though on some level he already understands. Ekko adjusts his feet to kick him in the hip, hard.

Zilean's expression falls. There is guilt in his eyes, the kind Ezreal is getting used to seeing all around him. It isn't making him any more sympathetic to it. "My sight alone won't be enough."

Ekko asserts, like he is repeating himself, "I can figure it out."

"I wouldn't feel right sending Ekko on such a dangerous journey, alone," Jarvan says. Ezreal wishes he weren't a prince, just so he could punch him without getting beheaded for it. He wouldn't feel right, he says, but does it anyway. Atones for it by dragging a second teenager into it instead of doing anything himself.

Demacia relies on mages and children to solve the problems of the world, acting like they are the heroes stepping up to the task. Ezreal just wishes the demand could come from somewhere else. But he knows that it never would. No other kingdom is self righteous enough to take this responsibility.

"So the three of us are going to Mt. Targon," Ezreal says, to clarify. Ezreal hates that a part of him is reluctantly thrilled at the opportunity. He hates that the idea of risk and reward is fanning the embers in his chest. He clarifies, "to look into the past and probably get murdered by the Solari for our sins."
"Basically," Ekko says, at the same time as Jarvan chuckles and says, "not quite."

"Just the three of us would be quite unwise," Zilean ponders.

Jarvan seems to choose his next words carefully. As if he is trying to phrase something delicately. "I believe Sona will have a newly kindled interest in Mt. Targon. And of course, this means Taric will be joining you as well."

The disgust Ezreal feels is visceral. His mouth goes dry, and for a moment he struggles to speak. He can't say nothing. "So you'll kick all the mages out of the kingdom and into danger in one go."

Xin Zhao makes a warning sound, but Jarvan does not defend himself. That kindness behind his words is always difficult for Ezreal to place as real or fake, but now it is absent. As if they have concluded a simple business transaction, with his gaze dropped down to his desk, Jarvan says, "please prepare yourselves."

Chapter End Notes

the last one was too short, so here's..... some stuff.....

every time i post a chapter i think of that meme of the frog handing a letter over and saying, like, "here is an insurmountable amount of garbage. it disgusts me as well." that's me. thanks.

anyway remember when Nami was released before the lore retcon? but in her lore they hadn't given her a reason to be in the League? even though they hadn't retconned it out yet? BECAUSE I...!!
Ezreal hates that his first thought, seeing Sona again, is how different she is. That he can only think of a hundred questions he wants to ask her. That he looks at her and wonders who she is, who she has been, in a way that is different from the infatuated curiosity he is so used to. He is used to feeling something warm - but shameful and childish. The hollow absence of it feels disgusting.

Her hair has changed shades. This is more subtle than the shift of her eyes from brown to blue, but to him it feels just as drastic. Her hair used to be almost teal - like a mossy lake's surface. The tips had been a vivid blonde. He had always assumed lightened by magic, but if that was the case, the effect of it now is tenfold.

Her bangs have been cut, finally swept away from her eyes. Her subtle declarations of war, her personal defiance. Sona has always been rebellious in small ways like this; aggressive in her self acceptance. She rubs it in people's face with a demure smile and silence, and because of this, there is never anything to be done about it.

She is a mage. She always has been. She is a Celestial. She always has been…? Ezreal is still uncertain.

Now her hair matches the sunrise. Sky blue, the color of a spring morning sky, fading into pale sunlight over a horizon. The golden ornaments in her pigtails have been replaced with crescent moons and strings of pearls. But the strangest part is seeing her fingers rest in the air over nothing, seeing the expanse of empty space all around her when he is used to her etwahl being ever-present.

She doesn't look ready for travel in her flowing dresses. She looks ready for a gala.

Especially as she stands beside Taric, dressed in proper traveling cloaks and looking just like Ezreal has always known him to. This familiarity is a comfort, at least. Ezreal has never thought himself the type to cling to the past. He learned to let go young. But he looks at Taric and it hits him like a tidal wave - he wants the League of Legends back. He wants everything to go back to the way it was. For once in his life, he longs for structure over chaos.

Maybe what strikes him hardest is knowing that Taric must feel this way, always. That he is far, far from home and the dissolving of the Institute washed away the only efforts to find him a way back. Neither Ekko nor Zilean comment on the shift in Sona's appearance, or even Sona's unfit clothing. Ezreal does not want to be the one to do so - nor does he even know what to say. And so, with their affairs arranged, they depart.

They travel slowly, as groups have to do. Ezreal hates this. Any flame he'd lit in excitement of a journey is put out by the burdens of company. It isn't as bad as it could be, he can grudgingly admit, but that still does not make it good.

Sona is not athletic, but does not tire. She walks beside them, looking quietly content. Even Ekko does not complain, even when Ezreal can see the weight in his steps and slows his pace without a word.

Zilean is the one who needs to rest the most frequently. Less than his appearance would lead one to
expect, but more than the rest.

There are things that clear Ezreal's mind, traveling. The patterns of untamed grass that ruffle up like sea waves in the breeze. The slow shift from one kind of tree to another, from wide, dark trunks to thin, white-patterned branches. The clarity with which he can feel air in his lungs, and pin-point the scents around him. He likes watching the slow roll of the mountains as they walk p

The vast openness of it is nice. Maybe it is not structure that he wants, so much. He just wants fewer walls around his heart. Demacia is at war, Noxus is in upheaval. There are no outsiders to this. There's no running home and ignoring it.

Instead he's running away from home to ignore it. Let Demacia and Noxus burn each other to the ground and hope Piltover doesn't get caught in the crossfire. (Or leave it alone and let them both get consumed by the void. He knows his path is correct, but it doesn't make it easier.)

Ezreal wishes the quiet were more of a comfort.

Sona does not have much to say, which is all the same when neither Zilean nor Ekko know sign language well enough to understand. Taric is amicable as always, a surface-level friendliness designed to keep from ruffling feathers but unable to soothe them down from an already unpleasant situation.

The only breaks in the quiet are the one-sided conversations, brief whispers from Taric to Sona. Sometimes there are long talks between Ekko and Zilean, both growing increasingly exasperated with their own inability to understand each other's craft.

But worse than that is when Ekko hop-steps to catch up with Ezreal at the front of the group. When he hesitates for a moment before asking, "you really don't know anything? About where she is?"

Ezreal has to keep his eyes forward, resolutely, and answer honestly, "I don't."

Ekko does not drop it. "Don't you have any guesses? Do you think she's safe, at least?"

He can feel the others watching him. They had not been speaking, but the hush still weighs down on his shoulders, heavy with obligations he can't answer to. Everyone expects him to know, and he doesn't. He doesn't mean to snap; "Those are questions you really should have asked Jarvan before we left. Not me."

He can't keep his gaze averted. When he looks to Ekko, the boy looks briefly startled, then drops into a scowl. "You're an idiot," Ekko tells him, venomous.

"What? You think she told me anything? Ever? Lux lied to me more than any-"

"-Shut up," Ekko interrupts. "You're smarter than this, I know you are."

Ezreal feels himself flinch, feels his own body going brittle. It's too familiar. He used to scold Lux the same way. That only makes him angrier, too angry to articulate anything.

"What do you want to say, Ekko?" Ezreal demands, and is met with a silent glare. "You want me to just - oh, my bad, I forgot to mention, she told me exactly where she was going."

Ezreal does not know how to express the betrayal that had come in shallow waves before the flood. Disappearing without saying a word, coming back as she pleased like she had done nothing wrong. And still, he remembers her bright eyes and manic laughter, and he remembers their hands squeezing each other so tightly in the chaos when he had finally learned to follow. He remembers feeling, for
once, for once, that they were on the same wavelength. Self-destructive and reckless, but invincible.

Moments later she had left him again, like it was nothing. And she had never really come back.

There is a part of him that takes vindictive pleasure in watching everyone hem and haw in her absence. Good. He's glad that now they know what that's like, too.

Ekko's scowl only deepens before he slows his pace to fall back in line with Taric and Sona

The tense silence lasts the rest of the day, only deepened when they are sitting around a camp fire in the night. Until Ekko tries, again, "you know she didn't want--"

"--drop it."

"No," Ekko says, firm. "I'm tired of both of you just shutting down. You know that's your entire problem?! Both of you. You just get tired of people trying to talk to you and give up. Giving up doesn't get you anywhere!"

"There isn't a both of us, anymore. You can't keep talking as if she wasn't my ex way before she disappeared. You can't keep talking as if she's still around!"

He is uncomfortably aware of Zilean and Sona's eyes on him. The way Taric looks away politely is almost worse.

"It's not like she died," Ekko mutters. "And it's annoying when you act you don't understand how trapped she was."

Ezreal steels himself. His heart is on fire and he realizes, suddenly, that his pulse is racing. He feels that if he were to hold his hand up, it would tremble. In his mind, he steps away from himself, keeping his expression blank. "We don't know that, though."

"Ezreal," Taric says, so soft that Ezreal almost believes it's not a warning.

Ekko stands up, like his anger is too overwhelming to stay still, and bursts out: "she isn't dead!"

Ezreal shrugs, feeling the rise and fall of his shoulders like a puppet. He does not like whoever is pulling the strings. He does not like to hurt Ekko. He does not believe for a second that Lux is dead.

Ekko waits for him to give a better answer for only a moment before it's too much for him, and he retreats into the tent they are sharing. Ezreal silently vows to stay up as long as he is able to give him the privacy. It's his penance.

Taric is too kind to scold him further, but Sona is not. When he looks across the fire, she is frowning at him, and signs apologize, later.

"I will," he says, whether it is true or not.

She knows him too well for this, and her frown only deepens. She's alive, she tells him. Then again. She's alive.

He doesn't know why he is so weak that he allows himself to falter, now. He curls in on himself, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. The gem of his gauntlet catches the firelight and flickers in the dark. "She hated where she was and what she was doing. But it's hard to believe she would actually leave."
"Everyone has a breaking point," Taric offers. "Knowing what I know of her, I'm only impressed hers was so steep."

_Do you have a theory?_ Sona asks. _About where she is?_

Ezreal thinks of Quinn. But Quinn would not - could not - keep a secret like that from her own prince. She is loyal to Lux as a friend, but loyal to Demacia as a Demacian. Ezreal knows all too well the way that trumps any other relationship. "The only people I can think of her running to," Ezreal says, "would have told us she was safe. At least."

He thinks of her voice from behind a door. Checklists of people she would leave him for, like she had already done enough times that it was a pattern. He was a fool for not expecting it to escalate.

He remembers a hot, hot shower, and misses the mind-numbing effect of running water. He remembers Lux wearing his jacket over her underwear, but staring him down and talking like she had temporarily forgotten to be self conscious. (He remembers her faltering, blushing and shifting when she remembered.)

He remembers the list.

Quinn is checked off. Jarvan was meant to be on the list after all, he thinks, with no small amount of bitterness, but not this time. Ashe and Sejuani, he is sure would send word. Especially knowing that they are receiving help from Jarvan with the rift that's opened in Freljord.

He is amazed at his own callousness. Being able to walk away from it, dropping the entire situation on the icy grounds of Freljord and going on his own journey. Another way of fighting the same problem, he knows, but it feels too much like closing a book half-way through the story, leaving its ending undiscovered. Ezreal has never considered himself any sort of 'hero of the people,' no matter what journalists wanted to project over him - but even he feels unpleasant walking the opposite direction from a crisis.

Quinn and Jarvan. Sejuani and Ashe.

The last name on the list was - Malzahar. Lux had disappeared in Zaun to see him, unable to explain herself the same way she always was.

The thought makes him nauseous. He wills it to leave his mind, refusing to ruminate on it. His mind races to draw conclusions and he stares down sparks in the air and doesn't allow it. Each time his mind tries to walk down a path, Ezreal forces it away, diverts, does whatever he can to think anything else.

But distraction can't keep the thought out, rising up under the surface and pushing up against it, refusing to be shut out. It's a thought that's crossed his mind a dozen times, half-hearted and insincere, but he wonders if maybe from Lux it wasn't.

If you're going to call my magic terrible, then fine.

I'll be terrible.

Maybe this was just more and more of her playing the role. More and more of her being pushed into boxes she doesn't fit in. (Maybe she thinks it isn't. Maybe she thinks it's freedom, maybe she thinks it's her only chance to get _out._)
Ezreal cannot fully convince himself this is truth. It's just a theory - a wild one, at that.

When he climbs into their tent, Ekko is still awake, still frowning deep like he's been simmering in anger this whole time. Ezreal wonders if his jaw hurts.

"She's gonna turn up," he insists, defensively, before Ezreal can say anything. Ezreal is grateful for the excuse to be indignant, for the reason to wash away any apology that he knows wasn't going to leave his lips, anyway.

"Are we just going to come back to this every day? We're not out here looking for Lux. We're looking for answers to - problems way bigger." He slides into his sleeping bag, wriggling until he is comfortable. He likes the uneven earth beneath the tent, likes the bumps and ridges of the ground.

Ekko is eying him, but as if he was waiting for Ezreal's permission, lays down for sleep as well. "I know that. But I'm not just going to act like nothing's wrong. Don't act like I'm too stupid to question anyone but you. I already interrogated Jarvan about it."

"And what did he say?" Ezreal asks, flatly. He tries not to look interested.

"He's as useful as you are," Ekko says, but the way he rolls his eyes is like easing up. Like drawing away from a fight. "No signs of any struggle in her room. They found her horse near the marshes. Tracks like it was heading north-east and then they just... Stop. They just stop."

North-east of the marshes. "The only thing that direction would have been Piltover. Or Zaun."

"Exactly. So then - which one? And why didn't she get there?"

Ezreal rolls over. He doesn't like the sparks of optimism, the cruel glimmers of hope that he knows will fade in time. To fall for it means setting himself up for betrayal, later. "Maybe she did. It's not like you or I know everything that happens in the city. It's not like she doesn't know how to disguise herself."

"But the trail stopped."

Ezreal does not have a retort for this.

He does not have a retort for it this night, or the next night, or the next. All he can do is insist louder each night that he doesn't know anything more than Ekko does. In fact, he'd known less. (Is it as simple as asking Jarvan? All he can think is that Jarvan should have told him, should have come to him with the information, as if Ezreal could do anything with it. Clearly not.)

Their bickering must be getting too annoying for the others. Someone must be losing sleep, because Taric tells him, as if it is not a command, "we're switching up the sleeping arrangements, if you don't mind."

Ezreal watches him set up the tents for what feels like the millionth time. Watches his hands, and listens to the instructions, annoyed with the whole ordeal. "Why?"

He knows why. Because he and Ekko can't go to bed just one night without arguing. Zilean is low on the 'complainer suspects' list. He looks far too amused with them, for it. Which leaves only Taric and Sona. Ezreal supposes he doesn't care which of them it is. He doesn't want to bother either of them.

Taric says, 'I'll be with Ekko.'
Ezreal tries not to look startled, tilting his head slowly to the side. Across their makeshift camp, Sona is watching Zilean and Ekko fuss over Ekko’s zero drive. Taric follows his gaze, then looks back and offers a smile.

It’s enough to relax Ezreal’s shoulders.

Sometimes Ezreal thinks that Taric sees the best parts in people too well. It blinds him to their flaws. Then again, when he is faced with those flaws, Ezreal has only ever seen Taric be accepting and patient. He wonders if Taric’s compassion sticks out so much in his own world, or if things are simply better, there. He isn’t sure if asking would be dragging up a loneliness that Taric doesn’t want to face or not.

But he does not think he could go the whole night without doing it even so, given the chance, and so he finally nods and says, "yeah, that's fine. She snore?"

Taric looks startled, then lets out a laugh. "No. And I'm sure you'll be pleased to learn she doesn't talk in her sleep, either."

Sona looks their way, clearly eavesdropping, but only rolls her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

traveling is uneventful, actually,,
Ezreal takes the first watch, though it's not as tense as he is used to. They will be closer to Demacia the entire way to the pass, and he's sure Noxus is still too busy with Swain's death to be out this far. At the very least, Ezreal is sure he would sense them coming from safe enough away.

He listens to the others settle for sleep. Zilean gets a tent to himself, which Ezreal can't really complain about, though he is jealous. Sona retires to their own tent with a soft nod and a quick kiss from Taric.

From Ekko and Taric's tent, he hears the murmuring.

First, from Ekko. "Do you think she'll come back, though?"

A long silence before Taric replies, tentatively, "I'm afraid I don't know. I'd like to believe that she wants to. But it's a matter of if the option is available to her. Not everyone can return home."

"Home," Ekko repeats. He sounds thoughtful, and Ezreal hears the shifting of his sleeping bag. "I mean, where home is could change. I don't think she'd want to go back to Demacia? After everything?"

"No?" Taric asks. "Lux has dedicated her whole life to her kingdom. To have only strayed from that path just once speaks volumes of her love. Even through complicated feelings, a home is a home."

Ekko sighs. "I get that - I do. Wanting to improve your home instead of just abandon it. I'm just not… Sure that's how Lux feels."

"Well," Taric says, "we'll just have to ask her when we see her next. Where she would like to go, and what she would like to do."

"Guess so."

Ezreal can hear the lightness in Ekko's voice. He knows the feeling well; overly simplistic words that would annoy Ezreal from anyone else can easily soothe him when they come from Taric.

Their conversation quiets further, at first a good-natured complaining session about the ache of their feet and the length of their travels. It grows too quiet for Ezreal to listen to, and then finally, the muffled whispering is gone.

Ezreal is alone. He lays back on the dirt and stares up the sky, and watches the moon drift, slow.

Hours later, he only has to scratch his finger-nail over the rough surface of Taric's tent to wake him. They swap out with groggy good-nights and good-lucks, and Ezreal has to stop himself from crawling into the tent with Ekko out of habit. It shouldn't even matter, he thinks. Ekko is already asleep.

But Taric closes the tent behind him and nods in the direction of the other.
Even so, Sona is awake when he enters. He blinks, eyes still adjusting to the dark without moonlight. Unmistakably, she is sitting up, still dressed in her day-clothes. Her fingers dance over the air, thin lights lining up under her touch but making no sound.

"I don't think anyone would mind a lullaby, for the record," Ezreal says, settling into the sleeping bag beside her. He knows he should change out of his day-clothes, but a little dirt never bothered him. A lot of dirt never bothered him. (Changing with Sona beside him would bother him.)

Sona brings a hand over her mouth as if to hide a giggle, then uses her hands to speak. *Do you need to be sung to sleep?*

Ezreal rolls his eyes, then realizes she probably cannot even see this in the dark. He can barely make out her sign language. "Hard to talk in the dark. You shouldn't have even stayed up this late. Get some rest."

*Yes, father,* she signs with a playful huff.

He lays on his side and watches her. She takes the crescent moon hair-decorations out first, setting them to the side gently. Next she pulls at the strings of pearls, patiently weaving them out from her hair and setting them away. After that, she un-ties her pigtails, fingers coming up to ruffle her hair at the scalp where it is still mussed from being tied so long.

It's rare to see her in any sort of disarray. Ezreal feels guilty for staring, but she seems to take it as judgment. *I enjoy routine,* she tells him, looking somewhere between defensive and amused.

She changes her dress only facing the other way for modesty. Or for the act of it. He doesn't have the energy to be annoyed by how inappropriate it is. If there weren't more on his mind, he might take comfort in it. In knowing what really lies behind her playful teasing, no matter how much of a dead-end it is. At least it's a mutually decided dead end. But instead the guilt and secrecy are both buried by his racing thoughts.

Ezreal looks away, obedient, but unsure of who to.

He hears the shifting of cloth - of her bedclothes and blankets and long, long hair. Then her hand in his hair, petting him softly. He turns his head slow to look up at her. She smiles, but does not stop. Her fingers work through tangles slow and deliberate and painful without a care.

Ezreal forces himself not to wince at the snags, and instead says, "what are you doing."

It does not quite come out a question.

She draws back only long enough to sign *a silent lullaby,* before shifting in place, folding up to sit on her knees. She pats her lap.

Moving to rest his head on her lap comes as a surprise to himself, too. But her touch is warm in the cool night, and the feeling of her thighs under him reminds him of when he was younger. His memories of his parents grow more blurry every year. Sights and scents become less and less vivid in his mind. But he remembers something like this.

His mother used to hum, but the only sound now is the muffled crackle of the fire outside the tent. Then, quietly, a low hum from Taric outside, a slow and unfamiliar melody that carries Sona's
fingers through his hair.

For once, Ezreal sleeps well.

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The flatlands begin to spike up as they finally turn towards the mountain range at the pass. It's miles before they reach the towns built into the heights, and the roads are rough from lack of use. Those who come from beyond the base of the mountain tend to stay their whole lives. Pilgrimages often end in new homes or death - it's rare for those who call Mt. Targon home to leave its inlet cities, and those who do are most often warriors.

Or merchants, Ezreal thinks, who are always much tougher than anyone gives them credit for.

Even as the roads grow harsher, their pace does not slow. Zilean and Ekko both suck up their exhaustion and trek onward. Zilean is quiet, his gaze resolutely forward, and his conversations with Ekko pitch wildly between a hurried fervor now that they are near their destination - and a slow disinterest.

This low on the mountain is hot under the sun. Outside of the shadows, the earth is baked and hot underfoot, but more solid than the dirt roads below. The grass is dry this season, the snow from the peaks yet to melt into trickling waterfalls to feed it. The incline of the path makes up for what little exhaustion the firm roads save, and now the soles of Ezreal's feet ache. He keeps his complaints to himself, though even he begins to feel grimy with sweat.

They pass civilians who live far from the settlements as they climb, but these herders and farmers are scarce. They know the land too well to stick to the roads of visitors.

Before they make it to the first city, Leona finds them, stepping into the firelight of their campsite in the evening with one hand raised in greeting. In the distance and up above, Ezreal can see the lights of the city, dim glows from lanterns hung in caverns. It's no surprise they were seen coming the same way.

"I thought I sensed a familiar presence," Leona says, smiling. She approaches each of them for a fleeting hug, her hands hardly touching them before drawing away. When she reaches Ekko she pauses for a moment, then settles on holding out her hand. (He shakes it, looking amused, which she does not seem to mind.)

"I take it you're not the usual welcoming committee?" Taric asks. He returns her smile with ease, and in exchange, she comes to help him set the tents without being asked.

"We should have one," she says, and laughs. "Though travels had slowed when the Institute was still..."

Sona plucks at the air, one chime to get Taric's attention. She signs, and he roughly translates for Leona: "Strange that in times of relative peace we saw less travel."

"I think it's natural to seek new perspectives when you're afraid," Leona says. Ezreal cannot be bothered to point out how incompatible this is with her own religion, how certain he is that she does not follow her own logic. She adds: "People are afraid, and so they will come again in hopes of power and answers."
This explains the hypocrisy. She believes she has the answers, and so has no need for asking questions. Ezreal hates religion.

When their tents are set, after some difficulty in the different terrain, the group of them sit around the camp-fire. Now that the shadows of the mountain are cast over them, the air is cold. Ezreal has seen less and less green all day. Even Leona, used to this climate, draws close to the flames. Her eyes brush over them all once again.

Her gaze settles on Zilean. "Not all of you are those I would expect as candidates for this kind of pilgrimage, I'll admit."

"But some of us?" Zilean asks with a smile.

Now Leona looks to Sona. Ezreal cannot tell if she is taking in her blue eyes, her pale blue hair - or the crescent-moons and pearls in her hair.

"Word has traveled of the sealed rift. Of the birth of a new Celestial, away from the peak of Mt. Targon. And… Of the exile of mages from Demacia."

"We aren't in exile," Taric comments, as if this is a common misconception.

Leona speaks as if she is humoring a lie, and amicably says, "well, all are welcome here. And of course, we would never try to keep anyone worthy from their destiny."

"Worthy," Ezreal repeats, interested in the specification. He wonders who decides a person's worth, if not the Celestials at the peak.

Leona looks to him with more interest in his presence than his words. Then to Ekko, then Zilean.

"Of you all, who… Which of you intend to make the climb?" She asks.

"All of us," Taric says. Ezreal does not think Leona recognizes that this smile of his is a challenge.

She looks rightly taken aback. Ezreal does not like being under-estimated, but he can't bring himself to take offense to this. Not with Ekko sitting beside him. Leona tries to be delicate; "It's… Quite perilous, I'm sure you know? I have faith in you, of course, and in Sona, but…"

"The young and the old are only hindrances, aren't they?" Zilean interjects, but he is not speaking to Leona. He is speaking to Ekko, with a laugh.

Ekko returns it with an easy grin.

When Leona smiles, Ezreal expects some kind of empty apology, but none comes. Instead she says, "You'll reach the city tomorrow. I'll have a proper welcome prepared by then."

She rises to her feet, and in the darkness, departs.

Ekko nudges Ezreal. "She must know shortcuts. She could just show them to us. That's stingy."

Ezreal rolls his eyes and nudges back, harder. Ekko laughs, pushed to the side, and rights himself. "It's faster and easier to travel alone."
Zilean joins in, joking, "perhaps she's just nocturnal."

"What a scandal," Ezreal says, flatly. Taric lets out a quick, guilty laugh, then stifles it behind a cough.

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The city is made up of caverns and halls in the mountainside. Some man-made, others natural. Ezreal can tell the difference only from his travels. He knows what mountains look like when they are pushed up by shifting land, and he knows what caves look like when they dissolve away the walls. The man-made walk-ways are much smoother, but not necessarily more precise. Mt. Targon dwellings twist and wind with the landscape, accepting its predetermined paths.

Leona is not waiting for them at the city entrance, but enough of the Rakkor must have been warned. They flock around the travelers, a welcoming bustle that offers them lodging and food and stare at Sona with admiration and confusion all at once.

When they have settled a place to leave their travel bags, they are led to Leona. She is at the far-end of the city, in a deep, beautiful room. Ezreal thinks it began as a natural cave, but has since been refined, with carved pillars that turn the mouth into a view of the city. There are flags hung up around the high ceiling, and half a dozen elegant chairs set at a long table.

