

Positive

As you walk along the track through the trees the seasons shift around you, the woodlands slipping deeper into autumn; the sudden chill makes you think wistfully of hearth and bonfire to the point that you believe you can smell wood smoke in the damp air and hear the crackle of flames. While in theory you should be doing the rounds in the hall proper with the other notables; you know full well that the real celebration has moved out here to the courtyard and the bonfire. Notwithstanding the fact that the only person who could rebuke you snuck out here (as much as she can sneak these days) some time ago.

It still surprises you that Belladonna is not only a mother, but a mother with a son old enough to be getting married. The last couple of decades have been busy enough that time has passed you by to an extent; always off travelling to new nations uncovered in the Kingdom's ongoing expansion or helping to smooth ruffled feathers between existing allies. The concept of applying for a position on the Kingdom's ambassadorial staff had never occurred to you when you were young but you're glad you did it. The fact that you only did so because you saw that you could do it on one of the many patrols sent to Mad Ox over the years to fix its tendency to break Time in unusual ways is not something mentioned outside of close family and friends; after all, no one would be comfortable with an Ambassador at Large who could see through time, even as a one-off.

In fact, on reflection, this night might well have been that night you saw all those years ago. The thought makes you smile, something not unnoticed by Tinker and Belladonna having a 'girly talk' (as much as either of them have ever been capable of such things) over to one side. Belladonna had jokingly asked you again earlier in the day, while you were helping with a matter of protocol, if you were going to ask Tinker the question while she was still around to see you two get married. The ring box is a familiar weight in your coat pocket, but there's still plenty of time.

Good old Belladonna. If it hadn't been for her, you probably would have been stuck in a dead end posting in the Defenders for the rest of your career, even with a future to aim for - she was the one who encouraged you to try for the role in the first place. She was also the one who bullied you into continuing in those difficult early days - so many of the Kingdom's allies had issues with mages, metal-users, non-humans, males or any combination of the above, but she was the one who pulled strings and got you assigned permanently to Bader for a few years while you found your feet. By the time you got reassigned to the general ambassadorial pool, with a command to go out there and explore the wider world, you were more than ready for everything you faced.

Neither of you had known how perfect the timing was; it was about then that the Seven Houses had decided to make a more formal alliance with the Kingdom and they wouldn't take to any diplomat who wasn't an elf. After that the tiny nation of Brumborg surfaced with its vast magical reserves and where nobility was determined by magical strength - you'd taken Tinker with you on that assignment and she'd nearly managed to become their queen...

"Right." Tinker stands and beckons peremptorily in your direction. "You, me, that way. We have something to talk about." Just behind her Belladonna gives you a gesture that either means "ask her!" or "beg forgiveness!" - you think the former seems more likely with the grin behind it. Fingering the box in your pocket, and with one last look of encouragement from Belladonna, you follow Tinker as she disappears through the archway to the night garden. A fitful gust of wind blows smoke from the bonfire across your path, momentarily blocking your vision and making you cough - when the air clears you're back on the track to Mad Ox.

Neutral

You take a moment to rest, stretching out tired muscles, listening to the chatter of the patrol. The smell of unexpected smoke catches your attention; you turn and watch Warden Sergeant Jackory walk towards you, carrying a slightly smoky torch to help in the predawn darkness. The two of you are off to run a squad of new recruits through their paces. Your role is to take them through a training regime to get them used to facing opponents with access to Fire, and to get them comfortable fighting with the help of Earth, while Jackory is here to fix up their wounds as required. You've run recruits through this course together a few times, and while there's always a few injuries no one has yet been seriously hurt - and the benefits have definitely outweighed the potential drawbacks.