Leona sits in the middle seat, all the rest empty, yet the entire table seems taken up with work and materials. There are maps, ink, quills. Parchments and stacks of books, baskets of fruit, some ripe and wrapped in nice cloth, others in shoddy baskets and under-grown, with folded parchments resting on top.

The elders are dead, and Leona is the one left with their work. The time she has, now that she is free from the battles of the Institute, do not cover the work needed in its absence.

Even so, she makes time for them.

She tells them what to expect of the climb. Tells them of the perils and stories and those who came back fragmented. She tells them of those who came back stronger - like herself, like Pantheon, and then an awkward beat as she does not say like Diana. Then she is back to her warnings. Eat well before you go, she tells them. Dress warmly, but make sure you can move. Your footing will slip, melt, break-away, and crack. Don't listen to your ghosts, don't give up.

She does not say it outright, but Ezreal gets the impression that she is telling them not to go. Her confidence in Sona, of all of them, looks misplaced. When Sona is standing pretty, looking delicate. In the rest of them, Ezreal is not sure she truly has faith. Even when her eyes graze Taric, Leona looks hesitant.

But she does not say it plainly. She cannot bring herself to claim the champions are unworthy, and intuitively knows better than to single out the one among them who was not a part of that history.

In the evening, Ekko shares a room with Ezreal. They have been separated long enough, or maybe it's just the insulation of mountain-walls between rooms that makes the others decide it.

Ekko's hextech lights up the room in neon, jarringly unnatural after all the bright sunlight and oil lanterns.
It occurs to Ezreal that Ekko could die.

This thought had not really occurred to him about any of the others. It still doesn't, not really. Sona, Taric, Zilean - all of them can take care of themselves. They have the magic to do it, and beyond that, he knows just how resilient they are.

"You shouldn't-" Ezreal begins, but Ekko cuts him off.

"-Be here. Yeah. Time's just a big repeating pattern, isn't it?"

Ezreal frowns. "What are you talking about?"

Ekko is twisting a screw, tightening it. He lifts his zero-drive up, then unceremoniously shakes it, as if checking to make sure nothing is loose enough to fall off. Distractedly, he says, "Lux's older brother was saying that, when we were in Noxus - without you, I mean. She got pissed, but I'm pretty sure he was just worried."

Ezreal remembers Talon saying this to Riven when they had hidden away in the old brothel building. He remembers Jarvan saying it to him before the rift had split open.


"I'm not," Ezreal grumbles.

Ekko grins. "Oh, good. 'Cause none of this works without me."

For a moment he wishes they were still crowded around a campfire, so he could kick Ekko. The air indoors is too musky and humid. He settles for rolling his eyes. "Can I take that to mean you actually know what you're doing?"

All Ekko gives him is a, "hm," in response.

Chapter End Notes

I like the new Riven & Yasuo stuff. I don't feel that anything about Riven has been changed and it pretty much reads exactly how I've always pictured Riven behaving, prioritizing things, and with how she regards Noxus! So! Yeah!! I love her!!!

Uh, but, I don't care about Yasuo. Nothing can make me care about Yasuo. I'm sorry.
Chapter 40

The sun has not even risen in the morning when Ekko bullies him into bathing. Ezreal does not know why this annoys him so much, but allows the younger boy to push him into the washroom. His skin feels dry and muddy beneath his clothes, but it's such a pointless endeavor to get clean when they are about to embark on the climb. He doesn't like wasting time.

"You're not gonna get the chance again for a while," Ekko scolds him through the closed door. Ezreal undresses, and hears the door creak against Ekko's back. "And you stink."

Ezreal sinks deep into the warm water of the tub and ignores him. He dunks his head under the surface to drown out whatever else Ekko is rambling on about, holding his breath and closing his eyes. For as long as he can, he just lingers, submerged. Eventually he has to force himself to actually scrub away the grime.

Admittedly, he does feel better, after. The cool air soothes the burning rawness of his overly vigorous scrubbing. After he has dried and dressed, the two of them join the others for a breakfast, spread out in front of them by the Rakkor.

He can't help his curiosity, and pulls one aside before they can leave the room. "This all tradition?"
He asks.

The man smiles, and nods, but there is no missing the worried crease in his brow. "The worthy are sent off with high hopes, and the support of all of us."

Ezreal frowns, but dismisses him with a wave of his hand and an almost-forgotten, "cool. Thanks."

This sort of treatment just feels like a last meal before they're sent off to their death.

Well, he can't blame anyone for that but himself. Or maybe Jarvan. Or maybe Zilean. He buries this thought in his mind for later, for when he is angry and miserable. He's sure it's only a matter of time.

They eat in silence, which feels uncomfortable, despite all their time traveling together in quiet. But Ezreal doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know what anyone else is thinking. Last night it had occurred to him that Ekko could die, and he can't shake that thought, now. The food is delicious, but it's as if it turns into stones in his throat. It's difficult to swallow, all too heavy and too thick.

The reality of this is suddenly vivid, and he can feel his own pulse racing. He isn't sure if it's fear or excitement.

He is not afraid of dying. Not really. But he is afraid for the people around him.

After they eat, the Rakkor return to lead them to the boundary. The sun is finally rising, and Ezreal watches the shifting angles of shadows as they walk. The shade from the mountains thins out, and the shadows of his companions grow. For once he does not lead the way, and watches Sona and Taric's hands slip together so naturally that he is not sure they thought of it.

This should probably make him feel jealous, but that thought occurs to him with complete detachment. He's not sure why. As much as he would like to think himself above that kind of immaturity, he knows he isn't. He really, really isn't. (He still remembers Lux taking Jarvan's hand, and his chest still hollows for a half-second, just as intensely as the day it happened.)

The Farewell Ceremony is mostly just standing around, pretending to listen to Leona give a speech.
Ezreal shifts his weight with boredom and watches her gesture up at the giant metal ring sculpture. The separation of the mountain and the city is purely symbolic, but as far as her people are concerned, this is where the ascent begins.

Ezreal wonders why this same ritual would be fascinating to him in a book, but seeing it performed live has him bored to death. Maybe he's just a fucking idiot who only cares about things he's lost.

There is a short dance by the members of the Solari, and Ezreal forces himself to take it in. He wants to know things. He wants to absorb information, he wants to care about this. A speech that he should have paid attention to and a traditional dance that he is lucky to see performed.

Finally, they receive Leona's blessing. She approaches each of them and touches their foreheads gently, one by one.

The group of them climb the steps to the ring. Leona stands at the bottom, and the crowd behind her wait in tidy rows, heads bowed. The sun halos Leona's hair, giving her a bright, golden outline. Ezreal takes in the expression on her shadowed face. Her brow furrowed just slightly, and her lips parted like she wants to ask them something. He's not sure what. He tries to put himself in her place, but the only question he can think of is: will I see you again?

"Shall we?" Taric asks, and the sound of his voice startles Ezreal. When he turns to look, the older man is still holding Sona's hand. Ezreal nods, and sees Ekko and Zilean do the same.

Passing through the ring does not feel particularly momentous. It isn't enchanted, and the ground to either side of it is the same. Ezreal even hears Ekko let out a vaguely disappointed, "huh."

He tries to take this to heart, too. He wants this to represent their ascent. Not death or loss or whatever they are going to face up there. Just Ekko's simple, curious: huh.

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"This isn't so bad," Ekko says.

"That's because we haven't made any progress," Ezreal retorts, and rolls his eyes. The road is still well-worn, here. Ezreal imagines there are foolish youth who sneak past the arbitrary boundary line regularly.

The incline is still gentle, but when he looks behind him, he can no longer see the boundary. Their path has twisted and turned with the mountain.

"While we aren't short of breath," Taric says, sounding amused. "Are the two of you ready?"

"I think so," Zilean responds, and gives a look to Ekko, who nods. "It's been… A long time since I used those spells. But I'm prepared to use them again."

Ezreal points out, "you use magic all the time."

Zilean raises a fist playfully. If he had a cane, Ezreal is sure he would have been smacked with it, despite the old man's laugh. "Different spells, boy. The magic I told you of in the past was projections. Does that sound like the same magic you've seen me use?"

"Like visiopathic crystals," Ekko says, as if he is not the one who needs this explained to him the most.

Zilean has to consider the comparison. He looks as if he is not entirely familiar with them, but Ezreal
knows he's watched them before on the Institute grounds. Eventually Zilean says, "yes, something like that. I grew up using magic to look across my city."

Ekko shrugs and says, "tech can do better."

"But magic gets stronger and stronger." Ezreal says. "Tech doesn't evolve."

"Uh, wrong." Ekko snorts. "Hextech can build up and build up. If you know what you're doing, anything can be improved."

Objectively, Ezreal knows that he should at least try to understand hextech before he tries to talk about it. But even being raised surrounded by it, all of it is too foreign to him. Its rules are too rigid. The inflexibility of them makes no sense. Magic may be vague and conceptual, but he can follow those concepts.

Zilean's magic was projections of the present. He tried to stretch it too hard, tried to project the future. And with how that played out for him, Ezreal really can't blame him for switching gears after that.

Sona signs something to Taric, who nods over his shoulder to Zilean. "And you've figured out how to… Accomplish what you wish to?"

Ezreal had always thought militaries were so organized. But after his mission with Lux, after the war-camp by the Institute, and after this? He is not so sure. It's like being handed a bunch of guesswork and being told to figure it out on the go.

This time Ekko is the one to answer, sounding self-conscious of his own uncertainty. A jarring change from last night's confidence. "Well, it sounds like the issue before was some kind of, like, overload problem? So if we kind of - redirect power to my zero-drive, it should be a lot more… Steady. Whiiiiich will also strengthen my drive's power, since right now it's limitation is really about how much mana I can siphon from my surroundings. On one hand, time paradoxes mean I never really run out, as far as it's current limitations go, but on the other hand, I pretty much always get the same amount in any given area."

Sona signs something; Taric translates. "Then is the intention for Ekko's drive to temporarily send him further back than he can currently go? Or to-"

"-Not the first one," Ekko interrupts, preemptively. "My drive can't take me back past when I turn it on, no matter how much power I get. Plus it's a one-way trip."

"But if you just needed a way to steady the magic overflow," Ezreal points out, trailing off.

"You'll see," Zilean says. He sounds like he wants to wink. The weirdo.

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The gentle incline of the mountain turns steep. The times they have to actually scale a near ninety degree mountain-side are still spread out, but just the slope of the mountain is tiring enough. It can't even be called time to rest.

Sona climbs well, though she explains that it's largely levitation magic. Celerity helps, a spell she spreads across all of them, keeping their bodies light.

Watching Zilean climb after her is almost comical. It's mostly just the dissonance between his appearance and his strength. Otherwise, there is nothing funny about it. He is devoid of his usual humor, instead keeping unnervingly quiet. He climbs with all his focus on the task ahead of him, and
Sona helps pull him up over the ledge, each time.

They stick to the order. Ekko goes next, with uncertain hand-holds and second-guessed footing. Taric looks to Ezreal as if to preemptively keep him from criticizing, but Ezreal is in no mood to sass Ekko for the sake of being contrary. He feels his own body tense, each time Ekko heaves himself higher. Then relax when Ekko disappears up and over the ledge.

He swallows back irritation when Ekko peers down to watch him climb. Tired as he is, Ezreal is used to climbing - and used to having inadequate gear. What he is not used to is company and audience.

"Your turn," Taric prompts him, and this is annoying, too. Ezreal doesn't like the quiet way that Taric has designated himself to climbing last. Like he thinks he needs to be there to catch anyone who falls. Like he thinks someone is going to fall.

Ezreal tries to shake off the thought, and climbs. It's fun, in its own way. He likes hurrying, not giving himself time to second-guess his choices. It's satisfying when he can step away from a foothold fast enough when it crumbles, but admittedly even better when everywhere he chooses is stable.

Ekko does not reach out to help him hoist over the edge, but he frowns when Ezreal gets himself up. "Watching you is horrifying, you know that?" Ekko asks.

"Don't, then," Ezreal says, and shrugs. He turns to watch Taric join them.

They've done this a dozen times. They'll have to do it approximately a billion more.

It only takes until the thirteenth time for it to go wrong. Zilean's grip fumbles, halfway up a tall climb. He's holding a bump in the mountain-rock one moment and falling backwards the next. Unlucky number thirteen, Ezreal thinks, alarmingly calm as he watches, yet unable to move. His body feels frozen - his reflexes aren't honed for rescues.

Sona's are - from above, she reaches out as if to grab him. Ezreal realizes she was reaching for invisible strings only when a chord plays out, and the air twists around Zilean like a shield. Below, Taric hardly has to reposition to catch the old man, but it's far from graceful. Zilean's foot knocks against the rough mountainside, Sona's spell unable to deflect it, and when he lands on Taric it is with enough momentum to bring them both to the ground.

Ezreal forces himself to move, Ekko right beside him. They both drop to kneel beside Taric and Zilean.

Taric and Zilean sit up and pull apart. Taric wastes no time in rolling up Zilean's pant-leg to look at his ankle.

It is a deep crimson, the skin swollen, split open and bleeding. It makes Ezreal think of torn paper, or like a split seam in cloth.

"That could have been much worse," Zilean says, calm, but hisses when he moves his foot.

He isn't wrong. It could have been much worse. Ezreal doesn't see bone, and the angle of his foot isn't wrong. But that doesn't change that it's a problem. One they're going to be stuck with for the rest of their ascent. Having two healers will help, but not erase this.

Turning back might be better, but without Zilean, Ezreal wonders what they could hope to achieve by continuing on.
Taric hovers his hand over the wound. A moment later and the gash doesn't look quite so deep. Zilean exhales like he had been holding his breath.

"I can keep the pain a bay," Taric says. He sounds winded from the landing, but doesn't complain. "It needs proper bandaging, and the swelling will probably persist as you strain it."

"Alright," Zilean says. "I have bandages in my bag."

It's all so matter-of-fact. They continue on. With so much farther to go, and now an injury, they persist. Ezreal realizes belatedly that Ekko is holding onto his arm like a life-line.

"Just remember that it's still injured. It will heal faster with magic, but in the meantime don't overdo it just because you can't feel the pain."

Zilean nods, resolute.

Ezreal's gaze drifts up. To Sona, still peering over the edge with concern. And to the mountainside that still needs scaling. Thirteen times, Ezreal thinks. Then a billion more.

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It is a combination of Taric's strength and his magic that gets Zilean up and over the walls. It can't be rushed, and so each time they need to scale anything vertical, time seems to slow down.

Ezreal has never consciously thought about looking up to Taric, before. Not in those words. Admire, maybe - a thought always breezed past because it felt childish or embarrassing to articulate.

But it's hard not to think it, now. Ezreal watches him pour everything he has into helping someone else's quest, after being recruited by a kingdom that's turned on him, all in a world that isn't even his own. (Ezreal had hardly been able to pour his all into the League, when he first joined. For the better of his own world, his own home. It had taken months for him to care about more than just a cool artifact and a chance to show off.)

They have to stop to rest more often than when they began, though it's still less often than on the road. Ezreal had been annoyed at the time, but now realizes it was a luxury.

There are inlet caves throughout the mountains - they seek them out for shelter whenever they can. The reprieve from the wind allows them to start fires, to warm up against the chill of the heights. The higher they get, the more ice and snow surrounds them.

Sona is tending to Zilean's wound, this time.

"I'm surprised your healing powers aren't stronger than they were before," Zilean comments, but does not sound disappointed.

Ezreal glances their way to read her reply, but continues wandering aimlessly, deeper into the caves. Sona signs: they would be. To use them would mean sacrifice.

"Like Soraka?" Taric asks.

Sona squints down at her hands. Maybe at strings that only she can see. I don't remember.

Ezreal turns away. He reaches out to touch the rough cave walls, dragging his hand along them as he walks. He hears Ekko's footsteps hurrying to catch up, then feels the other boy's arm brush his as he falls in step, but he does not say anything.
There are drawings on the walls.

Monsters, mostly. Ezreal recognizes the creatures of the void, even when none of them match the visuals of the ones he's seen first-hand.

He traces them, all the way until they stop, as if barricaded by white stripes of moonlight. He looks up. The crescent moon is high above him on the ceiling. Beside him, Ekko cranes his neck and still has to step back to see it

***

Being on the road normally makes the passage of time satisfying. Ezreal knows how far he can travel in a day. He can track his footsteps with the sun's cycle on flat-ground. The reward for a long day is new scenery.

On the mountain, it's different. The uneven ground makes it impossible to predict how far they will get. He can't even guess at how much farther is left. Their path leads up and up into the clouds, and the snow is so bright in the sunlight that he feels blinded, looking up ahead.

The air thins and the magic thickens, like sand pouring from one end of an hourglass to another. The more mana Ezreal feels all around him, the farther they are.

But the truest sign of progress is the dead. Bodies, frozen into snow. Skulls crystalized with ice so cold that it doesn't shatter under-foot.

Sometimes Ezreal cannot tell if they are really even bodies or just suspiciously eroded mountain. It's like seeing shadows in the dark. Silhouettes of innocent things, tricking your eyes and conjuring monsters.

Other times there is no question. Ezreal's eyes pass over the occasional tombstone, but most people ascend this mountain alone. Those who are seeking power, not knowledge. More often than grave markers are carvings into stone walls, and more often than both are abandoned bodies. (Ezreal stops looking at the carvings, eventually. He sees a dozen apologies, and then it sinks in that they are carved by and for strangers. No one can carve the names of the dead they never knew.)

The first hallucination is Ekko's. Ezreal does not know exactly what Ekko sees, but one moment the boy is heaving himself up over a ledge, the last one to make it over, and the next moment he is nearly backing off of it. The snow crunches under his weight. Ezreal has to lunge to grab him by the arm, yanking him harshly away from the edge.

The despondent look on Ekko's face hits Ezreal like a lightning strike. Even being pulled so harshly, the boy still seems focused on something else, and just stares into the side of the mountain. He looks as if his heart is breaking. He tries to back away from his vision again, but Ezreal holds him firm. Taric falls back from ahead to join them, wasting his energy without a thought.

"The air is thick, here," Taric murmurs.

Ezreal knows it. He can feel the magic all around them. It's even more dense here than in Ionia. In Ionia the way magic soaks into the air and the trees and the grass feels nice. It's comfortable, there. Here it feels oppressive. It feels like trespassing.

He can only imagine how it feels to Ekko, with no filter, no familiarity. Ekko cannot innately place what he is feeling, only suffer through it.
The younger boy is reaching behind him, like he wants to activate his zero-drive. Ezreal squeezes his arm harder to stop him - too hard, he knows. He wishes he could just leave this to Taric, but knows better than to try to divvy up responsibility as if it is something tangible.

"Hey," Ezreal says, over-loud. "What are you doing?"

Ekko looks over to him, but his wide-eyes seem to pass right over Ezreal. He mumbles something, too quiet for Ezreal to hear him.

It's Taric's hands on his shoulders that snap Ekko out of it. He jolts, startled, then takes in his surroundings. His precarious footing. The way Ezreal and Taric are both touching him; the way Zilean and Sona have both paused mid-step, hovering nearby. He squints at the mountainside again, his frown deepening like he expected to see something else.

He doesn't explain himself, just jerks away from both of them and resumes climbing. Ezreal knows better than to pry, and knows better than to think he'd be able to comfort him even if he tried. He allows Taric to take the space between them, a much more reliable safety net than Ezreal could ever be.

His limbs are heavy and it's agonizing to keep moving. They are in the shade, and it is dark and cold, and the snow is hard and slippery. It feels like hours pass, but Ezreal knows better. Ekko falls back to walk beside him.

He has to speak loudly, over the whistling wind. "I saw candles." His words come out between heavy breaths.

"Candles," Ezreal repeats. He is too tired to waste words.

Ekko nods. He shouldn't be wasting his energy talking when it's clearly a struggle, but Ezreal can't bring himself to stop him. "Candles, and names, and portraits."

Ezreal remembers the mural in Zaun. (He remembers fireworks, and Lux, and Malzahar.)

"But they moved, and then they weren't - they weren't portraits. Anymore."

Ezreal isn't sure what he's supposed to say. He glances to Ekko, but the tremble of the boy's shoulders makes him regret it immediately. He looks forward, and falls back on Leona's words. "Don't listen to ghosts."

Ekko murmurs, "he didn't say anything."

Ezreal gets the impression that Ekko would rather he not reply.

***

His vision is hazy. The snow is falling light, enough to make footsteps sink in and clothes damp and heavy.

Sona looks back at him from ahead, pausing to fix her hair up tighter. The visions aren't getting to her. Aside from her skin turned red, the cold does not seem to be bothering her, either. But there is still a deep exhaustion in her eyes. Her face is completely flat as she looks across the others, no trace of her usual performative smile.

It's only for a split second, but Ezreal sees his mother. Blurry through the snow, as if through a sudden flurry. Her hair dark and messy and her skin tan and warm. He hears her humming.
Ezreal loses his footing, stumbling so badly he trips and nearly falls.

It is Zilean who steadies him, a palm flat on his back. Ezreal blinks, and his mother is gone. Sona is staring at him, eyes wide with concern, now, like she has just remembered how to control her own face.

"I thought I saw my," Ezreal begins, then changes his mind and finishes, "someone. I thought I saw someone."

This is your judgment, Sona signs, with tired amusement. Concern beneath her hesitant smile. He remembers from her files, from her own judgment: Sona watched her mother die. Illusions to test her resolve. He wonders if she would be seeing it all again if she weren't already blessed by the stars.

"Guess that's fair," Ezreal says. "Never had a proper one."

"Why not?" Ekko asks, and Ezreal winces at how weak he sounds, at the deep breath he has to take just to speak.

He shouldn't even answer, it's only distracting them. But he still hears the humming and wants to drown it out. "Because I didn't apply for the League of anything. Just fell into it. My arcane shift, plus the new gauntlet, plus shoddy summoning magic."

Sona signs something, but through the snow and the fog of magic, Ezreal cannot make it out. Whatever it is, Taric lets out a low, tired laugh.

The humming follows him. He feels manic, like he is trying to out-pace someone right behind him. He fights the impulse to hurry faster, and falls to the back of the group. He knows every one of them are too exhausted to be fretting over him instead of themselves, and he knows they are stupid enough to try it if he doesn't keep himself out of their sight.

It's worse, being last in line. He has to watch the way Zilean limps, now, his swollen ankle in the sore-recovery stages of being healed. Ekko moves like his body weighs a thousand pounds. Like he is pushing through molasses on top of moving uphill. His chest heaves dramatically, and even through the thick cloaks, Ezreal can see the strain of it.

Taric is behind the two of them. His position is chosen as strategically as Ezreal's, and Ezreal knows that he is watching them the same way. But even Taric isn't immune to the strain. His large body, always a comforting symbol of stability, is at its limit. When they have to climb, his grip trembles with the exertion of staying firm.

And then there is Sona. Alarmingly unbothered. Ezreal is not naïve enough to think she isn't tired - he can see it in her shoulders, in the way she hangs her head and the look on her face. But she is not suffering hallucinations like they are. Is not cold. Not overwhelmed by the magic.

The humming echoes in his ears. Barely remembered nursery rhymes, and sometimes in the wind he hears a murmur. It is almost words, but always muffled, like he is hearing it through a closed door.

He resists for as long as he can, then covers his ears with his hands. It doesn't mute the sound, but it's a comfort even so.

***

He sees Lux.

Hallucinations have a strange way of tricking you into thinking they are real, no matter how absurd.
No matter how aware you are that they are coming. He knows his parents are dead, but he still falls for it for a split second each time the mountain shows them to him - in the dead bodies frozen into the ground, in his comrades' places.

He sees Lux, and his insides are made of glass.

She is sitting with her long legs swung over a cliff's ledge a ways away. Across a gaping crevice, she is impossible to get to. Her blonde hair blows in the wind, pretty and impossibly perfect. A flag-pole pierces the ice, and the Demacian flag is fluttering behind her. Blue and golden wings.

She looks like she did the day they met; shining silver armor and still with a fake smile.

He knows Ekko has paused, watching him with weary concern. Ezreal shakes his head, tries to shake her image away, but it doesn't work. The hallucinations are more stubborn, the higher they get.

Ekko does not try to touch him to draw him back from it, but looks like he wants to. "What are you seeing?"

"Nothing," Ezreal lies, and knows it is transparent.

He hears Ekko exhale. He tears his eyes away from Lux and his focus quickly hones in on the sweat on Ekko's brow. With narrowed eyes, Ekko looks away from him and says, "liar," but has to focus on his own steps.

"Cheer up," Lux says, laughing. Ezreal tries not to look back. He tries, and he fails, and Lux looks so warm and happy, and he is so cold. "Come on now," she tells him, and then the ice is over-taking her. Her hair is freezing over, frost is crawling out from her heart and coating her armor. "Bright smiles!"

He feels like a crazy person. He clenches his jaw and mutters under his breath. "Shut up."

"Ezreal," Ekko says, harshly trying to ground him without even looking up.

"I know," Ezreal snaps.

***

Ezreal is out of breath. He has never climbed for this long before. His fingers are red and raw, and just the shift of his clothes against his skin is starting to feel like sandpaper. His ears hurt from the wind, and from his own hair being whipped against them.

He opens his mouth to complain, but Taric cuts him off. "Don't waste your breath," he says gently, like advice instead of a warning. Ezreal can hear the exhaustion. He shouldn't waste his own energy, Ezreal thinks, and would roll his eyes if he weren't worried it would make him dizzy.

Ezreal swallows a deep gulp of air and bites out "screw you, I'll complain if I want to."

He misses when the air still chilled his insides, but by now he feels numb to the cold and his lungs are burning up. Having ice in them would be a blessing.

The climb has been chipping away at Ekko, too. He is sweating hard, his skin flushed, and when Ezreal helps to pull him up and over a steep ledge, he can feel the tremble of Ekko's arm. They're going to need to rest soon. If they don't, Ekko is going to lose his grip and fall.

There are fewer handholds the higher up they get. Like the sky is pulling up the mountain, huge
Sona looks alarmingly well. Her hair is still in the tight bun she tied it in before they left. Messier, now. A little looser. Her skin is red from the cold wind, cheeks bright despite her neutral expression. Her lips are pulled thin, and her eyes distant. Now, and what must be every other time he looks, her neck is craned to stare upwards.

He has never wanted to quit, before.

Ezreal is familiar with being tired enough to long for home over a sleeping-bag. But he has never been overwhelmed with the desire to just sit and stop in the middle of something. He knows if he stops moving it will only be harder to start again.

He feels like he is just silently arguing with himself as they climb. Ekko needs to rest. He wants to rest. But he keeps telling that childish part of himself to grow up. There's no resting.

He tries not to blame himself for having this internal fight when Ekko gets hurt. It isn't as bad as it could be. Ekko pulls his shoulder, reaching too far, too quickly.

Reminding himself of all the reasons that it is not his fault or his responsibility just makes Ezreal feel resentful. He has to fight against his own tired temper to not hate Taric for helping Ekko climb. He knows it would be impossible for anyone else. He knows the anger is all misplaced.

He cannot tell his shivers from trembles.

***

The snow is coming down heavy outside the cave's mouth. The sound of the howling wind is still echoing down the cavern, but it's quieter now that they are in shelter. Ezreal's ears are still ringing, the tips of them burning up with frost-bite.

He runs a hand through his hair, pushing it off of his forehead, and when he turns to help Taric with the fire, he catches Ekko staring.

"What?" Ezreal asks, instinctively annoyed. He knows it is hypocritical of him to care about staring, but he is tired and grumpy and all he wants to do is curl up by the fire and sleep. Not be figured out like a puzzle by someone who knows him too well.

Ekko's gaze has to drop down to meet his eyes, and he looks confused. "Your, uh… Hm." Instead of finishing his sentence with any coherency, the boy approaches Ezreal. He reaches out, curiously twisting a strand of Ezreal's hair around his finger. He adds, still not explaining himself, "huh. Nope."

After a moment of Ekko touching his hair and failing to explain himself, Ezreal shakes him off and steps back, scowling.

"I thought it was just the snow or something," Ekko says, unbothered. "But - Ez, your hair is white."

Ezreal tugs a strand into his field of vision, then jolts at the sight of it. It's like holding someone else's hair - he's used to blonde.

"It'll wear off," Taric says.

"How do you know?"
Taric looks hesitant to answer, eyes darting to Sona.

She takes over, and signs to Ezreal: *Strong magic can change hair color.*

"I thought so," Ezreal mutters, irrationally annoyed at not discovering anything new. Having his theories confirmed isn't fun - not when it means someone else says them so casually. Still. He looks to Zilean, hair already white with age. Then Ekko, with naturally white hair and no magic in his blood to change that. Then he looks to Taric, and frowns. "Why not him, then?"

Taric tilts his head to the side, as if this hadn't occurred to him. He pulls his braid over his shoulder to look, then gets distracted untieing it to braid it again. "I suppose because your gauntlet specializes in mana-regulating," Taric says, then holds his hair-tie in his mouth, muffling the rest. "Or rather, yourself and your gem have evolved to specialize in it."

Zilean's fire is more than embers now, and they all crowd around it, desperate for warmth. Ezreal slides closer to Taric, as close as he can get without touching. As much as he wants the body heat, pushing their damp clothes together sounds worse. Apparently Ekko does not consider this, and sidles up with his thigh against Ezreal's.

Ekko asks, "what's the difference, though? Like… It's all gems, right?"

Taric chuckles, good-natured in a way that baffles Ezreal. Ezreal likes lecturing people to annoy them - he can't imagine playing patient teacher right now. "Crystals naturally attract magic to them," Taric explains. "This is why they're so useful as catalysts in hextech. They also grow in areas with prevalent mana."

Ekko nods his head against Ezreal's shoulder. Ezreal is not quite sure when that happened, but he is tired enough to lean against him in return.

"The gemcraft I was taught is primarily about… Understanding what potential is in these gems, and making the most of it. And about manipulating these potentials effectively. And while what Ezreal has taught himself is surely gemcraft as well, it's been hyper-specialized to just one gem, and that gem's magic. Amplification and regulation."

Ekko yawns. His weight against Ezreal is getting heavier. "That's cool. I think. So Ezreal's gem just absorbed and amplified and redistributed way more magic than you're getting?"

"Something like that."

Ezreal's eyes shut. He listens to the crackling of the fire, acutely aware of the time passing in silence and Ekko's breathing evening out.

Sometimes he hears the gentle shift of Sona's signing, then Taric or Zilean replying to her. They fleetingly discuss how much farther it will be. (Taric is quiet, then murmurs, "who can say?") They discuss illusions. ("You get used to ignoring the dead," Zilean says. Taric says, "this may be the only way to see the people I knew, before. A shame that the indulgence carries so much danger.")

Ezreal drifts in and out of sleep. The fire's warmth is never quite enough, even when his clothes have dried, even when he curls so close to it that sparks leap onto his arm.
A fever soaks into Ezreal's clammy skin. He feels like a corpse in water, numb and swollen and heavy. He does not get sick often, but it doesn't surprise him that it would strike now, when he is stressed and when his body is pushed past its limits.

He refuses to make a big deal of it. There's no point in whining about like a child when everyone else is facing the same hardship. The same cold and the same strain.

Ezreal wipes spit and vomit from the edge of his mouth and keeps going. He sees his mother and father, and keeps going. Sometimes he has to lean on Taric for support, and he hates this, but it's better than stopping - and more than anything, Ezreal knows that they have to keep going.

He feels like his skin is boiling, sweaty and hot and his vision still swimming.

But the summit is beautiful.

Ezreal does not tend to admit to it, but he is easily captivated by a nice view. (Crystal-clear rivers hidden away in the shade of emerald-topped trees in the Summer. Crumbling sculptures, over-grown with vines and flowers from untamed fields. A pretty girl in a crystal cavern.)

Mt. Targon is all snow and ice - but it is no longer an unending, strenuous path up, as far into the distance as he can see. It is the lilac sky, reflected down on the pure snow. A view that is untouched, unseen. Stars spread out across the horizon, and the moon is still just as bright, even as the sun rises. Time feels mixed up, as if they are too close to the sun for Runeterra's day cycles to apply.

They can finally rest.

Ekko drops to his knees in the snow, and does not even have the energy to sigh with his relief. Zilean comes to stand beside him, sitting down much slower and more carefully. Both are still injured. Healers aren't Gods, least of all on a path to them. Ekko's shoulder is swollen now, burning up with the strain. While Zilean's cut is healed, it still must be aching enough to slow him down. That isn't counting the shivers, the raw fingers, the bumps and scuffs and bruises on all of them.

"A moment, if we can spare it," Zilean says. It sounds like a joke, but Ezreal knows it is not. When you stop, it's that much harder to start again. And for whatever they find here, they still have the entire way back down. Leaving aside however tiring their plans here may be.

Taric's hand claps down on Ezreal's shoulder, startling him. "Rest for a moment. You should be proud of yourself. We all should."

Ezreal's eyes dart Taric's way, then back to the sky, so fast that he dizzily regrets it. "I guess," he says, noncommittal. He is tired. It is almost inconceivable to him that this 'destination' was really a half-way point. It is almost heart-breaking that home does not await them, even when they reach the base once more. He doesn't like that he is somewhere so breathtaking, but only wants to breathe easily. He just wants to be warm and home, somewhere familiar. That feeling is strange.

Sona brushes past them all. She does not even spare them a glance, eyes tracked on the sky. Her feet hardly disturb the snow beneath her.

Ezreal does not know what she sees, what she hears, but Taric steps past him to follow her, with worry on his face.
The sun crests over the peak of distant mountaintops. The dawn arrives, blinking at first, and then the sunlight scatters. It's blinding, and its rays bleed out the colors of the mountain until it is all white, all bright, all nothing.

The light is everywhere.

The voice, too, seems to come from everywhere.

"What is it this time?" It asks, deep and booming, so loud that Ezreal almost worries of an avalanche. But there is a strangeness to its rumbling. A complete lack of vibration, like it is not connected to anything physical. Like a voice from another plane.

Ezreal squints, but all he sees are his comrades, enveloped by the light just as he is. Taric has reached Sona, now, and their fingers are entwined. Both of them crane their necks, looking high, high above. Whatever they see, whatever it is that Ezreal cannot see, they face together. (It hurts, this time. Why does it hurt, this time?)

The voice drawls, sarcastic, "do you want a comets to rain down on an enemy kingdom? Do you need me to seal away what you keep opening the door to? That would be… Revolutionary thinking, truly."

"My," Zilean's says mildly.

Sona does not reply with words. She plucks at her harp-strings, a short sequence that Ezreal cannot guess the meaning of.

But the voice seems to. After a conspicuous pause, it says: "Not who I expected. Not how I expected you. But it is you, isn't it?"

Harp-strings sing, her half of the conversation coming out in music. There is something that seems to shift, high, high above, and then the light is fading, falling, raining down slow like firework sparks around Sona's and Taric's silhouette. As the dark brings shadows back, Ezreal finally sees it.

A dragon in the sky, in the stars. Golden and violet, glowing and swirling in a way that is not unlike rolling clouds. Ezreal hears Ekko gasp.

Sona is still playing, fingers flying and the music becoming erratic. She is rushing, becoming frantic like Ezreal has never seen her. Her shoulders tremble, and the cut-off of her music is abrupt.

"It's been some time," it says, looming over them all.

There is a slow confusion to her next chords, then they grow low in a growl of rejection, of frustration. Sona signs something, but from behind her, Ezreal cannot read it. He doesn't have to. Her harsh body language is enough as she raises her hand to point up at the dragon, jabbing at the air. *It was you, it was you.*

Ezreal does not know how to interpret the expression on the dragon's face. Its reptilian eyes seem cold, its jaw set and tense.

It sounds disappointed, somehow. "So you haven't remembered."

Sona shakes her head slowly, but her shoulders sag. She plays three notes, each higher than the last in questioning.

"Pay it no mind," it says, lightly. The casual tone is jarring, from a creature of the heavens. To Sona,
to a woman Ezreal knows, it speaks as if to an old friend. Mindful and caring, but most of all: familiar. "A side effect of the intended."

"What, though?" Ezreal snaps. He probably should not antagonize a celestial dragon. Ekko hisses his name, but Ezreal just pushes on. "If she doesn't remember, then just tell her what the hell you're talking about!"

The dragon sets its eyes on Ezreal, and immediately it's as if gravity is pushing down on him. His stomach flips painfully.

"Are you asking for her sake?" The dragon asks, coldly. "Or your own curiosity?"

"Both," Ezreal says. "Fuck off."

"Not affiliated," Ekko blurts out, looking exasperated and horrified all at once. "If you're going to smite him or something. Just saying. Not affiliated."

Ezreal retorts, "yeah, we climbed all the way up here together because we're unaffiliated. You fuck off, too."

Sona flicks her wrist and her strings light up at her fingers. The sound is loud, discordant, and shuts both of them up in an instant. She doesn't look their way, but she raises her hands to either side of her where they can see, then pushes her palms down. It isn't even sign language, but Ezreal understands it clearly: calm down. Be quiet.

What she signs to the dragon next must be permission, because it considers her before saying, "if you request it, my lady."

Its gaze still darts to Ezreal again with a distinct disapproval.

Yet it begins, looking down at Sona alone.

"I warned you of what humans do. I warned you that they would trick and trap and deceive you if you walked among them. That they would not listen to you. Yet you wished to see the world for yourself. To observe, to experience. To help bring them keep balance in small ways, from a small life."

Sona is still. Her fingers do not seek strings in the air - one hand comes to brush Taric's shoulder for comfort. His hand rests loose at her hip.

"I was right, of course," the dragon says, with a tired sort of fury. Bitter and hopeless, its voice rumbles. "I was right about them. Your kindness blinded you. The humans in their labs tried to take everything from you, tried to steal what was yours to make a child of war, their own weapon of the stars to raise and command. A child from the very invasions you hoped to stop."

It should be hard to stare at Sona's silhouette when there is such an imposing figure above them all, but Ezreal watches her as she stays frozen. Too many concepts are flying through his mind at hyper-speed. Noxian run laboratories in Zaun, where they bring back the dead, where they turn one person into another with only blood and magic. Where they tear the powers from a celestial.

"You were always so clever," it murmurs, fondly. "You sealed your powers into your etwahl as well as you could, to keep them safe. So clever, and so lucky. What truly saved you was the kindness of one man. Perhaps just his guilt. With your powers split between your etwahl and a child, he stole both away, back across the sea." This he says with no fondness at all, as if entirely unimpressed by her rescuer.
Sona plays a hurried sequence, and this seems to startle the dragon. When he does not answer quickly enough, she plays it again, and again.

"I can't explain the actions of men," it eventually says, losing some patience. "And you're better of not wasting your time with dead men."


er rescuer?" Ezreal wonders.

Sona's hand flies to her forehead, then her nose. Black bird, Ezreal reads, unable to see the rest. But he understands enough. She is not asking after her rescuer, but after Swain. After the leadership of Noxus, of the ones who ordered the experiment. It only takes a moment to understand why. Sona became famous with a one-of-a-kind instrument. There is no way she was not found and recognized - so why was she left alone all through childhood?

"All seeing as I am," the dragon drawls, making some kind of joke, "I only watch what interests me."

Ezreal recognizes Sona's laughter notes. He is startled by the sincerity of them.

"The first self-appointed aspect. Still yourself, but made new. You are both a celestial and your own aspect."

The notes Sona plays sound disheartened.

"Well, where have memories ever gotten us?" The dragon drawls, trying to comfort her again, in its own condescending way. "You've no need for them. You wished to be free of the expectations of us and of them. What better way to begin anew, free from manipulation, than to forget?"

Sona hesitates.

"Aspect of what?" Taric asks. This seems to startle Sona, as she tilts her head to look at him. Ezreal is surprised too - he had assumed he was the only one stupid enough to interrupt a conversation clearly meant for two.

The dragon looks down at Taric with a quiet interest, as if taking note of him for the first time.

"Of dawn," it says, then brushes on like that was unimportant. "You. You brought them all here."

"We ascended together," Taric deflects. But Ezreal knows who carried Zilean, who supported Ekko. Who healed and worried, and caught each one of them every time they fell.

"A Demacian," the dragon observes, with no trace of fondness. Then squints. "No. Where-"

"-I love my home," Taric interrupts, though his voice stays soft and respectful. "That doesn't fade with distance. But right now my focus is on my new home. It needs protecting, and I don't wish to lose focus."

The dragon accepts this with ease. Ezreal supposes that other planes of reality aren't as impressive to one who exists beyond this one. (Runeterra is so small, Ezreal thinks. Small and hopeless and helpless.)

The dragon sounds bored. "How admirable." It's focus shifts back to Sona. "My lady," it says. "Rest well. We'll speak again under the stars."

Ezreal does not point out that the stars are already showing. That being this close to the heavens, this
close to another plane, the sky isn't a great way to tell time. The dragon disappears into a dissipating fog before Ezreal can tell him to stop being pretentious.
Resting would be a lot nicer if Ezreal didn't end up vomiting again. But, hey. There's no such thing as a perfect trip. When he sits back down beside Ekko, the younger boy reaches out and rubs a soothing circle into his back. The feeling of it is unfamiliar and nostalgic all at once. Ezreal shrugs him off, but shakes his head to show Ekko he isn't angry.

His sour mood is far from Ekko's fault. He watches him for a moment, his dark skin a stark contrast to the pale snow. Ekko has been sitting for some time now, but his cheeks are still flushed as if with exertion when he offers Ezreal and tentative grin. Maybe he is feverish, too. It wouldn't be surprising.

"If you're ready," Zilean says. It takes Ekko a moment to process the words, apparently lost in thought as he stares at Ezreal. (Ezreal doesn't blame him. His own pale hair keeps falling into his line of sight and startling him.)

Ekko rises.

As he does, Sona and Taric step back, coming to stand behind Ezreal. He remains sitting, feeling ill and impatient. The sicker he feels, the less worth it this all becomes.

The first thing Ezreal is aware of is the sound of gears turning. Before Ekko has even activated his zero drive, he hears them clicking into place and turning together. The sound of it is familiar - it is a sound that is pervasive to Piltover. This time it is magic. A magic that Ezreal can scarcely understand. Magic and hextech follow rules too dissimilar, but Zilean's magic takes on the image of technology. With the vast fluidity and personal nature of magic, what he visualizes is technology.

Maybe this is why he can blend his spells with hextech. Maybe Ezreal is overthinking.

He hears gears, and the zero drive, and the hands of a clock ticking.

Ezreal often imagines using his arcane shift to step away from himself. The visual of his own ghost, a trail of himself in the past in neon blue light, is a jarring recreation of the feeling.

All around them, the light bursts forth. Glowing traces of Sona and Taric before they had stepped behind him. Ekko, before he had stood. Ezreal, his retching made silent for the image. All are silent. Sona's hand touches his shoulder, and he is not sure if she is seeking or offering comfort.

In front of them, Ekko is turning in place, looking out at the projections. His eyes are blown wide, mouth open in a delighted smile. He steps forward, then watches his projection slowly, slowly catch up to the motion.

Zilean's magic is of projections and of time and of the mimicry of technology. It ties with Ekko's drive that can pull to the past. Together, they force the zero drive to show them the past under Zilean's control.

None of the projections are far behind their origins, all just a moment's delay away. Ezreal startles when his own converges with him, its glow overwhelming as it seems to come from inside him.

"Wrong way," Zilean comments.

Ezreal hears the clock turn back. The projections move in reverse. They do not approach the present,
but return back to where they had been.

"Faster," Ekko urges. "We have a long way to go back and I'll overheat eventually."

Obediently, the clock turns faster with a quick gesture from Zilean.

Their projections stand before a dragon's silhouette. Their projections reach the summit. Their projections are gone, still climbing.

The world is still bathed in blue light, but for a long stretch of time, there is nothing. Brief flurries of snow fall at high speeds, like a hundred fireflies living and dying around them. There are flickers of the cities in the sky. Barely-there flashes. A light that could be the crack of a door in the distance, a distortion in the air that could be a footstep.

These glimpses of weather and celestials blip in and out faster and faster, until Ezreal can scarcely identify the sound of ticking at all. It is just a continuous sound, now, and Zilean is frowning.

"How far back are we?" Ekko asks.

Zilean smiles innocently. "I'm afraid I can't be exact, at this pace."

"Roughly," Ekko says, and huffs.

"A year."

"Not much foot traffic, huh?" Ezreal offers. Then doubles over, coughing. When he straightens, Taric's hand is on his other shoulder.

Ezreal closes his eyes for a moment. Neither Taric nor Sona is using their magic, but he can still feel the flow of their mana in the air and all around them. He tries to draw in what he can, gently leaning towards their healing, just to soothe his throat and upset stomach.

When he opens his eyes, Taric is staring down at him, a smile tugging at his lips. But silently, he looks back up to the projection.

It's Ekko's gasp that Ezreal notices first. Among the sped-up flickers, he hadn't noticed the new projection on his own.

Time slows. The ticking clock snaps into real time. It plays out in reverse.

Diana leaves. Her body is weary, but rigid with purpose. Her strides are confident, and she stands with her chest out and chin up. She breathes one final, satisfied sigh, and looks out across the mountain-top.

Diana heals the earth. Her blade stands straight in the snow and ice, and moonlight pours all around her until the fissure is full.

Diana kneels as she becomes an aspect. There is a figure in front of her, but the light cannot portray them, just like it could not portray the dragon. They are tall, humanoid, but three times too large. Ezreal thinks he sees long hair, thinks he sees a second set of arms. Diana receives power. She learns that her answers were questions - and then sees those questions answered.

Diana kills. Small creatures of the void, weak this close to the celestial plane. They crawl from a fissure on the ground and meet their death by her blade. She moves with fury and hopelessness,
lashing out and taking satisfaction in yet more deaths. She does not know what else to do.

Diana arrives. Her body is weak and heavy. She drags herself to the summit with exhaustion in every muscle. She carries the stories she's discovered like they are weights tied to her limbs. Bitter, hopeless truths that have led her here in the collapse of the only institute that had believed her.

And then it is over. The projection is still running, its blue glow cast over the snow, but Diana has gone and come.

In the silence, Ezreal rises. He is less shaky now. Sona and Taric's hands both fall away as he makes his way to where the fissure had been. The projection's glow comes from far beneath the surface. Beneath more than a year's worth of snow.

"If there's anything here, it's buried," Ekko murmurs, stepping up beside Ezreal.

The whir of his drive quiets. The glow fades, and Ekko draws an x into the snow with his foot.

They dig. Through freezing ice and with shaky limbs that quiver in the cold, they dig. With makeshift tools from their traveling gear, they inch deeper and deeper into the ground. Ezreal wishes there were magic for this. He has wished this a thousand times in his life. Excavation is nothing new, it's only the scale of it all.

It doesn't feel so grand, right now. Sick cold and tired, fingers raw and arms heavy. The mountain-top is silent, and the celestial plane is far away.

The shimmer of the moonstone does a good job to remind him what's at stake. Surrounded by misshapen, dull stones, its perfect spherical shape is jarring. After they find it, it takes hours longer to properly unearth it. Ezreal watches the way Ekko nearly holds his breath, eyes sparkling.

The magic that radiates off of it feels like nothing else. It is clear and crisp. Like perfect, flawlessly pure water in his mind, a sharp clarity as if it is just a little bit more real than any other magic. It is something so powerful, and yet his mind shies away from grasping it for himself, and he is not sure if this is out of fear that it will hurt or fear that it will vanish if he tries to claim it.

But that's just its power.

The stone itself, Ezreal picks up as soon as he can, snatching it up greedily before anyone else gets the chance. (Ekko rolls his eyes, but his lips twitch like he wants to smile.)

Ezreal rolls the stone in his hand, observing its pale moonlight glow. Not a blemish on it, after all their sloppy work to dig it out, after heavy weather and the narrow collision of planes above it.

But just one stone couldn't be enough to have kept all of Shurima safe, in the past.

He wants to look further back, he wants to know if they were off-base. He wants to talk high-speed theories and nothing else, wants a second mind to mull this all over with him.

Ezreal keeps this to himself, even as the others discuss it over a blessedly hot meal. He just eats, and lets the extra rations that Taric must have been saving just for this warm his core. With his legs criss-crossed, he rests the moonstone on one leg, and silently listens with heavy eyelids and a heavier heart.

"She didn't take it with her," Taric points out, and the way he speaks is like a man reading the paper. "It may be that it was only a side-effect." Then, as if conversing with himself, he translates Sona's sign language: "Perhaps a ritual unknown to her. Yes, that thought crossed my mind as well."
"Like, she just didn't know that a moonstone was getting, uh… Blessed? Or made? Or located?" Ekko asks, leaning forward eagerly.

"If we could look back farther," Zilean murmurs, guilt etching out the wrinkles of his face. "Back to when the Lunari thrived…"

Taric soothes him like its instinct. "It was impressive enough that we saw what we did."

"I suppose," Zilean says, relaxing a bit. "Then the next matter is - what to do with our meager findings?"

"I mean, the prince sent us up here, right? So… Bring this back to him and have him decide?"

The idea of this sits bitter with Ezreal. He shifts his knee and the moonstone rolls to be caged by his legs as he pulls them in towards himself possessively. He is tired of giving things to Jarvan, and too exhausted to talk himself out of this over-emotional thinking.

Taric catches his eye. It's always Taric who catches him when he's being an idiot, Ezreal thinks, but cannot bring himself to be annoyed. Not at Taric. Not when he offers a tentative smile that is so understanding, so non-patronizing.

"We'll see," Taric says. "We have plenty of time to decide what our next step is. We were the ones to risk our lives for this, and it would have been impossible without Zilean and Ekko - neither of whom owe their loyalty to Demacia."

"I'm getting paid though," Ekko points out, grinning.

Sona signs, and Taric translates, nodding his agreement. "We still have the whole way down."

Ekko's grin falls, and he lets out a groan. "Don't remind me."

"Worth the money?" Ezreal asks, and has been quiet for so long that Ekko's shoulders jump dramatically.

"Yeah," Ekko says, eventually. "I mean, I'm just gonna give it to my parents, but… They could use it. It's a lot easier to be a broke street kid than it is to be a broke parent."

"You could have died," Ezreal points out, keeping his voice level. He knows that this was not Ekko's only motivation - knows that he did it for altruism, for the safety of the world. Did it to foster, in whatever way he could, a connection between Zaun and Demacia. Did it for Lux.

He doesn't like the idea of killing yourself for your family, however hypocritical this makes him.

Ekko sighs, and the way he looks at Ezreal holds all the judgment that Taric withholds. As if Ezreal is the younger one between them. Ekko says, "didn't, though," and leaves it at that.

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Ezreal wakes up.

Mana in the air is surging, pulsing, bright and sharp like the moonstone. He reaches out for it instinctively, and it is still right beside him, and it is only when he sees it that he realizes the brightness lighting his tent.
He surges out from under his sleeping bag and outside. The wind whips white hair in his eyes, and he can hear it howling, shrieking as if they are at the eye of a tornado.

In the distance, Taric is standing alone, reaching up towards - no. Not alone. He is reaching up towards a figure made of constellation-lines, filled in with the night sky of another plane. A giant, a man three times his size, setting aside its shield to touch Taric's hand.

Ezreal remembers this, not exactly this, but this. Diana becoming an aspect.

The light fades as it had for the dragon: in falling-tars streaking down from the sky, carried by a calming wind.

Taric turns to look at Ezreal over his shoulder. Ezreal is not sure of his own expression, but Taric's smile falters when he sees him. There is a dawning realization in his eyes and some kind of regret, and Ezreal does not know why. He must look worried, because Taric quickly masks it with a comforting smile. A soft, reassuring thing that has always worked too well, but this time doesn't.

He knows that he is not upset that Taric is an aspect - the same way he was not upset to learn that Sona is. But Taric's expression is burned in his mind, and how his thoughts are racing to understand it.

Then Taric's eyes glide past Ezreal.

He is not sure when she joined him outside, but Sona is a step behind him. She, too, tries to soothe him, resting a hand on his shoulder. She does not look away from Taric, and there is a tension to her grip. Maybe she wasn't comforting him at all.

_Under the stars_, she signs, then steps past him to join Taric.

"The sun is rising," Ezreal calls after her, grumpily.

She glances back at him to smile, then closes the distance to stand beside Taric. Ezreal trails after, not coming beside them, but closer.

Above the two aspects, the dragon returns.

"Found what you came for?" It drawls. Ezreal is immediately on edge. He has respected the celestials as much as he is able to respect anyone, always known that for all his distaste for authority, the celestials were a step beyond. One sentence from this dragon and Ezreal feels like he would fist-fight it just for the satisfaction, if he could.

Probably a bad idea.

"Yes and no," Taric answers, and hesitates. "Answers to the wrong questions, I suppose.

"Then ask better questions," the dragon tells him, but does not sound annoyed.

"We've seen a ritual to bless moonstones. To repel the void and seal rifts. That is what we sought."

"Oh, is that all?" Sona signs something, and the dragon curls backwards just an inch. "Apologies, my lady." It pauses as if to clear its throat, but the beat of silence is surreal in its awkwardness. When it has its bearings back, the dragon says, "only the Lunari can bless moonstones. If you aren't satisfied with what you've found, you should seek the Aspect of the Moon."

Sona's gesturing grows wide, impatient.
"I suppose," the dragon admits. "But believe me, it's no picnic. Limitations. You know how it is."

Sona runs a frustrated hand through her hair, and Ezreal knows she is lamenting because she does not know how it is. This familiarity is one-sided.

"You," it says, with a nod down towards Taric. "You work with the earth. Take whatever stones you like, forge them yourself if you like. Honestly, that I have to teach anyone at all when these rituals should be well-known by an entire tribe."

"And Diana will bless them?" Taric clarifies.

"Diana," the dragon repeats slowly, like it is tasting the name for the first time. "Yes."

Ezreal does not like the idea of groveling and singing praises of these scraps of information. Being a deity is no excuse - if anything, it makes it worse. To know so much and share so little. To have so much power and keep such a distance.

Yet Taric says, "thank you for your assistance," with a deep bow that seems to annoy even Sona.

The dragon looks pleased, a smug, toothy grin spreading across its face. "My generosity hasn't ended. A favor for a favor. It's about time for your plane to see her, anyway."

Ezreal frowns at the contradiction. He's done them a favor, so they are doing him one? That hardly sounds like generosity.

The stars are fading as the sun rises, this time. The celestial plane closes its doors slowly, and the lights that line the dragon fall away like fog.

Its voice drifts down to them, a strange combination of relieved and amused. "Take care of her."

"Of who?" Ezreal asks, but gets no answer - until the sky tears open to the sound of girlish giggling.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The rift that opens is not like the void rift that Ezreal had seen before, near the Institute grounds. Not quite. It isn't a hole that tears open the ground, pushing and cracking the earth around it and leaving only an emptiness so deep that it seemed to suck the life from its surroundings. It isn't jagged and rough, and it isn't dark inside.

This rift is different. A precise little hole punched into the air. It is vivid and overwhelming and filled with stars. Filled naturally with the same magic that Soraka had poured into the void rift, filled with the same constellations that had drawn the dragon in the sky.

A girl falls out with a gleeful cry of "Catch me!"

His body moves on reflex at the command. Ezreal has to lunge forward, throwing his arms out for her to crash into. He does not much mind the way she weighs him down to his knees, scratching him up on the hard icy ground. He is too distracted by the long hair that trails down after her, fluttering like a flag. Long, and with so many shifting hues that he cannot tell where it ends and where the stars through her portal begin until the final moment when the hole closes with a pop.

Her hair swirls slow around the both of them, sparkling like early stars at twilight, like it is floating on the surface of water. She meets his gaze with crinkled mismatched eyes, amethyst and sapphire, grinning at him.

Ezreal sets her down carefully, hands on her bare arms to make sure she stays upright. She looks younger than Ekko. If he had to guess, thirteen or fourteen, but he knows that looks don't mean much.

"You caught me!" She enthuses, and throws her arms up. They are bare, save for golden bracelets and bangles. Her feet are practically bare, too. So is her midriff, and her legs. In shorts and a cut-off top, she is not at all dressed for the peaks of Mt. Targon.

She is not the kind of person who could make it up to the peak, but she is no doubt blessed. She does not look out of place against the pale horizon, against the snow, painted by pastel light. Not when her hair is a sunset sky in itself.

He thinks of how Sona did not seem as affected by the weather as the rest of them. Maybe Celestials don't mind the cold, maybe it's just here that they don't.

Then the girl wraps her arms around herself and exclaims, "Brr! Let's get out of here! Where to? Down? Just - down, right?"

Taric and Sona are finally approaching, after far too much time spent observing from a distance. He hears Taric murmuring something in an agreeable tone. Sona helps slip the cloak from Taric's shoulders, then hands it back to him. In turn, Taric approaches the girl with it, offering it to her.

"It's quite a ways down," he says. "Wear this, we don't want you catching your death."

She looks confused, but still takes the cloak and pulls it over her shoulders. It is large enough to drag in the snow, and she does her best to wrap herself up in the excess fabric like a dress. She looks like those ridiculous summoners. They were all just children draped in their over-sized robes, too.
"Thanks! I'm Zoe! I'm the Aspect of Twilight!" She chirps. "And! We're not walking down! That would take forever!"

"A pleasure, Zoe," Taric says, with an amused smile, and the girl seems to stand up straighter, smile wider. It only seems natural to Ezreal that he's good with children.

"Yeah!" Zoe enthuses. Then repeats: "But we're not walkin'! Mm-mm. Too cold!"

She raises up her hands, then spreads them apart, pulling open another portal. There are galaxies on the other side, almost blinding-bright. She jumps in and says, "Follow me!"

But it closes behind her before anyone has time to react.

"Welp," Ekko says, apparently awake and standing outside their tent. Ezreal wonders how long he has been watching, vaguely annoyed that he didn't notice. Worse, when he turns to see him, Zilean is there too, already taking down his tent as if nothing is out of the ordinary.

"Hm," Taric agrees.

Sona ducks behind Taric's back, but not before Ezreal sees that she is laughing, one hand over her mouth and the other over her stomach. Zilean looks more amused by her reaction than anything else.

The sound of the portal opening again pulls Ezreal's attention away. Zoe fall backwards out of it, like being spit from the mouth of a dragon, before its maw closes once more.

She sits on the ground for a moment, blinking. Then wails, "What?! Come on, why can't I do the thingy?! I've always been able to do the thingy!"

"The thingy," Ekko repeats, distantly.

"They're still..." Zoe trails off, frowning deeply and furrowing her brow. Her tongue pokes out the corner of her mouth. "Something's still messing with my portals! Hey, doggy! Why can't I keep my portals open?!"

She is yelling at the sky, but the sky is not answering.

They let Zoe stomp around in the snow, whining and shouting up at an empty sky while they get ready to descend. Packing up goes slower than usual, and Ezreal is not sure if it is simple apprehension for what's to come, or if the others, like him, are far too distracted by the fresh face among them.

When everything is gathered, they give a final look over a view they are sure not to see again. Ezreal wants to imprint it in his mind, wants it broadcast as if over visiopathic crystals, wants magic projections of it. It doesn't matter how, but he wants to keep it.

But they have to leave.

The others are already seeking the gentlest path down. Zoe has taken to rambling Sona's ear off about - Ezreal doesn't even know what. Food, it sounds like. As they disappear over the steep horizon, Taric hesitates to follow.

Ezreal waits for him without approaching, lingering a distance away for as long as he can stand it, but the voices of the others are growing quiet. They know better than to let themselves get separated, but his mind is caught on wasted daylight. Ezreal steps up beside him, raising his hand as if to touch his shoulder but dropping it again, half-way.
The older man offers him a smile, and for a moment it is just the two of them in the quiet, here at the top of the world.

"The Aspect of the Protector," Taric says, breaking the silence.

Ezreal laughs, but it comes out weak. He wants to be proud, but there's a hollow space where that ember should be, edged with guilt and confusion. "What does that mean?"

Taric can't meet his gaze anymore, blue eyes drifting away like he is lost at sea. "That my magic is changing. Is - changed."

"What's wrong with that?" Ezreal asks, and knows it comes out much gruffer than he means for it to. He remembers Lux crumpling into herself in tears over her own magic, that to him had still flowed as naturally as anything. He still feels ill. "Magic evolves the same as any part of a person. Being gifted with something special just makes you lucky."

It isn't unfortunate to be special, or to be decided special by someone else. Ezreal wants to believe this.

Taric is quiet. He raises a hand, empty a moment ago, but when he opens it, new gems hover up from his palm. They shift in the air with the movements of his fingers, like he is testing himself, testing them. His new, unfamiliar gifts. Things he has always drawn power from, now summoned from thin air like nothing at all.


There is an unspoken: but, and that is what makes it click into place in Ezreal's mind, like gears lining up.

Taric is the only gem knight left, from his own world. New power is nothing to frown at; Ezreal had watched him reach for it, watched him take it willingly. But it's a power that will change the last trace of his home left in him. It will rewrite the only thing he had brought with him: tradition. It will steal it away from him, and with him, steal it from his home.

That's a high price to protect a world that is not even his own. Ezreal scowls at the realization of this, at the whims of celestials that offer people deals they are in no position to reject. It almost seems like a punishment - forcing him to discard his own world in pursuit of peace in this one.

But it is a choice. It is a choice, and Taric has chosen this world over his own. He was a knight, Ezreal thinks, before he was an aspect. No world with knights is at peace. No world where healers need armor is at peace.

Ezreal regrets snapping at him. Yet as always, Taric is a man who has no need for the apologies he deserves.

"Well," Taric says, after a moment, and puffs up a bit, for show. "I suppose I should get to protecting, then."

"Wait," Ezreal says. Taric obeys, head tilting to the side. Ezreal hurries to where they had camped, to where the most snow has been upturned, and kicks around it for a long moment. As he is searching, he explains, "The dragon said - stones from the mountain need to get blessed. So we should take more."

"Ah," Taric muses, "So you're looking for souvenirs."
Ezreal scoffs. He grabs a handful of stones, pale grey and rough-textured. He does not know if they will really be useful or if he is off-track; it's hard to imagine these turning into the smooth moonstone that he tucks them beside in his bag. But he can't take the risk of missing something in a place like this.

Worst case scenario, Ezreal is fine with stolen stones from the cusp of heaven sitting pretty on his shelf.

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They catch up to the others with ease; they have stopped to wait not far below. Zoe is hopping from foot to foot, either impatient or trying to keep herself warm. This only draws Ezreal's attention to how still the others are; tired and weakened by the climb they have already done once.

He knows the descent will be easier - downhill always is. But that's only when they're finished with the steep drops that are every bit as perilous down as they were up.

They regroup.

They move slow, but make better time than Ezreal had expected, given Ekko's arm, Zilean's ankle, and now a child.

It helps that Zoe, like Sona, can hover. It does not seem to take energy from her at all, and she is often drifting along beside Ezreal as he grasps at shaky handholds in the mountainside.

"So whatcha doin' up here?" Zoe asks, sparkling just at the edge of Ezreal's sight. He has to put in a conscious effort not to look, to keep himself focused on the task at hand. She is so lighthearted that she is a hazard, not to herself, but to them.

"Looking for keys to lock a door," Ezreal says, grunting.

Zoe fiddles with a loose string around her waist. "I've got keys! I don't remember where they're all from, but maybe one can help!"

"It's a metaphor, dear," Zilean offers, patiently, already at the bottom of this wall. He is holding Taric's arm for support.

Ezreal wishes Zoe would just wait below, but she sticks by his side, and hums with curiosity. "For what?"

Ekko seems to sense Ezreal's impatience, and tries to help explain. "Rifts into the void. The planet soaks up too much magic and goes crazy, I guess? And monsters come out from another plane, so we need to do what we can to close those rifts."

"Huh," Zoe says, but does not seem particularly intrigued. "That shouldn't be how it works. But maybe just stop using magic?"

"Not really an option," Ezreal says. "Not when there's war."

And not when the magic is every bit a part of you as your own hands. He hates the casual suggestion that a person with magic could just steel away that part of themselves - it's worse when it comes from someone whose feet don't touch the ground.

Zoe makes another displeased sound, and the flurry of movement forces Ezreal to look her way. She winds up her fist, then swings at an imaginary target. "Just go - pow! See? You don't need magic!"
Pow, pow, and then - boom!"

"The boom sounds like magic," Ekko comments, dryly.

"No, just…" Zoe twirls in mid-air, her hair swirling around her. She stops, and her hair doesn't, until it finally unwinds, and she admits, "Oh, wait, you're right. That's magic."

She had forgotten the difference, Ezreal realizes, as he finally hops down to solid ground. Zoe drifts down after him, toeing her way to the earth like testing water. He wonders how long she has been a child - how long she has been an aspect.

How long will Taric live? How long will Sona? If Zoe can pass through planes, will Taric be able to return home, someday? Or is he bound to protect this plane, bound to immortality, bound to abandoning that other realm?

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The physical exhaustion is nice, in its own way. Ezreal has always had trouble falling asleep. He is used to laying in bed for far too long, mind racing and jumping tracks from moment to moment. He is used to oversleeping, unbound by a proper work schedule. But like this, when he is tired to the bone, he can sleep with ease.

The hallucinations do not come. Sometimes Ezreal's vision is hazy, sometimes he almost hears echoes, but nothing is so clear as it was before.

As they descend, it becomes easier and easier to find shelter, though the necessity for it dissipates with the thinning snow. His fever does not completely fade, he still feels ill, but it's manageable, and he is able to keep food down without issue. His calves ache as if they are bruised all up and down. They are, but the ache is inside, too. In his arms and his back and his neck all at once.

He doesn't complain. It almost seems wasteful to ask for healing magic to go towards this when a surprise injury could be just around the corner. He leeches what he can from them, like skimming off the top of a cup about to overflow, and makes this be enough.

With a child's chipper rambling, the quiet weariness of the climb seems distant. They move slowly, but with a cohesion they have learned. One after the other, they help each other down slopes. Taric catches short stumbles. Zilean slows falls when they have to make steep jumps, and Sona shields them from the still-inevitable pain of landing.

Ezreal almost doesn't realize just how much easier it's gotten. It's only when he's holding his hand for Ekko, an unnecessary gesture of help as they're hopping across a small stream, that it strikes him how warm it must be for any water to have melted. There are still chunks of ice floating across it, the stones slippery with an over-layer of frost.

Ezreal thinks - Ekko's hand is warm, at the same time as Ekko comments, hopping towards him clumsily, "Your hair's getting dark again. Well, darker."

"We're getting to the walk-in-the-park stage of this," Ezreal retorts.

Ekko laughs, and doesn't let go of his hand. Ezreal doesn't mind; it's nice to feel something warm. He's always been a tactile person, and now that his stomach is not in such dramatic upheaval, he can enjoy it.

Ekko must not think it's strange either, because he just keeps speaking. "So then the next stage is…"
Ezreal tries to go through things in his mind. They have the moonstone to weaken the void. They still don't even know if this will truly seal open rifts or just make them more manageable. Let alone if they will prevent more from tearing open. They don't even know what they're going to do with this stone.

And just one stone isn't enough. It's like the dragon said.

"We need to find Diana to see about getting - more stones?"

"Mass distribution?" Ekko asks, and laughs like it was a joke. But there is an undercurrent of sincerity, the hope that it could be so easy.

"Even if that were possible, which I doubt, wouldn't that just encourage more and more magic abuse? Like building up an immunity."

"So we need something final, instead of these quick fixes to symptoms of war."

Ezreal does not like referring to magic as a symptom. Maybe that's how it seems to someone who has none. He doesn't like the idea that something he knows is wonderful is just as poisonous. He deflects. "You can't cure war. Noxus won't ever allow peace. And honestly, I don't think Demacia would, either."

"Not even under Jarvan?"

"The prince?" Ezreal frowns, feels his hand tense against his will, and Ekko squeezing it in return. "No, not even under him. Hero complexes aren't any less dangerous than power complexes."

He isn't sure how much of that is true and how much is irrational bitterness. The way Ekko looks at him sidelong gives him the impression that he knows as much.

Ezreal tries to cover, adding, "Not that it matters. His father is still the king until he either keels over or passes on the throne. In all my research, I don't know that I've ever come across a king who happily gave up his own power before he had to."

Ekko deflates a bit, successfully distracted. "We're just scrambling."

"But it's better than doing nothing."

***

They reach the city in the middle of the night. It's a miracle that anyone is still out in the streets, but there are a few. With the moon overhead, they are led back to the rooms they had stayed in before they left.

Ekko bathes before sleeping, drawing energy from who-knows-where, but Ezreal strips into his underclothes and lays down right away. He does not bother to argue when Zoe climbs into the other bed in the room. She stares across the space at him. She is constantly wide-eyed and curious about everything she sees - and this must include him.

He lets her stare.

Eventually she breaks the silence. "Is this a good world?"

Ezreal stares back, evenly. "There's no real answer to a question like that. There are a ton of great things, just like there are a ton of shitty things. I'm sure that any world is like that."
Zoe looks dissatisfied with this answer, and Ezreal doesn't blame her. But he doesn't know how to dumb it down to her without ruining the sincerity of his answer.

"It sounds like you're just destroying it yourselves," she says, frowning like she is struggling to solve a puzzle.

"Maybe," Ezreal says, even though he hates it. "Slowly."

She cocks her head to the side, into the soft pillow. "No? Something's gotta be coming up fast, for me to be here."

"What does that mean?"

Zoe hums, her tongue poking out her mouth. "Because the worlds I visit always - change. I don't really know much about this place anymore, but it sounds like that bad stuff is gonna be the thing that wrecks this place." After a brief pause, sounding completely unbothered, she adds: "Too bad."

Ezreal doesn't even know where to start with his questions, but he is tired. They can wait. Zoe entertains herself with constellation butterflies at her fingertips, and Ezreal lets himself doze off in the glow of them.

He wakes briefly, to Ekko's annoyed grumbling as the younger boy climbs into bed with him, Zoe sprawled out across the only other bed, snoring loudly.

This time Ekko does not need to force him into the bath in the morning.

Ezreal soaks in the hot water for so long that it goes cold, until his fingers are wrinkled like prunes. He stares at the foggy surface of the water. It's muddy with all the grime he's washed off of himself. He needs to get out of the tub and rinse off, but he knows his muscles are going to ache when he does.

His murky reflection stares back at him. His hair is back to blond. There are bruises and small scratches all across his body, but now that their climb is finally over, they are satisfying. More than he is used to, but comfortingly familiar.

Ezreal likes a bit of hurt, if he's honest. Rewards aren't good unless you earn them. He's had to strain his body to relax it, and that's what makes it worthwhile.

He only drags himself out of the water and into his clothes at the complaints of Ekko and Zoe, whining at the other side of the door.

Leona sees them as early as she can, which is to say, at mid-day. She must have known they were coming, must have been busy with work until the moment they were allowed to step through her doors, but she still rushes from her seat to greet them in a hurry, as if she is startled to see them alive. She grasps Sona's hands in her own for a moment, then moves on to Taric's, then Zilean's.

She does not extend the same courtesy to the children, and Ezreal doubts she even realizes it. There is no malice in it. She looks at them with such fondness and relief that it genuinely seems to take her a moment to notice Zoe at all.

When she does, her eyes go wide, and she bites the inside of her cheek. "You… Made it," she says, trying to stay on track and not get ahead of herself with questions.

They follow her to the table, where she gestures for them to sit.
When they've settled, Taric clasps his hands together. "It was beautiful."

Leona smiles, soft with nostalgia. She's seen it too, and knows the unique, unforgettable light of the stars being in reach. Despite her smile, she murmurs, "It's lonely. It's a place that faces you with your mistakes, and with the reality of your priorities."

Ezreal wonders why she didn't give them this spiel before they left.

Taric leans forward to see Ezreal past Zoe, and nods. Ezreal understands, pulling the moonstone from his bag and setting it on the table. He keeps his hand right beside it, making sure he keeps it claimed as his own.

Being jostled around with Ezreal's other things hasn't dulled it at all; its shine is still a stark contrast against the stone tabletop.

Leona does not know what to make of it. She knows better than to reach for something so valuable, and doesn't have to, to feel the magic that radiates from it.

Ezreal wonders if she can tell the difference in magic from the moon or the sun or the stars. He wonders how deep in denial she would have to be to still disbelieve in the history of Mt. Targon and the Lunari.

"Thanks to Diana, this stone can soothe the void, somehow," Ezreal says. He wants to cut to the chase. Taric shoots him a warning look, and he ignores it, almost spitefully adding, "and Taric got blessed and a star dragon is making us babysit."

"I call him space doggy!" Zoe interjects, sounding pleased to contribute. Then, "Wait, hey! I'm not a baby!"

Leona seems to ignore everything but the first sentence. As far as Ezreal is concerned, it was the least interesting part. But Leona blurts out, "She is a murderer, she can't bless anything. Nothing good can come from her."

Sona signs And you've never killed anyone?

Taric does not translate this, but murmurs to her, "There's a difference between survival and protection and what Diana has done, here."

Is there, Sona signs, scowling. Her expression has soured fast, and Taric's smile weakens as he looks away. Whatever this argument is, they have had it before. It's perhaps the first time Ezreal has ever seen them in public disagreement.

It's minor, and Taric is tactful as always. He directs his attention back to Leona. "I certainly understand your hesitation," he says, but trails off distractedly as Sona stands up and leaves the room.

She, apparently, is not nearly as interested in maintaining an image.

If Leona is offended, it doesn't show. If Taric wants to follow after her, it doesn't show.

So Ezreal does, swiping the moonstone back into his bag as he does. He hears Ekko let out a quiet, "Wait," behind him, but the other boy does not chase.

In the cool shade of the hallway, it is just Ezreal and Sona, and the occasional wandering Rakkor passing by. The wind does not reach them, but its harsh breeze is nearby; the sound of fluttering flags and its whistling caught between pillars is overwhelming.
"This place is nothing but a cautionary tale," Sona signs to him, eyes still narrow.

"How so?" Ezreal asks. It's something of a comfort to know that the people passing by are unlikely to understand Sona's half of the conversation. It feels private, no matter their audience.

"Condemning their own people and their own history. When you treat your own people as heretics, what wonder is it that they want to destroy the ones who can make that decision?"

"So you think she was justified?"

Sona hesitates. Not entirely. *But could she have changed the minds of the elders with words?*

"Doubt it."

*Then was she supposed to allow the Lunari to be erased from history, even with one still standing?*

"Guess not."

Ezreal doesn't mind voicing divisive opinions. He's stood up for Diana before - even if it was before she killed an entire room of elders. He doesn't disagree.

His mind is just elsewhere.

So is Sona's. Her hands are moving fast with anger. *He tolerates it like he has no right to comment, like he thinks corruption will work itself out without intervention.*

Ezreal blinks at her, startled that she would tell him this. Startled that the hill that Sona wants to die on is apparently Mt. Let-Diana-Get-Away-With-Murder.

He doesn't get a chance to reply. Through the door, he hears the footsteps of the others approaching. Sona raises a finger to pursed lips, then hurries down the hall. She disappears around a corner before the door opens.

The others spill out slowly. Leona lingers behind them. She gives Ezreal a nod. Then she stares at Zoe for a long moment, before finally shutting the door between them.

Ezreal turns the opposite direction from Sona and begins walking, sure that the others will naturally follow. He does not miss the way Taric's eyes scan all around in search of her, without comment.

It's rare to see Sona angry, and Ezreal figures this means she does not *want* to be seen angry.

Taric knows better than to ask after her, and breaks the silence as they walk, to say, "Leona says that Diana is likely near Kaladoun."

Kaladoun - to the north west of Valoran. A coastal region that feeds into the Serpentine River, which twists south until its slim tip is not terribly far from Mt. Targon.

Ezreal has been there before. He'd spent a dozen expeditions convinced it was nothing but a remnant of a kingdom. That had been before the vastaya had made themselves known. The mermaids, with traditions that meet these mountains.

Ezreal has been there a dozen times by himself - and once with Lux.

"That," Ezreal says, slowly, "Makes sense."

Diana, only recently an aspect, only recently aware of so much of what the moon could give her. She
had learned what she could from her home, and now it was time to answer to an over-due call.

He doesn't know how she could know about Nami, but it's all he can think of. Nami's people know more about the Lunari.

"She's probably tracking down Nami," Ezreal explains, though at the blank stares, he realizes this has not cleared anything up for them. "A mermaid. She was going to join the League, didn't quite make it in before we closed shop. Was looking for a moonstone, had a whole tradition with the Lunari. Which I know, because I stole the paperwork at the institute, but how would Diana have learned that? She wasn't big into random theft like I am."

Ekko snorts, which is better than getting scolded, so Ezreal grins.

"Without the elders," Taric points out, "Leona is the representative of the Solari and of Mt. Targon. I presume she inherited quite a bit of information with that title. Including all the relevant papers from the institute."

The elders would have learned of Nami's tribe, then. This is vaguely infuriating - that there were living people with traces of the history they worked to hide. And Leona will carry on their traditions and willful erasure, even with mounting evidence that it's wrong.

The only redeeming facet of all of this is that Leona must have told Diana about Nami and her quest. Ezreal is not blind to the depth of that decision.

He is also not blind to the irony of Diana leaving the moonstones blessed in her wake at the peak of Mt. Targon, just before learning of the person who will ask for one. But she doesn't know better, and now they are going to chase after her like she is a child who forgot their lunch at home.

Ezreal exhales, and wishes he could exhale his own soul out just to drift weightlessly for a little bit. He wants to rest much longer than one bath-soak, but resigns himself to the knowledge that it's too much to ask for.

"So," Ekko says, patting him on the back as if to console him. "Kaladoun next?"

"Kaladoun," Zoe repeats slowly, feeling out the vowels in her mouth. She scrunches up her face, eyes squinting in amusement at the sound of it.

"Are you coming with us?" Ekko asks her. The question startles Ezreal. Zoe's company is still new and strange, but dismissing an errand given to you by a celestial dragon from the top of the world seems out of character for Ekko.

Taric catches his raised eyebrows, and as an aside, explains, "Leona was intent on Zoe staying here."

"She was pushy about it," Zoe says, huffing. "I wanna see more stuff before it's all gone!"

"Please stop talking like the world is ending so casually," Ekko says, but sounds equally casual.

Zoe does not seem to understand the issue, and shrugs.

Chapter End Notes
The new map is sooooo perfect and I love it!

Although it really underscores the fact that this fic has gone completely off the rails. It's like 90% things I had planned from the start and 10% lucky integration of new lore. Honestly, its conception was: "A bridge from old lore to new, but also with my biases," but I think at this point it can only be called "Old lore, with my biases, and also sometimes new lore is there, too."

Did you know that this is about the length of a short novel? There are times I want to go back and fix it up, because along with the pieces I'm proud of, there are a dozen of areas that it's very sloppy... Both structurally, and... Typos for days. But if I turn around, I can't go forward.

So, please bare with me! Forwards and onwards! I love you!!
"Should be this way," Ezreal says, hopping over a mess of branches on the ground. One snags his pants at an existing tear, pulling it wider. He does not have to look back to know Lux is wincing.

She follows him more cautiously, using her baton to nudge the reaching twigs away from her skirt. They snap beneath her feet in very precise patterns. He likes this about her. He likes it when they have to fight, whether together or against one another. He knows the sound of her.

"Please be careful," Lux tells him, and they are in isolation enough that her voice is not oversaturated with concern and patience.

She sounds annoyed. This is starting to get familiar too. Pushing Lux is becoming a fun game. It's half the reason he had wanted her with him.

As if he had not heard her warning, Ezreal hops up to balance on a fallen tree-trunk. He looks down at Lux, feeling smug.

They are far, far from Demacia. Far from the Institute grounds - far from champions and journalists and family. The only thing out this close to the coast are ruins; towns abandoned centuries ago, when their communities flooded into growing kingdoms nearby.

Lux rolls her eyes and purses her lips. She stands below him and crosses her arms impatiently, staring up at him.

"Are you enjoying being taller for once?" She asks.

Ezreal's smirk falters. "Shut up, you're like… Two inches taller than me."

She laughs, and hoists herself up onto the log beside him. When she stands, she braces herself with a grip on his arm. He is hyper-aware of her touch. Her warmth and her weight, and of how close she stands to him.

He swallows thickly, and knows that this is nothing. That it has to be nothing.

But it is new.

The serpentine river is loud, and its roaring overwhelms him for a moment. Its path twists and curves into sight from between the trees, then back into hiding. Overhead, the leaves rustle in the wind. The grass is overgrown and the water dark, and deeper than he'd expected. He can hear the lively chirping of bugs and birds.

Lux squeezes his arm, he thinks in appreciation of the view. He wants to show her a hundred other beautiful places he's seen, and the impulse startles him. When he turns her way, her hair is blowing into her face, and she meets his eyes and smiles, tucking it behind her ear. The sunlight is dancing across her cheeks, bright and warm, and he feels his own face heating.

He isn't used to this. He isn't used to the warm in his gut, even when he's kissed other girls, other boys, in the past. He is used to the people he flirts with stuttering, not his own heart.
Not that he is flirting. Not that either of them are flirting.

Lux turns away from Ezreal with an urgency that reminds him not to turn down dead-end roads.

"Do you even think she'll show herself to us?" Lux asks to distract them, playing oblivious.

Ezreal does not waste his energy on letting this sting. He rubs his cheek with his palm as if he could wipe off his blush, and moves on.

"Dunno. But she's expecting to hear back from the Institute, and it's not like she's got a mail box to check. She's gotta be waiting for word."

"So we're taking advantage of that," Lux says, sounding vaguely displeased. But she is still here.

"Don't you wanna meet a mermaid?"

Lux shrugs innocently, as if they are not miles from home just for that, as if she had not been pushy and eager to go while Ezreal was still rubbing sleep from his eyes.

They are still far from where the river meets the sea when they finally meet her, but it's no surprise that the mermaids travel like this.

It starts with a small splash, a flick of shimmering tail in the sunlight, and Ezreal's hand reaching out to stop Lux behind him. He hates how conscious he is of where his fingers brush her stomach. He pays attention to the ripples on the water, instead.

After a long moment of silence, surely of mutual observation, dark eyes break the surface.

The vastaya is girlish and curious, at first just watching them.

Then Lux says, "good afternoon," gentle and bright all at once. Ezreal should be captivated by the mermaid, by a race he's never had the chance to meet before, barely even able to find texts and illustrations of. Instead his eyes are drawn to Lux at his side, still under the sparkling, golden light.

It's rare for him to believe her sincerity when she is soft. He has seen her on the fields, where she is calculating and oppressive, and he sees her when they are alone, when she is becoming more honest with her annoyances. He's seen the cruelty in her combat too well to think she is who she seems. This does not feel like a calculated act.

He tries to contribute, his own greeting much less careful as he turns back to the vastaya. "Hey."

The mermaid seems soothed, though he cannot tell by what. She nods. "Hello."

"We're champions of the League of Legends," Lux says. "We came to meet - Miss Nami? Though I should clarify that we're not here as representatives."

Ezreal imagines it would take Lux hours to figure out the most tactful way to explain, so he does it for her. "We were just curious."

The vastaya smiles, her eyes wide, and swims closer to the edge of the river. She rests her arms on a large stone, water dripping down and darkening its surface. "I'm Nami. I'm curious about you, too."

***

Ezreal wakes up to a bright light streaming in through luxurious floor-to-ceiling windows, and the glow of his dream ebbs away from him like a receding wave.
He doesn't care for this expensive inn that Jarvan has put him in as they pass through Demacia. He would rather keep moving, but Taric insists they check in while they are close, before they continue on to Kaladoun, and no wants to argue with how stern he has been with Sona's pointedly poor mood.

Ezreal thinks this pause is less for the sake of reporting and more to hear what news they have been missing. The more you explore of the world, the less you know of what happens back home. Ezreal likes the escapism, but no one else is with him on this except for Zoe, who has no investment one way or another. The well of her curiosity is deep, but mostly spent on the things right in front of her.

Ekko is already awake, which doesn't surprise Ezreal. Ekko does not have half as much trouble getting to sleep as he does. He is sitting at the desk, tipped dangerously far on the back legs of the chair.

The savory smell of breakfast from a box on the desk is the morning's surprise. Or maybe it's the stack of journals beside it.

"I figured you'd prefer reading up on all the news we've missed over having to hear it from a person," Ekko explains. It's entirely unnecessary, but he still clarifies, with a knowing tone, "From the prince."

They had offered Zoe a room to herself, still on eggshells for what she is, but she had rejected it. She is stretched out on the sofa that she had slept on without complaint. The gossip seems to pique her interest, because she sits upright. "You don't like the prince?"

Ezreal scowls, but still groggy with sleep, it only comes out as a slight frown. "I don't hate him."

It's the truth. Ezreal may not have a favorable thing to say about the king, but the prince is another story. Jarvan is - sincere. At the very least, he is a step in the right direction, for Demacia. He misses the days when he didn't care one way or the other.

But, well, a childish part of him also misses the days before Jarvan stole his girlfriend.

Zoe's eyes are wide. She squirms in place, desperately trying not to ask for the details she clearly wants.

"It's not…" Ekko begins, then interrupts himself with a sigh. The front legs of his chair finally hit the ground with a loud clunk. He stares at the wall at the other side of the desk, like he cannot bear to look at Ezreal to admit this. "It's not like I don't get it. He made Lux miserable, whether he wanted to or not."

Ezreal does not want to respond. *Lux made herself miserable*, he thinks, but there's no bite behind it. In silence, he drags himself across the room to take the food and journals from the desk. He takes them back to his bed, and reads while he eats.

He remembers when journals were half full of interviews with Champions, like celebrities. It had been so annoying to be fending them off, but now even when he's among civilization, he doesn't have to. A world with time for celebrities sounds like a child's dream. (So does the institute. So does a planet that doesn't tear itself apart with the magic that it gave you.)

He starts with the oldest papers, ignoring Zoe as she comes to sit beside him and read over his shoulder.

The war against Noxus is at a temporary stand-still. Small fights break out regularly between the closest military encampments between the kingdoms, but there is no frontier battleground. The
confusion is subtle. Demacian papers do not openly question their leaders, but Ezreal can read between the lines.

Why is Demacia not attacking in Noxus' weakest moment? With Swain dead and their government in upheaval, it's the perfect time to strike.

Countless witnesses attest that Katarina is rightfully the new Grand General after killing Swain - but there are reports that the loyalty to her is split. There is unrest between those who are glad to have a Du Couteau back in leadership and those who decry her. A leader who would attack such a great tactician at a pivotal time will not be a good leader. A leader who would ally with an exile cannot be trusted with Noxus' best interests.

Noxians are open with the way they denounce her. Not like Demacian journalists' who offer only gentle, passive-aggressive confusion at their leaders.

And then there is Leblanc. Swain's right-hand. She had been ruling before he even died - tending to Noxus while he was drawn away to battle. She has her own following, and Ezreal imagines that even if she didn't, it wouldn't deter her from presenting herself as a viable leader. As someone with a right to lead.

In the confusion, their ships still sail. Their armies still serve under individual generals, and those generals still fight. Both Ionia and Freljord are all but isolated, Noxian militia serving like a barrier between them and the rest of Valoran.

After all Lux did, after the danger she put herself in just to gain Ionia's alliance, their ships are trapped and their own forces overwhelmed. He thinks of Irelia and Zelos, siblings reunitied, and he thinks about Garen and Lux, who may never be.

He wonders if Quinn was able to return from Freljord.

He realizes how idealistic it is to assume her greatest hardship might be isolation in Freljord, and not the threats that are there with her. The Noxians and their armies. The void and the Watchers.

Ezreal bites his lip hard. It used to feel so abstract. But now there is not a place on the map that Ezreal cannot point to and name five people who live there. These aren't just war-games and stuffy royal politics like they were when he laughed them off. He makes note to ask after Quinn when they meet with Jarvan, and nonsensically, his mind carries on with the thought: that way, when I see Lux - before he catches himself.

His dream is messing with his mind. Their ascent is over, but it is still weighing him down. Even-footing and sunlight have not been enough to rejuvenate him. Lux in the cold and Lux in the sun. Both are glittering in his mind, overwhelming, and the ice at the center of his bones hasn't thawed.

*I'm not stupid enough to keep doing this.*

He is, though.

He would do all of this with or without Lux, but the fact of the matter is that right now? It is for Lux. The same way Ekko is doing it for Lux, and for himself, and for his home.

They have not said it out loud, but Ezreal understands. Somewhere, in the backs of their minds, they think: maybe if we solve this, Lux comes home. Like a reward for a job well done. Like the hidden treasure in a dungeon. You slay the dragon, you rescue the princess.

Ezreal tries not to think about what she would come back *to.* A kingdom that's turned on her for
abandoning the throne. Or worse: the throne. After all, Jarvan is the dragon slayer, here.

"Hey," Zoe says, softly, but the sound of it breaks him out of his head. She touches his arm, and her eyes are blown wide with worry. "Are you okay? Don't be sad."

"I'm fine," Ezreal says.

She does not seem to mind how harsh it comes out, or realize that he is brushing her off. She grins. "Oh, good." After a pause, she asks, "Will you tell me what all that stuff meant? I read most of it, but I don't get it at all."

Ezreal talks himself through it on the way to the castle, and she listens attentively, still without understanding.

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Ezreal could have done without Ekko filling Zoe in on the real reasons he doesn't like Jarvan. Telling Zoe about abstract politics could have been enough. But no. In the sitting room, as Zoe swings her legs back and forth from her seat, too short to reach the floor, Ekko explains, "Ezreal and my friend Lux were a couple, until she got engaged to the prince."

Zoe's eyes dart his way, taking in his scowl, then back to Ekko. With a dawning sort of horror, Ezreal watches her cheeks light up.

It doesn't help that this makes him think of Lux. It doesn't help that he knows his own reaction is exactly the way she used to react to him. She hadn't wanted him to love her - not until it was convenient to her.

"That's awful," Zoe says, shooting him furtive glances. "That's just so mean!"

Zoe, Ezreal realizes, is not remotely as subtle as he or Lux had been. Zoe starts to climb from her seat, half onto Ezreal's lap with one knee up on his thigh. She leans in, too close to his face.

"I would never leave you for some dumb prince," she tells him.

Unsure of what else to do, Ezreal sets his hands on Zoe's shoulder and gently pushes her back into her own seat. He hears Ekko struggling to hold back laughter.

"Thanks," he tells her, dryly. She is pleased enough with this to not mind being guided away. She beams at him.

"So he's like a thief prince," she murmurs to herself, mulling over the concept.

Ezreal thinks: *You can't steal people.* Ezreal also thinks: *Yeah, basically.*

"Lux is already gone," Ekko says, his voice growing distant halfway through the sentence. "And he sent us on this mission to begin with. All that's left for him to take is glory, and that's kind of the deal we signed up for."

"Don't want it anyway," Ezreal says. But he remembers something else. "He could take the moonstone."

"Aren't we giving it to Diana?"

"Ideally. But if he thinks it's a sure enough thing that she could make more, or if he thinks its worth the protection it can provide..."
Ezreal only realizes that he has been leaning forward to speak to Ekko when Zoe leans forward to interject herself again.

"I could hold it! He can't take it from me!"

"We're not really worried he'll take it by force," Ekko says, amused.

Ezreal still thinks it's a good bet. Zoe is a trump card, in a way. It's hard to oppose celestials that don't care who you are, especially when you're trained in royal etiquette. Compared to asking favors from rough kids like Ezreal and Ekko, it would be harder for him to even breach the subject to a girl with twilight in her hair.

Wordlessly, he digs into his bag for the stone. He feels possessive of it, but still hands it to Zoe.

He is surprised that she is silent, too, taking it and popping it into place in the center of her necklace. It hovers there when she drops her hands, held by nothing, held by magic. Childlike, she swings her legs again.

Himself, Ekko, and Zoe sit in a row, quiet now, as they wait. They are too young to be bearing this. Even Zoe.

Across the room, Zilean is reading a small book in his lap. Beside him, Taric and Sona are sitting, as good as absent for their silence. They are still fighting, Ezreal suspects, in the particularly passive way that they do. Sona does not speak with her hands, and when Taric speaks to her, she drifts her gaze elsewhere as if he is the wind. Her hands stay folded over her lap.

Taric is no use in an argument. He simply gives her a smile that is soft and resigned, then turns his attention inward, to his own mind. His thoughts crystalize, building up a barrier around themselves, and instead of arguing with her, he simply gives up.

Ezreal watches them with irritation rising up in his gut, but this is not his fight to resolve.

None of this is, he thinks, furiously, but still possessive of his right to do it anyway. He sits, and he waits, until the prince sees them in.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't forget about you... Sorry for the delay!

Um, what's new? Ezreal? My beautiful boy? My son? The light of my life??? My wishlist was: EzLux, a friendly line w/ Taric that isn't a homophobic joke or rude, and lines w/ Zoe where he doesn't totally hate her.

So I got basically all of that!! The bar was real fuckin low for Taric interactions, but they did it!! Visuals are nice, new voice is acceptable (I liked old voice actor more, but I defo like the new one, too!), animations are nice, skin redesigns are SO NICE MY BEAUTIFUL FCUCKDSFNSD MY BOY !!!!!!!! I think it definitely shows that the ways his personality evolved from conception went in two different ways. Me, and Riot both fleshed him out beyond what he was! Maybe not in exactly the same way, but also not necessarily in jarringly contradictory ways, if that makes sense? I think that's just how League lore IS, though. So much of it will always be the fans and so much of it
will always vary depending on which fan, in particular, you're talking to. And I think that goes a bit double for pre-rework lore fans, who have already put so much passion towards something that now makes less and less sense, but I think still deserve their indulgences... And I don't just mean myself.

Aaah. Sorry for rambling.
There is some part of Ezreal that is amused that, out of all of them, Ekko takes the lead in the conversation with the prince. Beneath that, there is a frustration reaching its boiling point, directed acutely at Taric's silence. It's an unfamiliar direction for it to flow.

He is used to glancing Taric's way and being caught every time. He is used to a reassuring smile, every single time. He looks at Taric now, and realizes that he is startled not to get that. Instead Taric is watching Sona from the edge of his sight. He looks distracted, like he is not even listening. Not that Ezreal is, either, but Taric is supposed to be the responsible one.

Ekko has just finished recounting their time at the peak. Taric's ascension and what they saw of Diana in the recent past. Sometimes Zilean or Zoe chime in, though Zoe mostly does so to explain her presence. Phrases like "And now I'm here!" Aren't as helpful as she seems to think they are, but Zilean fills in the gaps.

"Leona… Advised us that Diana was probably headed up to Kaladoun to meet a vastaya named Nami," Ekko is saying, pausing every so often to search for more formal words.

Jarvan rests his chin on laced fingers, elbows propped up on his desk. He is staring out the window in thought, considering. Ezreal takes the moment to shoot Ekko a look, eyebrows raised at his sudden respect for authority, and Ekko shrugs back.

"Then," Jarvan says, without looking back to them. "Do you intend to follow after Diana?"

Ezreal says, "She can bless the stones of Mt. Targon into moonstones, and moonstones can hold back the void. It seems like the best thing to do." He tries not to sound as impatient as he feels.

For a moment he thinks he's failed, for the sharp way that Jarvan's eyes land on him. Then the prince's gaze drifts, resting on Zoe, and the moonstone embedded in her necklace. He nods. Any greed he may have is beaten out by the long-term. (Ezreal wonders if it can be called 'greed' to want something for the sake of protecting people. He can't hate Jarvan, not wholly.)

"Then I imagine the two of you are going?" Jarvan asks, looking to Sona and Taric.

"Of course," Taric murmurs, and Sona watches him with a beat of tense hesitation before she nods.

There is an uncomfortable silence. There is guilt in Jarvan's eyes. Maybe this is less to do with them being aspects and more to do with keeping them out of Demacia, but the urge to lash out on their behalf is weak for once, muddied by Ezreal's impatience at their immaturity.

Instead, Ezreal says, "Me and Zoe are going too, obviously."

Zoe bounces in her seat, like being spoken for has made her happy. Ezreal figures it's lucky she likes him so much - otherwise she'd probably smite him down for being so presumptuous.

Jarvan gives a slow nod. He looks to Zilean, next.

"I've offered the help I can," Zilean says, after a moment's hesitation. "Let an old man rest."
Ezreal supposes this is fair. He has his own circumstances to worry about, and their need for his magic and insight has passed. When he glances over, Ekko looks disappointed, arms crossing over his chest.

The prince smiles consolingly. "Of course. The old and the young should be given peace."

"I'm still going," Ekko objects, frowning. "I'm - whether you're still paying me as if I'm providing some service for Demacia or not. I'm not just quitting in the middle. Uh, no offense, Zilean. But I'm not bailing on…" Mid-sentence, his mouth snaps shut, and his eyes dart to Ezreal, then away again.

He must want to stay on the road, Ezreal realizes. In case they find Lux, or even just a trace of her. It's such an abstract way of thinking, but Ezreal still gets it. Still feels the same way.

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Sona and Taric finally put their fight to rest, before they have even reached the Serpentine River. It is anticlimactic. That's how relationships are, Ezreal thinks. The good ones, anyway. A fight that ends in a dramatic blow-out is a fight that has done too much harm to smooth over. This is better.

Ezreal's mind is elsewhere, at first. They are so near the marshes, just on the opposite side of the river. He remembers passing through them with Lux, and as cliché as the thought is, it feels like it was a hundred years ago.

He should have paid better attention - the River King had warned him exactly what was going to happen.

What had Lux been thinking? And what was she thinking when she passed through these marshes again, before she disappeared?

Ekko is quiet, too, staring ahead with an impressively serious face for someone who is currently giving Zoe a piggy-back ride. ("She's really light, actually," he had said, and it must be true, because that was nearly an hour ago and he does not seem at all tired.)

Ahead of them, Sona's body is angled towards Taric, her hands dancing between them. When this is over, she signs, We have no home.

"That isn't true," Taric murmurs.

Ezreal wants to cover his ears, the same way he had on Mt. Targon to block out the illusions of his parents. But it isn't anyone's fault. There is so little privacy when you are traveling like this, so little opportunity to have tactful moments alone.

He's a hypocrite anyway. He thinks he should not eavesdrop, but still watches Sona's hands as attentively as if she were speaking to him.

The king is still pushing. We'll be unwelcome.

Taric does not try to soothe her. Ezreal wonders if this is the difference between Taric's love and Taric's friendship. Sometimes he cannot play healer, sometimes he is upset and moody and human. (No, Ezreal thinks, not anymore. Not really.) Taric's head angles as he looks off into the distance. It doesn't last long; he remembers after a moment that this shuts her out, and looks back.

We're lucky to be out of the kingdom, Sona says.

"Is it so bad if we settle somewhere new?" He asks. Sona startles, and Taric offers a humorless
"I'm accustomed to finding new homes, anyway."

Mother, Sona signs, with a look of genuine contemplation on her face, almost as if she has taken his laughter at face value. Or maybe she has looked past it, to see the sincerity of his words.

"Of course, Lestara is welcome to join us or welcome to stay behind. Hasn't Jarvan held that he won't close Demacia's gates? We're good at traveling now, you and I."

How sad, Sona signs. She is smiling, but it does not reach her eyes. This time they are unified, both making half-hearted shows of being at peace with their circumstances. Both frustrated, but accepting each other's misery. Sona's expression falls into resignation, and she repeats, How sad.

Ezreal wants to interrupt, somehow. He wants to snap at the both of them that they shouldn't have to leave their homes. But it isn't up to him to decide what's worth it. Worse, it's a lost point when it comes to Taric. Nowhere in this world is his home.

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They follow the Serpentine River for weeks. Ezreal remembers the picnic with Nami and Lux, but the sun doesn't shine down the same way, and they pass at least four separate spots that he thinks could have been the ones he remembers. Slowly, it has changed too much for him to know. The waters do not seem nearly so deep or alive.

All this way, and not a sign of Diana.

Or Lux, Ezreal thinks, then immediately: Obviously.

It is this thought that has him saying out loud, "There's no promise that we ever find Lux, you know. Even traveling the whole world couldn't guarantee it."

Ekko's lips quirk. "But you think she's alive?"

Ezreal rolls his eyes. "She's too smart to die."

"I don't think that's how it works," Ekko says, but moves on quickly. "Anyway, it's still worth holding out hope. We're traveling anyway, may as well be optimistic."

Ahead of them, Zoe stops in her tracks. As they step up beside her, she cranes her neck back to look up at them. "Why do you wanna find someone who ran off to begin with?"

Because we're stupid, Ezreal thinks.

"Because she's our friend, and we love her," Ekko says.

"You love her," Zoe repeats, casting looks Ezreal's way with a furrowed brow. He does not dignify this with a response.

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Kaladoun is a dead kingdom.

It's been dead for centuries. This close to the sea, too much of it is eroded away by sea-salt wind and time. Ezreal can't figure out what remains of the architecture. All the precedents set by other ruins he's seen don't help him piece it together. Sometimes lost cultures are just lost. Sometimes this feels deeply sad. That for as much enthusiasm and effort he pours into trying to learn, he will never be absolutely certain of anything.
Ezreal tends to fall back on the most common theory among archeologists and historians. Demacia was rising, and offered a better life than this small, seaside kingdom. As if overnight, whole villages left their homes. Then, over time, the buildings wasted away, sped up and amplified by natural disasters and their proximity to the sea. The history ate itself alive until there was nothing left.

They have not found Diana, no matter how strictly they followed the Serpentine River. Ezreal is beginning to think they will not find her here, either, but the ruins are vast. Even if they don't find her, he'd like to observe what he can while he has the chance.

In the ruins of a city, Zoe skips ahead of them like a child at play.

Ezreal closes his eyes and allows the evening breeze to chill him. The mist in the air makes his clothes feel damp. He licks his lips and they taste like salt.

Ekko has worn out all the topics he has to keep a one-sided conversation going, and now even Zoe is reduced to humming. He hears Taric's footsteps behind him, and the flutter of Sona's skirts in the strong breeze.

When he opens his eyes, he has to blink rapidly at the cold of the wind and the brightness of the sunset. The horizon is a flat line, and if they chase it far enough they will reach a sharp drop off into rocks and waves. There are only misplaced stones where there must have once been homes.

Zoe's silhouette stills, sticking out like a shadow against the orange light. Sometimes she strikes him as an apparition. Like she might disappear into the mist if he looks away from her for too long. Might dissipate beneath his hand if he were to touch her shoulder.

"Huh," she says. Ezreal shivers, not from the chill. "I guess they never came back?"

It occurs to him that Zoe is a child, but that she has been a child for a very, very long time. There is no limit to the things she may know. She is a resource, and Ezreal does not mind thinking of her this way.

Ezreal asks, "What do you mean?"

Zoe crosses her arms over her chest and pouts, her lower lip jutting out. She begins walking again, strides going long, as if she could out-pace the conversation. "I came here before! I came, and I played with some kids and some guards!"

It doesn't sound like an interesting story, but maybe he can learn about the city. "What was it like?"

"It was boring, they didn't even want to play with me," she complains, apparently misinterpreting where his interest rests. "So I dropped a meteor on them and then they were gone."

Ezreal's pauses, the cold air chilling his lungs, his whole chest. "What?"

It could be a metaphor, he thinks, but the thought doesn't stick. Zoe's mismatched eyes meet his, then scrunch up as if remembering is difficult. "They threw things at me. So I threw something at them. I think it was here, anyway, but it had a lot more houses back then."

He should probably handle this delicately. With the knowledge that she does not grasp death, or time - and that she can summon meteors - it would be better not to upset her.

If he is honest, Ezreal's emotional capacity is as tapped out as his enthusiasm for travel. Far too few traps, this adventure. No collapsing ruins, no spikes to dodge. There is no adrenaline rush and no exciting reward. Just a whole lot of walking, and cold, and unanswered questions. A whole lot of
silence from the only damn adults with them.

And now he's babysitting this Celestial infant.

"They're dead," he tells her.

Maybe he is just as stupid as she is, deluding himself into thinking there's something more to Lux's disappearance than a dead-end story. Sometimes you don't find what you're looking for. Sometimes the history can't be unearthed, and sometimes people don't come back.

Her nose wrinkles, next. "Oh, right. Mortals have short life patterns. And it's been a long time since then! I was napping with space doggy for longer than I thought."

Well, at least she didn't take offense and smite him down.

"Napping?"

She looks self conscious, drawing a strand of hair over her shoulder and running her hands through its tangles. "I played for a while, but my portals were messed up. I thought I could sleep it off, because I never figured out what I was supposed to do."

Ezreal does not have anything to offer this. He does not really understand what she is saying, and isn't sure any explanation she could offer would clarify. Instead he points out, "I think they'd die from getting hit with a meteor before they died of old age. That'd destroy this whole place and everyone in it."

She blinks owlishly. "Oh," she says, without remorse. Then: "Maybe that was all I was supposed to do, then?"

"What do you mean 'supposed to do'?"

Zoe opens her mouth, but it only hangs open as her attention is caught by something else. "I can see a way down to the beach!" She says, and without waiting for response, chases it.

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The beach is not a warm one. Ezreal had hoped for a nice shore, like the port cities of so many places he has traveled to, with soft sand and gentle waves. But it is cold and dark. The waves crash hard against rough, black stone.

Just climbing down the drop off to the sea takes careful coordination and help from everyone, and once they are there, it is still a concentrated effort to move along the uneven surface. Zoe takes wide steps, careful of her bare feet.

This is where they find Diana. Laying in a shallow pool of water atop the rocks, with the tide crashing past her at either side, but parting as if to give her space. The moon controls the tide, Ezreal thinks, and wonders if she is doing this herself - if it is on purpose.

Then he sees that her breathing is ragged, exhaustion weighing her whole body down, and small scrapes and cuts adorn her arms and legs. Her long silver hair is a tangled mess, strewn out on the rocks behind her and disobedient strands falling across the tattoo on her forehead, across her face.

Ezreal can still feel the miasma of the void in the air, slowly dissipating in the harsh wind. He sees the disfigured shadows of monsters being swept away with the water.
He is at her side without thinking. Thankfully, so is Taric, because Ezreal was not sure what help he had expected to be by himself. Sona joins them a moment later, moving with an unnerving patience, not half as frantic as the others.

"I'm just tired," Diana grumbles, feebly pushing away Taric's hand when he reaches for her. Ezreal believes her; all these scratches on her look more like they came from the rough surface of the rocks rather than the creatures. And he's seen first hand how strong she is. "Leave me be."

Obedient, Taric draws back. When Sona reaches for Diana in his place, glowing green, the woman does not protest. She resigns herself to the healing. When the glow subsides, she accepts Taric's hand, heaving herself up out of the water.

Ezreal wants to ask about the rift. She must have closed it herself, and he cannot decide if this is upsetting or a comfort. She can do a job herself that takes the whole group of them. But it is done, and she has no severe wounds.

"We've been looking for you," Taric tells her. "But first, we should wash any cuts. They could get infected."

"It's just the sea," Diana huffs. Her expression is more severe than her words.

Sona signs We don't know that, with a pointed look in the direction of the slain creatures being washed into the waves.

Taric does not translate. He just nods, and says, "Come. We'll help you back to the city."

Diana snorts. "Some city. Not half as lively as what's below the sea." When Ezreal's gaze drifts that way, she gives him a look. "You won't see them today. I told them to flee when the rift split the sky. Perhaps tomorrow."

"Then we'll have you healed up by then," Taric says, as if compromising.

"I'll catch up," Ezreal tells them, because he would not be much help with healing, anyway. Taric taught him how to take care of a person without using magic, and he could even borrow magic from the two of them if he pleased, but it's pointless when the two healers are right there already.

"Need company?" Ekko asks, shifting his weight as if feeling similarly useless. Ezreal shrugs, but does not complain when Ekko steps closer.

"Me too!" Zoe enthuses, throwing her hands in the air.

They watch as Sona and Taric help Diana up the path back to the city ruins, and then the three of them turn back, sitting down to watch the waves.

Ezreal does not like being one of the children. But he knows he is not quite one of the adults yet, either. It's an arbitrary line that he is pushed back and forth across depending on what people want from him.

The foam is a striking white against the rocks and the dark water, crashing and spilling over the edges in the distance. Ezreal thinks he would like to walk closer and let the tall waves splash over him, but knows better than to get his clothes wet before night. He knows better than to risk a pull more powerful than he is ready for.

Clouds pass and waves crash, and their quiet moment expands and breathes with them.
Ezreal thinks about curling in on himself, about pulling his knees to his chest and trying to shrink so small that he disappears for just a moment of reprieve. But with company, he keeps his legs outstretched, and tries to even out the rise and fall of his own chest.

The sea is a deep blue. Ezreal likes to see the usual minty greens of the sea and the slow-fade from teal to pale blue, but this is a different shore. From where it hits the rocks, all the way out to the horizon, it is as dark as midnight.

"Did I do this?" Zoe asks, breaking the silence. Her gaze is low, staring down at her outstretched legs.

"What do you mean?"

"The whole place is broken and empty. You said it was because of me."

"Smooth," Ekko comments.

Ezreal shrugs, more at the other boy than Zoe. "So even Celestial magic messes up the world. What else is new?"

Zoe bursts out with a loud, brief laugh, like he has just told her a good joke. At least she's cheered up, Ezreal thinks, vaguely bewildered. She does not explain what she had found so funny about this.

Quiet overtakes them again. The sea is loud, a rumbling like thunder clouds that only grows closer the more time passes. The sky is not dark yet, but Ezreal knows better than to wait too long before setting up a proper camp. He knows that if they take too long, Taric will do it for them without a word. He doesn't want to rely on him that way, like a child. The tide is edging closer.

He rises, dusting himself off. He begins to offer a hand to Ekko, then reconsiders, and offers one to Zoe, too. Both their hands are chilly in his as they tug themselves up from either side of him, nearly pulling him right back down. But all three laugh lightly, rising up and inclining towards each other for the body heat.

Ezreal spares one last look to the sea to watch the spray of mist up into the air.

But against a backdrop of the waves, Lux stares back at him. With violet eyes wide and dark hair whipping across her face with the wind, her lips slowly part.

She asks, helplessly, "Why is it you?"

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Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is... A doozy. (A bombshell, u might say.......)

Anyway, my little Ezlux heart is all aflutter at the SG Slumber Party skins. I don't care if it's a cash grab!! I don't care!!! Take my cash!!!! And of course, in unrelated news, the K/DA stuff is also amazing I'm dyin'. Riot, you always take two steps forward and then ten steps back, but this time you've burst into a sprint!! A full speed sprint, straight into my open heart!!!
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is someone with her in the dark.

Being without light can lead one to hallucinations, Lux knows. Her mind wants to fill in the blanks, whether it's reality or not. But she is certain this shadow is real. Their form is vague, not in the way that shadows do not differentiate head from limb, but in the way that dreams are ever-changing all around you. They twist up like curtains in a midnight breeze. Their skin is the surface of the moving sea without moonlight.

Sometimes she thinks they are almost human. They have a head, they have two arms and two legs. Most of the time.

She does not linger on the indecisive nature of their body in the distance. It doesn't matter, really. She knows enough.

They are familiar. They are something cold that she has brushed against before. They want out of the dark.

"Girl," Their voice calls to her across eternity. She can't make it out - can't even tell if it is a man or a woman's voice. She does not hear the sound of words, but knows they are calling her.

"Girl." Lux opens her eyes.

The room around her is dry and empty. Ruins of someone long-dead's bedroom that she's taken for herself over the last few months. So long abandoned that nature has reclaimed the space. Vines crawl up her walls. Some mornings they move, twisted by her own anxious mind in a waking dream.

It is not morning. It is nearly twilight.

She has been sleeping too much.

Malzahar is beside her bed, glowing eyes narrowed in annoyance.

It is hard to believe she was ever afraid of him. Even now, with his power ever-growing, she only rolls her eyes, rising out of bed. (Maybe she is not afraid because her own power has grown so much, too. She wonders if she could kill him, yet.)

She asks, "What do you want?"

His gaze softens, almost imperceptible, but she is used to him now. It is these tiny, tiny things that fill her with curiosity. She wants to know who he was - she wants to know if there are traces of that man beyond all this. She feels resigned to never knowing, the same way she feels resigned to most everything in her life.

"One of them has a spell for you."

One of them. One of the cultists. He does not even know their names. Maybe he knows and chooses not to use them. Lux is certain he knows her name, and all he ever calls her is girl.

Lux swallows back the lump that leaps to her throat. She is an idiot to be following this man.
Delivered to his doorstep and instead of walking away she had just thought *If this is where fate leads me.* She had thought *I am tired, I am tired.*

Each announcement of his could be something terrible. Lux knows that you should not dread every step of a plan you are participating in. She tells herself she doesn't care.

"A spell," she repeats. She thinks about the creature in the dark, the creature in her dreams. The creature inside of her.

Malzahar must know what her first thought is. "It isn't ready for you," he answers, in lieu of 'fear not.' He wants her to be afraid of what's to come. If he didn't, he would have told her more about it.

Lux asks, "But I'm ready for it?"

"You are the same as it. That is enough."

She knows it's true. She can feel it.

The spilled ink of the void is staining up her insides. Those dreams are not from outside herself. She is not just plagued by her fears, manifest in dreams. It is already a parasite inside her soul, and all she can think is that it must have been her own magic that welcomed it in. Maybe the king is right - maybe this was inevitable. Her power grew, and grows, and as it does it opens a door.

She doesn't want magic to be evil, but it cracks the world open and it splits apart her heart. It's hard to deny.

"Weren't there other options?" Lux asks, forcing the fear from her voice, like swallowing bile back. She only shows him curiosity, though she is sure he would answer her the same either way, always at his own whims, regardless of what she shows or conceals. "There are others much more desperate for power than I."

The tale of mages gone mad with power-lust are too frequent. They are part of why Lux can feel bitter at the same blood that she grew up proud of. Many of those mages were even *in* the League of Legends, brought before Malzahar like a crop to be harvested.

But none of the other champions had succumbed to the void. None had joined him. He had not even tried to recruit them.

He had not even had to recruit Lux, either. But inside her head she is still asking, why *her*? Why not Syndra? Why not Lissandra? Why not an empty vessel? Why not *himself*? Why not a hundred people besides her?

Maybe none of this was the plan. Maybe it is a plan born of convenience.

Something in the dark needed a host, and Lux arrived, freshly mended together after being broken once too many times and thinking herself sturdy. She had surprised even Malzahar. Maybe that's all there is to it.

He does not answer her question. In silence, Malzahar leads her from the home, down the streets of this residential area. The other homes all look similar, even the one he takes her inside of. He does not knock, but he is expected company.

Inside, one of the cultists is seated at a table. It hasn't been made new since the cultists arrived; this table is rotting and covered in holes. There are bowls and cups of things Lux doesn't recognize, all placed carefully around the holes.
The follower stands up quickly and gives Malzahar a deep bow. Her hood is down, and Lux looks over. Dark skin and long, flowing white hair. The shape of her face and her eyes is distinctly Ionian, and in the part of her cloak, Lux sees intricate red and gold floral print on her clothing.

It is strange to think that these people came from somewhere. Lux wonders how many of the interchangeable hooded strangers who treat her as a princess were from Demacia.

"My lord," the cultist says, her voice an adoring honey-sweet. Lux startles. The other cultists speak to Malzahar like they are brainwashed, not like they are love-sick.

He ignores her.

"The rifts have been sealing," he says to Lux. "Closed by wandering Celestials."

"More will open," Lux says. She does not understand why individual rifts matter at the rate they are spreading. Malzahar does not share many of his visions with her, but those he does are devoid of hope, and that is how the void thrives. Noxus's ships are in Ionia's waters. Noxian soldiers are in Freljord. There is war everywhere, and with it, mages spilling their magic all over. And all the artifacts lost in the closure of the Institute, spread across the world, staining it up as they go.

Malzahar is silent, not bothering to explain the issue.

Lux sighs. "So?"

The cultist interjects herself into the conversation eagerly. "I can send you to the rift, and you can make sure they assist us."

Lux tries not to snort in disbelief. "I may be powerful, but I'm no match for Celestial magic."

"Especially not now," Malzahar says, and Lux does not understand. He does not explain. Instead he says, "There are others that seek to heal what we do. The more they try, the more magic they expend."

The cultist speaks as if to Lux, but without ever tearing her gaze from Malzahar. "How clever! They have so much magic that they'll be more useful alive and angry!"

There is a part of Lux that wants to laugh at the absurdity of this woman, but it's hard to find humor with orders like these. Rile up heroes and let them tear apart the world themselves. The more they try to help, the worst it will become. Justice was never real.

Lux steels herself. She knows that she is going to do something that is going to kill another part of herself, but still says: "Fine."

The cultist's spell is simple. Her mana is infused in a circle that she draws on the floor. It is nothing special; Lux even realizes that the bowls and cups on the table were potions to enhance her magic. The cultist is a weak mage, barely able to cast spells without catalysts. She isn't touched with any of the infinite power of the void, not like Malzahar. Not like Lux. She cannot draw from that well.

But maybe her proficiency in spells like this is how the cultists made it to such a cursed place.

She wonders who the Celestials are. Soraka? She hopes it will be someone she has never met before. It would be a sad thing to have to fight a familiar face. Then again, at least if it were a former champion, she would know their movements.

There's no good answer. There's no pleasing version of a situation she does not want to begin with.
Lux spares a final look around the room before she steps into the circle. She blinks, and when she opens her eyes the circle is drawn around the edges of a shallow pool of water on the rocks. All the grey stone walls are gone, leaving her in the misty air of a cold shore.

It smells different. She can smell the salt in the air, covering thin traces of the void. Icathia's winds are harsh and hot, only kept away by thick stone walls, and now the wind that whips her darkened hair into her eyes is cold and wet.

She sees Ezreal.

Rising from his seat and ineffectually dusting pebbles off of himself. She can hardly look at the others with him for a moment, too overwhelmed.

Regret swells inside her like an insidious vine, squeezing her heart, squeezing the air from her lungs. It fills her veins until they are thick and her blood is still. Then just as fast, it turns to fury. Ezreal should not be risking his life like this - that is her first thought. Then: he has Ekko with him.

The third is the realization that this is not a mission he would go on without orders, and not a mission that Caitlyn would demand. He is here for Jarvan.

Her kingdom breathes when she is gone. Her kingdom pulls itself into the future relentlessly, dragging what she loves with it.

Ezreal's gaze stays low as he offers his hand to Ekko, then to - someone she does not recognize. A child with sunset-hair and mismatched eyes.

When the spell evaporates around her, there is such a burst of celestial magic that Lux flinches. It is overwhelming, all coming from the little girl and carried in the air. Lux's eyes set on her necklace, on the shining stone set in it. The dark inside her wants to recede away in its brilliance, and that is painful, like it is burning her up in its wake, crawling away with its claws still dug in deep.

Her eyes should be drawn to someone so out of place, to someone who holds an artifact with power that scalds her from the inside.

But Ezreal tugs the two of them up, and laughs, and this is all she sees. They all lean close together, begin to step away, and Lux swallows back the impulse to call for him.

He looks back to her anyway.

Ezreal's blue eyes blow wide; the startled jump travels all through his body as he nearly yanks his hands away from his companions.

She murmurs, "Why is it you?" Her voice comes out weak. She wants to try again, but it may be too late to make an intimidating entrance.

She tells herself the pain is from the stars. The ache of celestial magic pushing against this dark seed that wants to blossom in her chest.

Lux straightens up. She has a mission. She can still do this. Her appearance is twisted up into the dark and all the pretty violets of the void, and she tries to hold her weight with confidence. More haughty, she tells herself. Come now, you now how to pretend.

She locks her eyes on Ezreal, because she cannot bear to see Ekko's face when he looks at her. "Why are you here? Playing hero?" She still sees the shape of Ekko as he flinches back. Don't look, she tells herself, staring intently into Ezreal's blue eyes. Don't look.
She watches his eyes climb up and down her. She expects pragmatic suspicion, expects him to clue into the condescension she has bitten out. But his first words are a firm: "Tell me you're okay."

He sounds like he already knows that she isn't. Like he could not decide between expressing concern and matching her antagonistic tone, and chose to try both at once.

Ezreal is smarter than this, she knows he is. She feels hopelessly fond of him, in this moment. Everything about her is dark, now. Her looks and her words. And Ezreal wants to know if she is okay. You idiot, she thinks, shoulders sagging for a moment.

"I'm fine," she tells him, flatly.

She allows herself to look across them. The girl draws back behind Ezreal, and Lux imagines her like a hissing animal. She cannot look at her for long. The celestial magic of that stone pushes her away, painfully guiding even her attention itself away.

Ekko is looking at her with his brow furrowed. He tries to wipe the troubled look from his face, and when their eyes meet, rushes towards her against better judgment. She thinks of how easy it would be to snare him as he hops along uneven rocks to get to her.

Ekko throws his arms around her as if he could dispel his own worry with forced enthusiasm. "We were looking for you!"

The weight of his body and it warmth are startling. Lux has not touched anyone in months, save for the few times cultists brushed fingers against her arms. The few times Malzahar has held her by the shoulders.

Lux catches him, despite herself. She does not know how to respond to that. She had known there would be search parties for a short time. She is not so far gone that she had not expected her disappearance to have an impact on those closest to her.

There is too much guilt for words. She just holds Ekko tight, allowing herself this moment of weakness, telling herself it will be the only one. She prays that Ezreal does not come close enough to touch. She squeezes Ekko tight, feeling the chill of his skin but the warm of his core, and the way he breathes and holds her back.

The moment has to end. When Lux pulls away, she holds Ekko away from her at arms length, pleading him to understand the unspoken: Stay back.

The waves dash the rocks behind her, and ocean spray hits her back.

Shielded from it in her shadow, there is a tension in Ekko's confusion. He asks, quiet and already knowing better, "You're okay - did you… Just run? From the throne?"

Lux nods slowly, barely listening.

"Sona and Taric and Diana are all up in the ruins," Ekko murmurs, so cautiously that she thinks he already knows he should not be telling her. Then how deep does his fondness go, if he does anyway? "We can go back to them together."

"Stay back. Stay back."

She shakes her head. She looks over Ekko's shoulder, to Ezreal. He is holding the child's hand tight, but staring at Lux as if he does not realize it. He has been silently watching, too smart to pretend like
Ekko is.

"Lux," Ezreal finally says, using her name like a plea. He does not know what else to say, and in his silence, Lux breathes in deep.

She draws air from the depths of her lungs, from where it still hurts like a burn scar. The sea does nothing to soothe it. She exhales.

Then attacks.

Dark bursts from her fingertips, hurled out towards Ezreal. She isn't sure what to call an attack like this; it isn't lucent anymore. Ekko whirls to watch as the shadow blows past him, leaving himself wide open to her. If she were a crueler woman she would push him down just for the fun of it.

Lux knows Ezreal, and she knows how he moves. She settles the dark at the edges of him, detonating it quick as Ezreal tries to dodge, inadvertently stepping further into it. There is some satisfaction in this. He should know her just as well as she knows him, but he still falls for the same tricks. It's been so long. Maybe he's out of practice.

A girl's voice is shrill from behind her. "Hey, hey! Leave Ezreal alone!" Lux whirls around; the unfamiliar child is waiting in the air, nearly nose-to-nose with her. Lux is blinded by a flash of magic, and her vision blurs with the pain of proximity to the celestial stone before the attack even hits. The impact is fast and shocking when it comes, like a strike to the gut. The girl falls, through the air, then through the ground. Ekko yells, "Don't hurt her!"

Lux wishes she knew who he was talking to. Not that it matters. When she turns back, the girl is back at Ezreal's side again, impossibly fast. She has her hand wound back as if about to throw a punch from a distance, and Lux can see something bright twinkling to her side.

The girl punches the air, and the light streaks towards Lux like a comet.

Lux can't move. Her body is heavy, as if she has not slept for days. The world around her is only half-real now, and she blinks as the shadows in the distance coalesce into a figure. Like the vines on her wall, a waking dream that calls to her, the creature is closer to her in sleep.

She is knocked out of her reverie by force, shouldered into with the full weight of another body slamming into her from a shimmering burst of light. Her eyes snap wide open to the world; the shadow recedes back into her mind.

It's a miracle they don't fall into the waves. Her back slams hard against the rough stone, scratched up and stinging, but she hardly feels it through the ache of magic's touch.

There is a small crater where she had stood a moment ago, the rocks crumbling inward. Even Ekko must have had to dodge it. There is ash in the hole, mixing up in the wind with a scent of burning.

Ezreal is holding his weight over her, expression frantic as he surveys the crater.

His face soothes when he looks back to her, drawing his hands away from her sides. She thinks he is about to reach out, to touch her. He opens his mouth, but just as quickly shuts it and pushes himself from the ground. As he stands, he turns to face the girl, calling out to her, "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The girl sounds genuinely baffled. "She attacked you! I was careful, this time! I learned!"

"She's a friend," Ekko bites out in response, and Lux wonders if he still believes it. He is standing
heavily, a small way away, like he's hurt himself rolling away from his own ally's attack.

The indignation is gone from the girl's voice, replaced with utter sincerity. "Do friends attack each other?" She asks, and before Ekko can answer adds a matter of fact, "I've never had friends before!"

"Interesting company you keep," Lux says, rising to her feet beside Ezreal and trying not to think about his response to being attacked being - this. She had attacked first, yet they are scolding the girl for retaliating.

Ezreal stands still as she rests a hand on his arm to steady herself.

As if burned, she pulls back quickly when she realizes what she's doing. She thinks about the shadow inside her and about Malzahar, just a spell away. She isn't one to talk about strange company.

Ezreal turns to her slow, but she knows the flare of blue on his cheeks, and she knows the tight-grip of his fists at his sides. "Why is your magic like that? Why are - you - like that? Where have you been?"

Lux takes a moment to assess where she is, pretending to consider his questions. She is close to the circle, so thinly drawn and shallow that it's easily missed. She needs to leave. She can't tough-talk a group that could have killed her by mistake. She finally understands why Malzahar had sent her for this. As soon as they had seen her, her part was done.

No matter what she does or says here, she knows it's only going to invigorate their efforts, encouraging them to drag their magic across the whole world.

Lux trusts them not to attack her - not after Ezreal has shown that he'll hurl himself in the way if they do. He's lucky she doesn't really want him dead.

She takes only one step away, but Ezreal catches her wrist. It burns; Lux tries to wrench her hand away, but he is stronger than her and keeps his grip, even as she hisses in pain. His magic shouldn't hurt like this. She's felt it before, flowing between them like it was as good as hers, like hers was as good as his. It's never been so painful.

With the way he is looking at her, it is like he doesn't realize what he's doing at all. "Answer me," he demands.

She tries to shake free again, but this has never been where her strength lies. "I let the void in," she bites out through the searing pain. It's an answer to all of his questions. She amends, "I will let the void in."

His grip tightens, and inside herself Lux throws up every barrier she knows how to make to keep their magic from mixing, to keep him from regulating her mana. It's an intimacy, a familiarity, that she can't allow.

"Fine," Ezreal says evenly, processing. "You can let monsters into this world all you want. But we'll just keep killing them. You can run off all you want, but I'll just keep catching you."

She laughs, because his stupid heroics play into Malzahar's plan perfectly. It turns into a pained snarl as she yanks her arm, still unable to break his grip. She snaps, "I thought you weren't that stupid."

His fingers loosen around her wrist. His eyes bore into hers. She flinches at the bright, bright blue of them, crystalline clear.
"I am, though." He says it like a revelation to himself, as if hearing himself say it is a relief. His grip goes loose, until his fingertips are only barely brushing her wrists. They are boiling hot pin-points, and he leans closer towards her, face inches from hers, to repeat: "I am."

You are, Lux thinks, fondly, but with bitterness all the same. She thinks about kissing him.

Then she thinks of how much that would hurt, like his fingers, like all the magic slipping through her desperate barriers, a smoldering ember just under her skin. How can the void stand a chance when it hurts just to be near celestial magic?

When Lux steps backwards, Ezreal steps forward to match. "You can run off," he says, quieter this time, like a secret shared between them. "But you came to me."

Then he draws back from her, raising his hands as a show of surrender.

Lux stumbles back in a hurry. It benefits her not to correct him - not to let him know that she had no choice in this visit. She plays her role, and she lets him get his hopes up. She spares a final look to the other two. Ekko has joined the child, with his arm out in front of her. Whether defensively or to keep her reigned in, Lux is not sure.

"You can't change the effects of magic," she tells them, desperate for the last words, and her mind still reeling over Ezreal's. "You can't change what's coming. It's just a waste of your own time."

Lux thinks that she could do anything, and it would still play into Malzahar's plan. She could be sincere, she could warn them - she could even actually kiss Ezreal. It would still only benefit the void as it bleeds over more and more.

"Yes, yes, very ominous," Ezreal says, unimpressed.

Lux crosses her arms over her chest, turns her head to look at him sidelong. Instead of giving a retort, she steps into the circle of the cultist's spell, watching the way Ezreal does not so much as reach after her. Watching the way his eyes narrow as she vanishes.

In Icathia, in a stuffy room that smells like sour potions and rotting wood, a smiling prophet and worshipper await her.

Lux brings a hand to her chest as if she could rub away the ache inside of it. She feels the creature in the dark begin to spread again inside her, unrestrained by celestial magic.

Chapter End Notes

We'll be back to your regularly scheduled Ezreal-POV in the next chapter. :)
Ezreal feels like they are dragging back a thousand extra pounds of baggage when they return to the ruins of the city.

Ekko's knees, palm, and arm are scraped from the way he had rolled away from Zoe's attack. Ironic that his only injury is from his own side of a brief fight, but Ezreal thinks this is not so shocking.

Ezreal is lucky enough to have mostly just hurt his own hands, but his limbs still tingle with the burning chill of that darkness Lux had thrown at him. His chest feels hollow. Lux does this to him, he thinks. She reaches into him and pulls up everything he buries, and just when he thinks that might be alright, she throws it in his face.

Seeing her was a lightning-strike reminder that he is an idiot. He had known it before, the countless times they had kissed after her engagement to Jarvan.

He had thought she would change her mind. He had thought if he was insistent enough, but quiet enough, she would know what she wanted. It had only been wishful thinking. And now he is an idiot again, as he debates internally whether or not to even tell Sona and Taric what's just happened.

Zoe resolves that dilemma for him, bouncing up to where they have set up half their camp, and singing, cheerfully, "We met Lux!"

Sona rises in a hurry, and Ezreal thinks the only reason Taric doesn't do the same is because he is actively wrapping a bandage around Diana's shoulder.

Ezreal motions for her to sit. "She's gone," he says, hoping the words will carry more weight than he can even fathom putting behind them.

The silence is uncomfortable as Sona smooths down her skirts and kneels again. Ezreal drops down to sit near Diana, and Ekko bumps against him as he plops down at his side. The warm of his body is a small comfort. Ezreal cannot stop thinking about Lux beneath him, beside him, her hand on his arm, her wrists in his. He feels desperate for touch, but pushes the feeling back. It's a sickening desperation that he wants no part of.

Zoe sits down, scoots up against his side, and cuts the tension like someone who did not notice it in the first place. "She was mean! Maybe I'm supposed to get rid of her? Is that why I'm here?"

Tired, Ekko buries his face in one hand. "No, Zoe."

She leans back on her arms. "I don't know what I'm supposed to end, though! I'm supposed to signal the end of something! Something big! Like the rifts she's openin'! Am I supposed to close all of them? I think that's too many little things. I'm not supposed to do lots of different stuff, just one big thing."

Ezreal does not point out that Lux is not the one opening the rifts. That it's everyone - every mage, using their magic for good or for bad. Themselves included. But it's thanks to all this traveling, this exhausting, dragging traveling, that there are more Aspects of Celestials, now. More solutions. More
things and people capable of stopping it.

They have no choice but to keep going, and to keep hoping for the best. Magic won't go anywhere, no matter the consequences of it.

"Was she… Herself?" Taric asks. His eyes are painfully sympathetic. Ezreal is relieved when the older man looks away, giving his attention back to bandaging Diana's freshly washed cuts instead of watching Ezreal.

Ekko says, "No," at the same time as Ezreal says, "Yes."

They share a look like a silent argument, before Ekko takes the lead. "She looked different, but it wasn't like her illusions. Her features were all the same and stuff, it was just, like… Her colors were backwards. Purple hair and eyes, and dark clothes."

"She's still Lux," Ezreal insists. There had been a swell of optimism, his heart caught up in the moment, but pessimism is crashing back down over him. "And she's trying to keep rifts open. That's all we know."

If he didn't know them better, Ezreal would think Taric and Sona were not even listening for how little they react. Even Diana lets out a startled grunt.

Why, Ezreal wants to know, did this feel like a forgone conclusion to them all? Just yesterday, all they knew was that she had gone missing. Today, she is an enemy. This should be shocking to someone, anyone, but Diana's gaze flits back down, somber, and Ezreal knows that it isn't.

There is more, but he has no desire to say it. Ekko is wrong if he thinks there's something insidious that's taken away her free will. It's nothing more than that Lux is an idiot. She lets herself get dragged along with things and is too stubborn to break away from them. She kills herself slowly for causes she does not believe in. She always has.

It's no wonder that she would jerk so hard away from the prince that she would fall against the cultists, and that she would be too worn out to try again. Ezreal is not sure how to articulate this thought, but it hollows out his chest with a sympathy that he does not have the patience for.

No one seems to know what to say, and Ezreal is glad for it. He wants to conversation over. They can all mull it over as much as they want and come to whatever conclusions they want, but he does not want to hear them.

They rest far longer than they should, watching Taric bandage Diana with what seems like a hundred small, separate wrappings. Finally they are forced to set up the rest of their camp by firelight. Ekko is quiet, the two of them working together to line up pieces in silence.

Diana is surprisingly taken with Zoe, humming along patiently as the child rambles. "She wasn't even that pretty," Zoe is saying, when Ezreal thinks to listen, but before this can annoy him, she adds, "Not like you. You're so pretty! Your hair is so silver and shiny, it's just like the moon!"

"Let her rest," Taric says with patience.

Diana sounds stilted and awkward, but says, "She's fine."

Ekko catches Ezreal's eye and smiles. Then says, "Told you she was alive."

***
In the morning they return to the sea.

It is some time before the vastaya arrives. In the meantime, they patiently scout out the gentlest area of the shore, and find decent spots to sit among the rocks. Together, but spread across different heights, they eat and talk.

It is still cold and wet, and the waters and sea cliffs still dark, but the traces of the void are washed away now. The sky is bright. Clouded over, but with the sun lighting the clouds from behind. It's a blinding grey, and Ezreal squints up at it as he listens to the others.

"It's difficult to imagine this won't all culminate in something," Taric is saying ponderously. After a brief pause, he repeats something Sona has signed, "It's too much at once. Indeed."

"It's unfortunate that no one thought to inform any of the aspects just what, exactly, is coming," Diana grouses. "But I'm in agreement that this many people would not be blessed with power if it weren't with intention."

Zoe lets out a long, agreeable whine. "I never get told what I'm supposed to do!" Then she rethinks. "Oh, it's fun to play around, though!"

Ekko's laugh is weak. Zoe's idea of playing around has apparently, historically, leveled an entire kingdom.

"Though in my case," Taric is reciting for Sona, slowly, "This is apparently nothing new. Just regained." He pauses, then answers her, "Perhaps… But the timing is still particular."

The quiet stretches longer. At first Ezreal thinks Sona must be signing something long, but when he finally drops his gaze from the sky to look, she is doing just as he had done. Simply staring up, her hands resting on her lap, loosely holding what's left of her bread.

She catches him staring and offers a hesitant smile. He nods back. It is a dull realization that this does not fluster him anymore, not like it used to.

"It's going to be the end of something, at least," Zoe says, brightly. "It always is."

"But the end of - what?" Ekko asks, sounding unnerved.

Taric offers a consoling, "Change isn't always bad."

"The sun sets," Diana says, and sounds a bit too gruff to be speaking in pretty metaphors. There is a grimace on her face when Ezreal looks to her, like she is forcing herself. "And the sun rises."

Ezreal considers this, then looks from Zoe to Sona. From long, sparkling, sunset hair, to Sona's smooth silky locks, the colors of a sunrise.

The Aspect of Dawn.

If Zoe is the end of something, then is Sona the beginning? And even if they are blessed by the heavens, can any person really represent something so inconceivably big?

It's all too pretty. Such flowery concepts and looks, as if they are goddesses sent down from the stars. And in the mean time the world is cracking open and letting in monsters to devour what's left. It's hard to imagine the two concepts facing off in any capacity.

Diana clears her throat. "Closing the rifts one by one won't bring about change," she admits. "The
world falling to ruin isn't something to be simplified that way. The moonstones stave away the void, but that's not a change to the cycle. It's a cycle that's been in motion for…" She trails off and looks down to her lap.

Zoe holds up her necklace, with the moonstone still embedded in it, looking speculative. "Yeah, this isn't gonna do much for you. I mean - not, like, to change stuff."

Ekko leans so far backward that he falls down, crossing his arms behind his head to pillow it. He just lays there on the rocks in surrender. "This is the worst. If we really did all that for something so useless."

"-It's not useless," Diana interjects.

"Things that help still matter, even if they're not the final solution," Taric says.

Ezreal wonders if this is just how it will be from now on. If this is simply the new status quo. A cycle that had been broken by the Solari's rejection of the Lunari, and now has been resumed.

War that spills magic and welcomes the void. Aspects who go on quests to shut it back out. Tag-along idiots who think they can be heroes on one side and broken idiots who think they can't. Ad infinitum.

No, something has to change. Zoe is the sign of that. When Ezreal looks, she is kicking her legs over the edge of the rocks and mushing the softest bits of her bread into a ball with great concentration.

The conversation slows, but continues. The clouds do not part and the sun does not break through, but the brightest spot of grey shifts overhead as the sun moves behind the veil.

The waves shift, too.

Nami is alone when she arrives, letting the waves push her up against a stone in the water, where she gently wraps her arms over it and holds herself in place. Her eyes are wide, inky, and blink up at the crowd she had clearly not been expecting. She does not look any different than when Ezreal had first met her.

Her gaze drifts across them all, and though there is a flicker of recognition when she passes over Ezreal, she still settles on Diana.

It takes maneuvering to get closer to the waters, but Diana climbs down until she is knee-deep, being swayed by the edges of the waves. Zoe follows her, hovering in the air and already popping the moon stone out of her necklace.

Nami's eyes are drawn to it. She can't look away, even when she asks, a bit breathlessly, "This is it?"

"From the Lunari," Diana confirms. Then falters. "The… Only Lunari."

Nami frowns, confused but sympathetic. She is too tactful to ask questions right now. "I thank you, for all the Marai," she says, seeming to struggle with the formality. Then, softer, "This - this is a salvation for my people. With this we can keep our home safe."

Ezreal has never seen Diana's expression so soft as the way she gazes at the mermaid. Zoe hands her the stone, and with ease, Diana passes it to Nami, who hugs it close to her chest.

"Isn't there some way to… Close that rift?" Ekko asks, stepping closer to the edge, still high above but seeking a better vantage point on the waters. "We've been closing rifts. That's - the aspects can
do that."

Nami looks bewildered, and the way she shrinks back is almost defensive. "The rift has been a part of our home for as long as our people have lived," she says, incredulous. "It cannot be closed."

Ezreal asks, "Is it that it can't be closed, or is it just that the people who could close it can't get to it?"

When Nami looks at him, her gaze lingers with a strange and surprising fondness. It quickly shifts into curiosity. "I don't know. I don't think so. There are no stories that tell of such a thing."

"We're kind of ineffectual, huh?" Ekko asks, clearly dissatisfied. Ad infinitum, Ezreal thinks. Tag-along idiots.

Nami fusses, like she wants to reassure them. "But this is wonderful! The safety this grants us should not be understated! With this in place, the void will not dare touch us. And in return…"

Her tail flicks out from the water, curled carefully around a sphere. Nearly the same size as the moon stone, but pitch black. Dripping, shining, it is so smooth that as it rotates, no shadows seem disturbed on its surface. She takes it in hand, and holds it for Diana.

Diana takes it like formality, her grip ginger, but then once again is left standing in her own uncertainty.

"I know of this," she says, hesitantly. "The abyssal pearl. But not its use to me. If… The light of the moon repels the void, then what can the dark of the void repel?"

"The Lunari said it would keep them safe," Nami says, but shakes her head. "I don't know any more than that."

Diana holds back the sigh that so clearly wants to heave from her lungs. After a delay she remembers to say, "I thank you. I pray that this tradition will continue."

Ezreal winces. Diana may have gained the ability to bless the stones from the top of Mt. Targon, and they may have more for her to use as she pleases, but then it ends. She still isn't welcome there. Leona had told her of the history, though, and then had told them where to find her. That can't mean nothing.

He is not able to draw the optimism he had as a child. This makes him think of Lux, and of her forced niceties. All the smiles and laughs she had pushed out of herself as if she had to crush her own insides to dig them out.

"I can hold it," Zoe offers, "If you want! I liked having a sparkly necklace!"

Diana blinks. "Sure," she says, far too easily, and passes the abyssal pearl on to the child.

Nami takes the moment to turn her attention back to Ezreal. Almost casually, she smiles at him. "Hello, again. Have you been well?"

Not so much, Ezreal thinks, but answers, "Yeah."

"Is Luxanna not with you?" Nami asks. "I had thought you two inseparable."

Ezreal snorts at this. He doesn't know what assumptions Nami had made of their relationship back then, but she had been far off base. Lux has done nothing but separate from him. He doesn't know how what answer this question deserves, but Nami seems to accept this, and moves on.
"I wish that I could stay," she says, her grip on the rock she has been using to ground herself already loosening. "But I need to take this home. It's important."

The way Diana speaks is abrupt, as if she is startling herself as well when she blurts out, "Come back tomorrow." She adds on, for courtesy's sake, "If…"

Nami's tail flicks down into the water, and Ezreal thinks of the way Sona sometimes laughs with her fingers. "Okay. Of course, I would love to."

Diana nods, somewhat stiff. Then the two of them part - Nami pushing away from the shore and disappearing into the waves. Diana climbs back up to the low-hanging sea cliffs, helped up by Taric when she reaches the top.

"You're staying," Taric observes.

Diana is tense, but shivers from the cold her wet clothes. Her eyes drift back to the sea. "I'd like to hear more from her. I'd like to hear that the marai are safe, as this is meant to promise, and I'd like to hear what they know of the Lunari."

"Of course," Taric says, with an agreeable nod. "History is important. All the more when we're standing on the ruins of a kingdom."

Diana tries to return his smile, Ezreal thinks, but does a poor job of it. It looks more like another grimace. He thinks of making fun of her in the crystal caverns, and of Lux's own strained smile as she tried to play along with him.

He clenches and unclenches his fists at his side, feeling the prickle of the cold. He feels antsy. The adrenaline he had been missing from their travels is just under the surface - it wants to swell at just the thought of Lux, at knowing that she's okay. Like a delayed reaction, it is hitting him that she is out there, even if he doesn't know where, even if she's doing something stupid.

"If we could," Ezreal starts, then corrects himself. "If you could perform the ritual, we have more stones from Mt. Targon. There are rifts all over - in Ionia and in Freljord. If we could spread moonstones around, it could at least curb the damage until they can be closed."

"But if we're the ones, uh, playing delivery boy here, and we're also the ones closing the rifts, it's kind of moot." Ekko points out.

Sona signs, and Taric does not even look at her to voice the same thought, "Not if more open after our departure. Ideally, everyone should be self sufficient in our absence. It's never good to rely too much on any single party."

Ezreal wonders just when they all decided that they were the ones in charge of this mess, but shakes off the thought. It doesn't matter. The flow of their journey pushes and there's no reason to fight against it. What else would he be doing?

And if Lux is doing this, is some part of this, then it's the best path to her.

He's an idiot, but he's starting to feel at peace with this instead of bitter about it. He's always thought of himself as smart, but it's some kind of weight off his shoulders to push that off.

"I'm…" Diana stumbles over the word as if it is foreign: "Happy to. Certainly."

Ezreal nods. As he gives a short survey of their group, he notices Taric is looking at him oddly. There is a small quirk of his lips like a held-back smile, and it breaks through when Ezreal's eyes
meet his. He speaks like he is leading Ezreal when he prompts, "Then it becomes a matter of how to reach these places past Noxus's efforts to isolate them."

"We're a small group, it can't be that hard," Ezreal retorts. There is a strange mix of calm and impatience inside him. He cannot settle on one side or the other.

"I imagine we'll return to Demacia before deciding whether to journey to Freljord or Ionia?"

It's strange that it's a question. Ezreal squints at Taric - at Sona standing at his side and looking to him just as expectantly, with an equally amused turn to her lips.

It's pride, Ezreal realizes. Taric is proud of him. Is it for suggesting they do something that seems heroic at a glance? Or is it for coopting the leadership from the adults?

Neither makes him particularly happy. He isn't doing the right thing out of altruism, he's doing it because he knows that it's the path to Lux. And he shouldn't have to be making decisions for the rest of them. It isn't admirable to get bossy to those who are meant to be your leaders, your mentors.

So maybe he is not happy. But there is a small warmth in his chest. Ezreal blinks rapidly. "Uh, right," he stammers. "Probably. Yeah."

Chapter End Notes

oh sylas, ohhh sylas, i love you, i wish there were any way you fit into this story but you super don't but i love you.
In the night, the clouds finally part, and under the clear starlight, Diana performs a ritual. It is a simple calling of magic. A prayer to the light of the moon. Gratitude for the past and a plea for the future.

It's the relationship between a child and parent, Ezreal thinks. Knowing that they have already protected you so much, you ask for it to continue with nothing to offer in return but your own love and continued life. It's asking for the assurance that all they want is that: for you to live.

Maybe he is reading into this too much. He has been thinking too much about his family since their ascent of Mt. Targon. He doesn't like the way his thoughts have spiraled so much during this journey, circling the same handful of topics again and again as if he has no will of his own.

The stones are set in a circle around Diana, and the moon shines down on her, glinting off the blade resting over her knees.

With his own knees pulled to his chest, he watches the stones begin to smooth over. He feels the mana of the air; bright and cold against the darkness of the night. Zoe is standing behind him, arms resting on his head. He doesn't mind, as long as she doesn't put much weight on him. It's a pleasant sort of contact, and with the gem of his gauntlet it feels as if he is dipping his fingers lightly into her magic.

Beside him, Ekko sits with crossed legs, and across from them, Sona and Taric are watching in silence.

The light overhead does not dim with the end of Diana's prayer. The light was not called down to them by magic. The moon simply shines, a sharp crescent hole in the dark of the sky, and Diana rises to her feet in its spotlight.

The moon stones are pretty things, made from what had looked like ordinary stones only a moment ago. Taric motions to them with his fingers with a kind of curiosity, commanding them to lift into the air at his will. It's no surprise to Ezreal. If Taric had been able to cast spells with crystals before becoming an aspect, of course he can still do it with celestial-blessed stones.

"Thank you," Taric says to Diana, who shifts her weight uncomfortably with the gratitude.

"It's my duty," she tries, but has no confidence in the words. She sounds tired. It was not a spell she cast, but rather a ritual that used her as a conduit. Ezreal knows first-hand how the flow of mana that isn't your own can feel. He knows that without his gauntlet to regulate it, to regulate him, he wouldn't last.

Taric humors Diana. "Of course."

Zoe's hands drop down to Ezreal's shoulders, and she pushes on him uncomfortably, leaning forward. With her cheek nearly pressed to his she asks, "Hey, hey, are we going?"

He swats at her half-heartedly, not particularly intent on shooing her off of him. "In the morning. We're not going to travel at night."
"Boring," Zoe mutters. "I'm tired of sleeping. I already slept enough." Then she turns her head away from him to yawn.

Ezreal arches an eyebrow. "Apparently not."

"I'm not sleepy," she insists with a pout, and pushes away from him. "But that's okay! I can stay up late with Diana and talk more!" At the edge of his sight, Ezreal sees Diana perk up and look their way, curious. Even when Zoe tries to stay secretive with a whisper, her voice is loud. "I really like her, she's really cool!"

Ezreal holds back the snort of disbelief out of respect for what Diana just did for them. Probably better not to tease a woman as powerful as her for being socially awkward when she's just received the power of the Gods.

Wouldn't dare to say something rude about Diana.

His own words come back to haunt him, but he knows that isn't it. It's Lux, it's memories of Lux, a ghost he's created of a person still alive.

Taric helps him pack the moonstones away into his bag before they retire for the night.

In the dark of the tent, Ekko scoots closer until their shoulders are touching.

"You okay?"

Ezreal blinks, but his eyes have not adjusted well to the dark. There is a fire burning outside, but it is low and the tent is too thick. He can hear Zoe laughing over the low sound of Diana talking. Kaladoun is not as quiet as he had expected for a dead kingdom. The sea is loud, and the wind whistles through trees and overgrown grass. The fire sparks, and he hears someone prodding at it; hears the gravel and stone shift under their weight.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm good."

"You think if we close enough rifts she'll come back?" Ekko asks.

Ezreal closes his eyes. He has been trying to avoid this conversation. "I don't know. Haven't thought that far ahead."

Ekko is quiet. There is a sound of blankets shifting as he turns to face Ezreal. "Do you think you can fight her? If we have to?"

Ezreal does not want to answer this, because the answer is a pained but sincere: Yes. "Can you?" He counters, instead.

Ekko hums, and it's strange for him to act so detached from it. Usually it's Ezreal who plays indifferent. "I guess so," he says. "It's hard to think about. I think she's too smart to try and fight us. If it was just us, maybe not, but she's seen what Zoe can do when she's 'being careful.' I think she knows it would be a losing fight."

"She doesn't want to fight us, anyway," Ezreal says.

"That too."

Not that it's worth much. What Lux wants rarely comes into play. It only redoubles her determination to do the things she hates. For a girl who should have so much practice, Ezreal thinks, Lux never
really learned how to detach herself.

They are their own magic, after all. Ezreal can twist space and run, can step away from himself. But Lux is used to her illusions; she can't change what's really there.

Until the other elements kicked in, Ezreal thinks, but tries not to linger on the way that breaks his metaphor. He doesn't like the implication.

Even if Lux was overpowered by Zoe, there was still much more she could have done - much more that Ezreal knows she is capable of. She's stronger than him. If she wasn't during the Institute days, she certainly is now.

She had come just to rile them up, and it had worked.

Ezreal thinks about how harshly she had pulled away from his touch. His fingers twitch against his will, and he flexes his hand to get rid of the sensation.

"I'm focusing on the getting to her part," Ezreal admits. "And the undoing whatever she thinks she has to do right now. We'll deal with the rest as it happens."

Ekko sounds dissatisfied, but murmurs, "Yeah, alright." Then asks, "Think she's close?"

"No, that was teleportation magic." Ezreal says, then frowns, the thought only occurring to him as he says it out loud. "Which... I don't think she knows how to use."

He had known she wasn't working alone - of course not. Lux is used to following. Used to hating every moment of it, shattering herself to fit into the role she's been given, but doing it even so.

It's strange to think of her at anyone else's side. Not his, nor Jarvan's.

But if it's the void - Malzahar's.

Ezreal pushes the thought away as aggressively as he can. He doesn't like his relationship with Lux being slotted into the same category as whatever had gone on with her and the prince. He likes it even less to think Malzahar might be the same.

He's grateful for the distraction when Ekko asks, "She picks up magic quick, though. She could have learned. Right?"

Ezreal opens his eyes, though in the dark it doesn't change his view. He shakes his head. "No, not quite." He gives Ekko a moment to let out an irritated huff. The way magic works still does not make sense to the younger boy, even after working with it with Zilean. Ezreal tries to think of the best way to explain. "She tried learning the teleportation spell from the Institute, and she'd even tried learning my arcane shift before. But she couldn't get them, because what Lux works with is elements."

"Light isn't actually an element," Ekko points out, his frown audible. "Dark isn't an element, either."

"No, but she thinks of them like they are."

Ekko groans. "That doesn't make sense! It's - those are physical factors at play, you can't just control them because you misunderstand how they work! I get that mana can alter things from how they are in nature, right? When she makes ice or fire, I get that it's, like, intuitively altering the compounds and using mana to fill in or take away whatever she needs. But light and dark aren't physical. Her illusions aren't physical, right? If you touch her when she's using an illusion, you'll still just feel what's actually there. She's redirecting light. That shouldn't be something she can turn into a physical
attack, but she does. Which means the rules make no sense, which means if there's a teleportation
spell, she should be able to learn it."

Ezreal is not sure he understood half of that, but argues anyway. "No, that's not how it works.
Maybe that's part of it? But if you're willing to admit that mana allows her to alter reality by creating
or subtracting things from it, then why do those things she creates have to follow the rules you think
you know? If she can summon whatever she needs to make fire or ice, what's to say she can't
summon light that doesn't follow the rules of normal light?"

"Well, she can, obviously," Ekko grumbles. "But I don't get how - okay, so she can do that, because
magic is stupid, but then why not teleport? Or... Why do you think she couldn't have learned, when
she was just here?"

"Magic is conceptual," Ezreal tells him. His eyes are starting to adjust, and he stares into the thin
lines across the top of the tent. Then turns to see Ekko, and the vague outline of him, listening
intently. "It's different for everyone, and the rules it follows are self-imposed by the way you think of
them."

Ekko mutters, "Ridiculous," but waits patiently to hear the rest.

"It's harder to overcome than you'd think. I know what my magic can do. I know I can push it to do
more. But figuring out how is..." He searches for words. "Instinctive? It's not a step by step process
that one person can tell another."

"Then how does anyone teach magic?" Ekko asks, clearly at his wits end. "If I wanted to teach you
how to build something with hextech, I could do it. You could just follow the instructions, even if
you didn't really understand what each part did."

"Magic teachers usually start young, honestly," Ezreal says. "So that they can help shape the way the
student thinks about it to match their own way of thinking. It gets harder the older you are, because
your own rules are more solidified."

"I hate this," Ekko grumbles, half-playful and half genuinely annoyed. "I hate this."

It only makes Ezreal want to continue, a weak grin forming on his face, even in the dark. "Lux was
known for being a spell thief. She's a quick learner. She knows how to adapt, and that's what's
impressive. And in the end, most things can be broken down into elements. Conceptually. But
teleportation, not so much."

This time Ekko is quiet for a moment, sincerely considering this. "Okay. I guess that makes sense.
Not really, but oh well. Then what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Your - the gauntlet. It's not like it's a secret. It amplifies your magic. So how does that work?" Ekko
hesitates. Then, quieter, as if he thinks it is a very intimate question, he asks: "What rules does your
magic follow?"

Ezreal shifts in place uncomfortably. It isn't a personal question, but he is suddenly conscious of how
close they are. He tries to distract himself, staring up again. "I've never put them in words before," he
admits. "It... Does what I need it to. It takes what I can do and makes it stronger. It lets me move
how I want to when I couldn't before. It..."

He keeps searching for words, and they keep coming out wrong. Ekko props himself up on one arm
to look down at Ezreal, waiting patiently.
"It adjusts things," Ezreal says, eventually. He feels like he is deducing it for the first time. "The things I could already do, for one. The attacks I use. It adjusts them stronger, lets me control their form and power. It - adjusts me. Let's me move from one place to another. And it adjusts what's around me."

"What's around you," Ekko repeats.

Ezreal looks up to him, and with a tilt of his head commands the boy to lay back down. Ekko obeys, and Ezreal explains, "It regulates other people's mana. Draws from it, brings it to me. Filters it back, I guess. Like… Sampling from them. You know how crystals are a catalyst for magic, right?"

"Sort of?"

"Well, that's probably what the gem of this gauntlet is doing. Being a catalyst for everything around it, and offering that to me."

"So you're a spell thief too," Ekko concludes, snickering.

"It's not like I'm learning the spells. It's just about proximity, and… Borrowing. Rebalancing."

"That's not better."

Ezreal's own gaze drifts towards the small pile of clothes burying his gauntlet. "It's just what a gem… Does. It absorbs magic from around it. I didn't think about what the gem was doing, just about that I was using the gem to begin with."

"I don't… Really get it."

"I can't copy other people's spells - I can't break them down and rework them for myself. Not like Lux does."

"Weird."

A silence finally spreads out between them. Ekko seems satisfied with what he's heard, and lays on his back again, linking his fingers over his chest.

Ezreal exhales slow. Outside, Diana and Zoe are still talking. Quieter, now. Calm and soft. It occurs to Ezreal for the first time that he kind of likes the sound of others nearby. Not necessarily right beside him, but close. He likes the muffled sound of voices; they're a comfort that tell him he is safe, they are safe.

It's better than being alone, at any rate.

"Thanks," Ekko says, eventually. "For explaining. I appreciate it."

Ezreal blinks, startled. "Yeah," he says. It must be audible in his voice, because Ekko snickers.

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The journey back to Demacia is much the same as the journey away had been. It is slow and peaceful. There is nothing to be fought for here, and so the war has not encroached on this land. Only a matter of time, Ezreal thinks.

Maybe Kaladoun's ruins will be host to Demacian military tents, a stronghold base to prevent ambush. Or maybe they will be draped with Noxian flags, slowly circling around to surround Demacia for an attack.
He thinks about his gauntlet more consciously. About the way mana flows from the others to him, and about the distinct feel from each of them. It's difficult to figure out. Against his will, his gauntlet gives and takes, redistributing until what Ezreal feels is a perfectly balanced harmony.

It takes nearly the whole trip, but with practice, he can tell the difference.

Zoe's mana overflows, pouring out endlessly, bubbling and flowing and never once slowing. Sona's is a rhythmic flow, powerful but carefully tamed. Taric's is strong, an almost oppressive feeling, but there is comfort in the sturdiness of it.

Ekko's is the strangest. A boy with mana, but no magic. It is almost a hollow thing, as if Ezreal were pressing his fingers up against the glass of Ekko's zero drive, expecting there to be something inside and finding nothing.

He tries to remember the feel of Lux's mana. It had felt so natural for it blend with his when they had been together. Or maybe this had not even been happening back then. He cannot be sure, not based on memory alone.

But he knows that when he saw her by the sea, she had locked him out. Purposefully, knowingly. She had yanked her mana away from him as severely as her arm when he had touched her.

He grows accustomed to Taric looking to him as the sun sets, as if awaiting the announcement that they should stop for the night. Whatever mockery of leadership Taric wants to push on him, Ezreal supposes it isn't so bad - as long as it is in small things like that.

He grows accustomed to Zoe riding on his shoulders, slouched over his head and showering him with questions and inconsequential stories.

He grows accustomed to the fond way Sona looks back at them, and grows reacquainted with the genuine smile that she had been missing for too long.

He grows accustomed to Ekko looking up at him, sometimes unabashedly, other times his eyes quickly darting away when caught.

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He dreams of Lux again. She is on his mind too much for it not to bleed into sleep.

"Explain," she demands, both her hands holding his wrist more harshly than she must realize.

In his dream they are in the Kaladoun forests, in the sunlight, by the river. It is not where this had happened. This had been on Institute grounds, on a cold and foggy evening - but the soothing sound of the river washes away his confusion. Lucidity slips away from him.

"Uh," Ezreal manages, distracted.

Lux's thumbs are angled to press down, pushing into the gauntlet enough that he can feel their pressure, more pointed than the rest of her grip. He is briefly distracted by her fingernails, smooth and pretty like she's never worked a day in her life. He knows that isn't true. But they are glossy, catching the light with a shimmer.

"It's nail polish," she tells him impatiently, though he had not said anything. "Now, please take this seriously."

"I am," he protests. He is not.
She sets a disbelieving look on him, blue eyes narrowed.

"I can't explain it, you know that," he insists.

Lux concedes with a sigh, but does not let go. One of her hands slips higher, slender fingers tracing over the gem embedded in his gauntlet. He watches them slide across it, smooth and curious. "I understand that it's an amplification, but... It also granted you new abilities?"

"Yeah, arcane shift kinda came with the package."

She takes a moment to think. She begins, tactfully, "I don't mean to impose, but if it isn't too much trouble-"

"-Sure," Ezreal hears himself say, already tugging gently out of her grip to take off the gauntlet.

The expression that crosses her face is fascinating, like she is both pleased and distraught by something all at once. She flinches back from him, belatedly realizing how long she has been holding his arm.

He wears the gauntlet so often that it always feels strange to be without it. Like his arm is too light. There is some possessiveness in him, even as he hands it to her. But it is outweighed by a subtle satisfaction at watching her wear something of his.

Maybe that is possessiveness, too.

He shouldn't indulge this feeling. But he shouldn't indulge himself by gravitating to her at all, not when it's obvious that she's building careful walls between them each time they interact. Yet here he is, more hopelessly than he has ever been before.

And here she is. He'd like to think that means something, even if she looks at him with an anxious part of her lips before hurriedly looking back down.

She has to take off her own armguards before she can put on the gauntlet, and the sizing isn't quite right. Ezreal helps her with the clasps on the underside, even though he knows how badly she wants to pull away from him. They stand close, closer than they've ever stood before. Closer than they need to. He is conscious of the rise and fall of her body as she breathes, and in silence, he secures the gauntlet for her.

When it's secured, he does not let go of her. This time it is his hands wrapped around her wrist between them, like a mirror to how she had held onto him before.

She does not pull back. He raises his head slowly to look her in the face, taking in her long lashes and the strand of hair that has fallen loose from behind her ear into her face. Resolutely, she does not look up to meet his gaze. She stares down at his hands like her life depends on it.

He counts the seconds that she allows this, the seconds that she fights the part of herself that knows better. Her body has gone tense.

Thirteen seconds. Then Lux says, suddenly, "Never mind."

But she still has not moved, and so Ezreal does not either. "Why?"

"I won't be able to do this," she says. Ezreal tells himself not to read too much into this, even when her smile is transparent. Her voice wavers with the effort to sound casual. "I can tell. It's not compatible with how I do things. Even if I managed it now, it wouldn't really be me."
"But you might be able to learn to do it for real after you've tried it," Ezreal points out.

"It's fine," she insists, still not looking up. "There are some things I can't do."

He knows he takes far too long to reply. Fifteen seconds. He does not want to pull away, because he knows this moment will come and go and disappear.

Lux finally looks up. He tries to smile for her, to soothe her if he can, but all it seems to do is distress her further.

She is still smiling, but it fractures. Worse is the way she pulls back to remove the gauntlet without his help, her whole body moving stiff and anxiously. She begins rambling, her words just a touch too fast. "This magic has nothing to do with mine, so there's no way I can get a grasp of it. I think that just wearing the gauntlet for a moment has given me enough insight into its workings to know that borrowing its powers wouldn't help me to mimic them without it. This is enough for me to know what I can make use of. And besides, can you even use that power without the gauntlet?"

Ezreal blinks as Lux thrusts the gauntlet back into his hand as if desperate to rid herself of it.

"I-" He begins.

Lux interrupts him severely. "What can you even do?"

No. That wasn't what happened.

Lucidity snaps back around him and the sky goes dark. He clenches his eyes shut and pushes himself to wake up, to open them to a dark tent and a body at either side of him.

He had shown her that he could still arcane shift without the gauntlet. He had shown her, and made an idiot of himself, but she had laughed at him and stayed with him despite her own discomfort. She had insisted she was waiting for Garen to finish his business like a well-rehearsed excuse, and looked just a little bit disappointed when he finally came for her.

"Nothing?" Lux asks, in his silence. When he opens his eyes, her hair has gone dark. She's shaded by midnight, but her eyes are a beautiful shade of lilac. Even when they're setting him with a glare. "Of course."

"You came to me," Ezreal finds himself insisting again. He hears the way his own conviction wavers. It's pointless to argue in a dream, he knows.

"You think I wanted to?" She asks, incredulous. "You're so easy to manipulate. It's incredible, really."

Ezreal wakes up with sweat on his forehead and Ekko's hand on his shoulder. He feels out of breath and swallows thickly, coming back to reality in fractions. He takes in the fabric of the tent and the way Zoe's hair is pushed off to the side, taking up far too much space behind her as she snores.

The sunrise is pressing dim light against the walls, and concern is painted across Ekko's face.

"Bad dream," Ezreal says, shrugging away from the touch.

As if on cue, Zoe rolls over, flinging an arm against his. The sound of Ekko's laugh is soothing, and though he pulls his hand away, he is already sitting up and dressed for the day. Sitting cross-legged, his knee is pushed uncomfortably into Ezreal's side.
Ezreal stays this way for a self indulgent moment longer. Then he rises, dresses, and steps outside to stretch in the cool morning air. Taric and Sona greet him as they begin to pack up for the day. It isn't long before Ekko is leading Zoe out of the tent too, then taking it apart.

It's not so hard to shake off the dream.

Not when the roads are easy and the weather is clear. Not with a bag full of moonstones at his back, as comforting as a plan. It's something. It's something, at least.

By the time they reach Demacia, it is afternoon, and his gut is pleasantly tight from his own stifled laughter at Ekko and Taric's deadpan responses to Zoe's increasingly non sequitur questions.

The feeling goes sour when he sees the guards at the gates, closing in a tight line with the message clear before they are close enough to hear it.

The guards will not let them in.

Chapter End Notes

wink wonk
"These are wartimes," Xin Zhao explains to them, just outside the border of the kingdom. He has led them far from the guards, who all hide their face behind shining silver helmets and hold their weapons like an active threat. He sounds as if he is reciting something with bitten back fury, but resignation too. "The kingdom must protect its people."

"We literally work for the prince!" Ekko exclaims, throwing his arms in the air. "I get that we aren't all, uh, from here, but--"

Xin Zhao's expression doesn't waver, and its sheer certainty cuts Ekko off. Dread settling into Ezreal's gut in the brief silence, before Xin Zhao confirms, terse with his own frustration, "And you are still allowed within the kingdom. With supervision."

"Me," Ekko repeats, flatly.

Ezreal looks past Ekko - to Taric, Sona, and Zoe. Then down to his own hand, gauntleted at his side. Magic in all of them, but because Ekko's is artificial, it doesn't count? He can't fathom thinking the boy is harmless. Thinking that Sona or Taric would choose to be harmful. Xin Zhao nods.

Sona's hands are balled into fists in her skirt. Her shoulders tremble, but when Ezreal looks to her face it is anger more than sadness that furrows her brow and tugs her lip between her teeth. Taric's hand drifts to her back unconsciously; his smile does a poor job of convincing anyone.

Zoe, floating upside down, just frowns with a mild annoyance and confusion.

"I'm not Demacian," Ezreal snaps, "so fine, whatever. But Sona and Taric live here."

He knows there's no point in arguing this with Xin Zhao, and the man takes being a stand-in for Ezreal's frustration with grace, not so much as flinching.

"If you could bring Jarvan to speak with us," Taric says, patiently, "perhaps we could…"

Xin Zhao shakes his head. "This is for his protection more than anyone's. Under the king's orders, he isn't permitted to leave."

Ekko's eyebrows shoot up. "The prince is under house arrest?"

Xin Zhao knows better than to confirm this out loud. The silence is enough. After enough time has passed for the meaning to be clear, he goes as far as admitting, "His actions have been strictly limited since the Institute closed. This isn't something that arose from nothing."

"I don't think I could jump far enough to grab him," Zoe ponders.

Ezreal reaches up to flick her in the forehead, hardly thinking about it. "That wouldn't exactly earn us any points, here."

Sona has carefully wiped the emotion from her face, her mouth now in a thin line. She gently drops
to the ground, skirt billowing around her as she sits. She meets Ezreal's eyes with a resigned smile, but he can only wonder how she has the will power not to tell Taric *I told you so.*

Being barred from the kingdom is one thing for him, who wanted little to do with it to begin with, but for the two of them, this is more. Even if it was only ever a secondhand home, Ezreal thinks, it was a place they were invited to. It was where their only family was.

"These aren't very popular decisions," Xin Zhao murmurs. "Even among civilians."

Ezreal doesn't know if this is true or if Xin Zhao is just defensive of the kingdom that still holds his loyalty. After everything, still. He thinks: Demacians are an idiotic bunch, all of them carefully protecting something sharp-edged and intrinsically broken.

"Doesn't matter how unpopular it is," Ezreal points out. "It's still enforced."

Ekko asks, "What do we do? I can go, at least, and report in to Jarvan. And hear from him if there's anything… We should know. I guess I can be the one to restock our travel supplies too. This was only going to be a pit-stop, anyway, so this doesn't have to ruin our plans."

As Sona's hands move, Ezreal and Taric's eyes both drift down to her. *It only ruins what comes after them.*

Both think better of translating such a helpless complaint. Ezreal is sure she prefers it this way.

They have no choice but to send Ekko off with a long shopping list and Xin Zhao at his side.

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It takes Ekko multiple trips, even with the help of Xin Zhao and a couple of nameless blue-eyed soldiers. It's still carrying five people's worth of rations and gear from inside the city. Then there is the matter of consolidating it into travel bags properly, but by now this is a process they are used to, and one they can coordinate in relative silence. Something in the clockwork action is almost comforting.

"Jarvan didn't have much time for me," Ekko tells them, staring down at his own hands as he tugs at the drawstrings of his bag. "Maybe that's on purpose. I don't know. But he's fine with our plan, and with continuing to fund it however we need. He said…" Ekko hesitates before looking up in Sona's direction. "He said he can help make arrangements for transportation if you two are moving."

"That's it?" Ezreal asks. "He didn't say he'd be sure to get this law overturned? That he would convince his dad to change it? Just that he'd help them figure out how to move?"

Taric does not soothe him this time. Nor does Sona. They do not react to what Ekko had said at all, and keep focused on packing.

Ekko's forced smile falls, and a silence drapes over them as they work. Even Zoe can read the mood well enough not to fuss, though Ezreal has to help her organize her own travel bag.

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He expects the journey to Freljord to be quiet. The way their journey to Kaladoun had been.

It is, for the most part. The terrain won't get rocky until they are much closer to the mountains, and even then, he is sure their steep inclines will feel like a cakewalk after Mt. Targon. Roads made for travelers, made for wagons and merchants.
They cross the marshes and his memory tugs at him again. This time the River King does not come to taunt him. Ezreal isn't surprised. He does not by any means think that the world revolves around Lux, but she is more closely tied to those it *does* revolve around.

He used to think royals were so ridiculous to think the world was all about them - but it is, now. Stubbornly, the world rejects his pragmatism and allows itself to be led by the few.

Ekko brought them back journals to read as they walked. It's like playing catch up with the world they are in, as if their travels are on another plane.

Leblanc is the grand general of Noxus. The timing of Katarina's attack on Swain earned her no favors. It's hard to say if the public accepts this or not - Demacian reporters aren't a good resource of information on the internal nuances of Noxus. Ezreal knows for himself that Katarina has followers. But to read it in the journals you would think that once a decision was made, it was unanimously supported across the kingdom.

They write about themselves in the same way. It isn't a popular decision, Xin Zhao had said. Maybe he only meant among his own limited circle. Maybe he only meant to Jarvan himself.

Ezreal chases the lightheartedness that Zoe tries to bring them all, trying to accept it like a hand outstretched, but she is clumsy and clueless, and half her attempts only sour Sona's mood further. Sona is not quite as patient with her as Taric.

"I wanna stop and build snowmen when we get to the snow," Zoe enthuses, oblivious to the exhaustion of the day's travels. She waves her hand in the air and as she does, stars trace an outline of a snowman in front of her. Light on her feet, she dances around it, taking off her scarf to drape around its neck. When she looks to Sona, it is with expectant eyes. "Ta-da!"

Across the campfire from her, Sona looks weary, and can't smooth it off of her face. She humors Zoe with a polite clap. Ezreal wonders if she could dispel those lights like dust with a wave of her own hand. If Taric could. He has not known them as celestials long enough to truly wrap his head around it.

"If we can spare the time," Taric concedes, but Ezreal knows they won't have it.

When you're moving slow it's easy to forget the urgency of the places you're between.

They should see snow on the ground by tomorrow, something Ezreal is not looking forward to, but not nearly as apprehensive of as he would have been before Mt. Targon's heights. In the meantime all he wants to do is curl up in his blankets and enjoy the warm while he can, and so he rises, excusing himself to his tent.

Zoe's stars scatter as he passes through them, and she scrambles to catch her falling scarf with an indignant whine. She flicks it at his back as he leaves, blowing raspberries after him.

It's still early in the night.

Ezreal does not allow his steps to falter, but he is instantly on edge when he sees that the entrance to his tent is not completely closed.

The air inside shimmers strangely in a silhouette. It's a kindly given permission to his awareness; she's better than that. But this is an omen, Ezreal thinks. If this is a secret meant only for him, then this means it is not a good visit. It is not a turning tide.

He still closes the tent behind him obediently, audibly sighing at himself for it. Maybe he is sighing at
her. A part of him is just plain _exasperated_ with her.

But a part of him is afraid of her, too.

"Hey, Lux," he greets her, before turning back to face her. It comes out resigned, and he thinks this is why she stays quiet.

When he turns to face her, the illusion is dropped. Redirected, he is sure, onto the tent walls to keep their shadows from giving her away. She's too smart for mistakes. He's sure anything that occurs to him had occurred to her much sooner.

He takes in the way her legs are pulled to her chest instead of tucked politely beneath her. She pays no mind to the length of her skirt in this position, but he does for a moment too long. When he tears his eyes to her face, she is watching him carefully. With suspicion, like she is trapped prey.

He doesn't know why, when she was the one to run away. She was the one to attack first. She is the one who put herself here, waiting for him to come.

"I do share this tent, you know," he tells her, at length. He is wholly uninterested in protecting her if she gets caught. He knows he is already playing into her game to think of it this way, like a secret they can hide. Like it's something they're in on together.

Ezreal thinks of kissing a princess in the hidden corners of the castle.

Lux is quiet. For so long that Ezreal eventually snaps, carefully quiet but no less severe for it, "What? Did you come here just to stare at me?" A thought occurs to him before she can answer, and he jolts forward to touch her, to check that she isn't still just a trick of the light. "Are you even really here?"

His hand lands clumsy on her knee, solid, cold under his palm. She lets her leg fall to the side with the weight, hissing, face tensing like it hurts.

He draws away quickly, falling back with crossed legs. He wills his cheeks to cool and bites his cheek to keep back an apology that he knows would have come out stuttered.

Lux does not readjust, just drapes her arms around her raised knee, linking her fingers. She is the one to break the stretch of silence. "At this point, nothing I do matters. I'll be observed, I'm sure. But not punished. If anything, this sort of thing probably just amuses him."

"Malzahar," Ezreal guesses.

Lux only knows how to follow, and if any man is a spokesperson for the void, it's him. It leaves a sour taste in Ezreal's mouth, thinking of the times they've crossed paths until now. He wishes she would at least choose better people to follow, if that's all she's going to do.

She doesn't answer, confirmation in itself.

"If it doesn't matter either way, then maybe stop helping the fucking _bad guys_," Ezreal snaps.

Her mask is cracked, fractured compared to the act that used to fit around her like a glove. She knows to keep quiet, but the frustration sparks from her bitten-out words. "There's no _avoiding_ it! You want me to tag along with you? Poison the whole world as you go? You think that's better?"

"You aren't poison," Ezreal scoffs.

Lux raises an eyebrow at him, as if it was a bluff she could call out. She shakes her head.
He should be on the defensive; she attacked him the last time they met. But his stomach is too tightly knotted for him to focus on anything else. "What do you want, Lux?"

He can't read her expression; his gaze catches on the curl of lilac hair falling close to her lips. Her lips purse. He watches them move around the words as she admits, "I wanted to see you."

Ezreal wants to roll his eyes. "Well. Here I am. Happy?"

Something in this gets to her, enough to make her take in a sharp breath like she's about to snap at him again. She exhales instead. "Of course. Are you?"

He doesn't bother trying to hide that he's miserable. There's no point. Besides, he doesn't think she would be any more or less compassionate either way. She was never good with handling his moods. So he drawls, sarcastic, "Definitely. Things are great right now."

She confirms that his answer hardly mattered in the first place, quickly brushing past it as if the question had been rhetorical. "Why are you even doing any of this? Why would you want to save this world from tearing itself apart?"

The question is infuriating for how stupid it is. If he weren't overwhelmed by the nauseating tension of just sitting across from her, his blood would be boiling. She's smarter than this, but he knows there's no use in just saying because I live here.

Instead he asks, "Why don't you? That should be the exact sort of thing your stupid Demacian ideals say are noble."

At least those flawed notions of true justice would be better than this.

Ezreal hates the way his heart stutters as she seems to mull it over; the way his eyes crawl up her legs again. He knows this is not the time.

When he tears his eyes back up to meet hers, she looks amused.

This is not like her. He doesn't know what to do with it. Not when he remembers her flinching away so many times they touched - how long it had taken for that to stop. (But he remembers holding onto her hips beneath her nightgown and he remembers her arms wrapped tight around him, too.)

Lux wets her lips, then answers. "Because it's a terrible place," she says. "Or rather, it's a lovely place that people are using terribly."

"That's not a good enough reason."

"No? Societies fall because they fight. You know this. In all your studying, have you ever seen it proved wrong? Even the peaceful fall - they fall faster. And even in times of peace, people are miserable."

"You were miserable," Ezreal corrects her, but she ignores him.

"Is it really fair to keep this world to ourselves, just to fill it with petty fighting and unnecessary rules? What's so wrong with those creatures wanting out? Wanting sunlight and warmth? There are wild animals that follow the laws of nature, to kill or get killed. Humans do it, too. So what's the point to refusing the same freedom to them?"
"You wanted out," Ezreal corrects, again. "They're different and you know it. And even if they weren't - if they're a part of the kill or be killed cycle, then we're just doing our half and killing them before they kill us. That's nature, too. Your argument sucks and you're smarter than this. If you believed anything you were saying you would be able to convince me, at least half way."

She looks mystified at the idea. Had she never realized how valuable her thoughts were to him? Ezreal's heart sinks again.

"I suppose," Lux offers, noncommittal. She's just messing with him. Their conversation is meaningless, and it fills him with a familiar hopelessness. He is being turned away at the gates, he is chasing someone who isn't there anymore, even as she sits right in front of him. She says, "Then we just happen to be on opposite sides. Bad luck."

"Luck is a factor," Ezreal concedes, terse. It feels like another of their stupid debates over dinner. Only this time the topic is vague, and the direct impact on them is greater. A perpetually rebalancing scale that refuses to settle anywhere good. "But it's only a factor."

There is a silence that stretches between them. He doesn't break it, and neither does she.

She reaches out for him first, one hand still holding her knee to her chest, the other stretched out toward him. He feels pathetic for how quickly he reaches out to touch her, their fingertips brushing before she flinches away.

He does not understand the way she seems to steel herself before entwining their fingers. He does not understand how she can look so determined to do something like this, the antithesis of her entire reason for coming.

His grip goes tight before he realizes it, like a flood of frustration. He wants to weave their mana together in the space between them, he wants to feel the way their magic ebbs and flows. He wants to breathe in the exchange. He wants to exhale everything else. Replace it the bad with the good.

One thing at a time, he has been telling himself this whole time, but it isn't one thing at a time. All of them are happening, piling up, mixing together, and he hates to admit how helpless he feels in the wake of it.

He could not even save one stupid girl, and now all he wants is for her to talk to him about what she thinks will happen, because right or wrong, the clinical way she dissects it all has always soothed him.

But even if he asked her what she thought of these things, this time she would not talk. He's sure of it. He can feel the walls she has up around her own mana, as thick and tall as the walls around Demacia. Always the child of her kingdom, he supposes.

She won't let him circulate their mana, like blood from one chamber of the heart to the other, but she holds his hand, even if she looks pained by it.

"Ezreal," Lux prompts him, and he realizes that his eyes are closed. It's startling all over again to see her with the wrong colors, to see her in dark and violets.

He heaves a sigh from his chest; it doesn't make him feel any lighter. He repeats, "Hey, Lux."

"I need you to make sure Quinn is safe," she says, firmly.

There are immediate questions. Why does she think she can ask him favors? Give him commands? More importantly, what right does she have to ask for someone's safety when she's part of what puts
them in danger?

What makes Quinn more worthy of saving than anyone else? Than him?

But Ezreal meant it when he told her he was stupid. The stupidest prodigy ever, he imagines. At the very least, beneath all his frustration, there is a small but solid core of pride in this.

"Yeah," he says. "Can do."

When Lux lets go of him, she cradles her hand in the other, holding it against her chest like it's been injured, as if she's been holding it in a flame this whole time. "Good. I'll see you again."

Ezreal stretches his arms behind him, leaning back. "Can't stay away, huh?"

She rolls her eyes, over-familiar and strangely casual.

He thinks of following her as she leaves, but cannot bring himself to do it. There's no telling the danger he could be walking into if he follows her - especially if she's right about being watched.

Besides, he has a mission.

Chapter End Notes

... gestures...... life.... you know.........

End Notes

this is self indulgence at its purest

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