You reach the barracks, stopping momentarily to cast up a suitably impressive Flame Blade, and gesture to Drill Sergeant Mags to wake the recruits. He marches in, shouting as loudly as only a Drill Sergeant can, and you follow behind leaving Jackory waiting outside. With Mags' prior agreement you help hurry up a couple of the slower risers by shoving the flaming spear into the field of their sleepy vision, making them start or freeze according to their natures. Before long the line of bleary-eyed recruits stands at attention; you stand back while the Sergeant finishes berating them.

"By the end of the day even you snivelling maggots won't flinch away from an opponent's flame blade, you'll have tasted the fire and be stronger for it. Now pay attention or I'll burn you somewhere that my fellow Sarge here ain't gonna want to heal."

The warm ups begin as usual; you take the time to go from recruit to recruit commenting on their stances, eyeing up those who are confident, those who are cocky and those who are clearly just the poor souls Mags has chosen to single out for special treatment. One or two of them show real promise and you make note of the names to report to the local commander when you're done.

The first round of the training proper sees the recruits attacking each other with training blunts empowered with your Flame Blades while protected with your Fire Skins. In spite of the fact that the flame can't hurt them several of them still shy away when the flaming weapons are swung at them; most soon get it though, especially after Mags borrows your spear and lays about one of the more panicky ones to teach him a lesson. Once the three of you are satisfied that the recruits are ready to take it up a notch you pull back your protective magics and the recruits get a taste for the actual heat of the flame. Jackory, by now an old hand at this as much as you are, steps in and out only when really needed; soon the recruits are making a game of it, challenging the others to see who can stand the most burns before calling the Warden Sergeant over to help.

As Jackory works his way around, you and Mags prepare for the next exercise. Drill Sergeant Mags summons each recruit over in turn; each gets given a casting of Strength, then they're made to run the assault course. Several them underestimate their magically enhanced strength with hilarious consequences, especially the inevitable poor lad who pulls himself so forcibly over the wall that he goes flying over the top and ends up hitting the ground face first on the other side, but as always they all seem to be enjoying the increased physical endurance that comes with their enhanced strength.

The last set of exercises are about getting them used to relying on Endurance to allow them to take hits they'd otherwise have to block or parry in order to get into a better position for a strike and that feeling of invulnerability goes with it - and, more importantly, getting used to when it suddenly fades from use mid-combat and changing back to a more defensive style. Things are going well until one recruit takes a hard hit to the arm just after his Endurance has faded. The empowered mace flies from his hand and lands on one of the straw pallets from the assault course, which immediately catches alight. You rush forward to grab the weapon and help put it out, the thick smoke forcing you to cover your face as you struggle to breathe. The air clears unexpectedly; you lower your arm to find yourself once more standing amongst the patrol.

Traumatic

Marching along, your attention drifts to the end of your spear; you watch as the magical burning flame flickers and changes momentarily, twisting to other powers then back to flame in the blink of an eye. The snap of the air freezing to ice, the crackle of lightning, glowing like the sun or suddenly cast in shadow. Never anything but flame when you fight, but in these quiet moments its nature - presumably a reflection of other possible yous - is mercurial and uncertain.

You're completely caught off guard when it suddenly starts belching forth a thick black smoke; you choke and cough and try to wave it away. The wind changes direction, thankfully, and the smoke from the burning buildings of Stonehaven blows away from you again. Long line of citizens are frantically working a bucket chain, trying to save what they can from the blaze. You and the patrol you march with have an entirely different goal, the source of the fire and the recent violence and trouble in town. You look up and stare at it looming over the town, safe from the flames on the small hill; the orphanage.

An Anarchy cult has apparently taken it over; the children have all been corrupted to the Path, but there's still hope that they can be redeemed. You've been sent in as part of a special task force determined to be suitable for the role because of your history. - after all, if anyone here is unlikely to use excessive force against children and try to save them it's you. Or, at least, that's what you keep telling yourself...unfortunately for you the makeup of the rest of the patrol doesn't quite fit with that notion, particularly the only recently reinstated High Wizard Traci. Her presence has been especially unpleasant so far as she's been eyeing you up the whole way here - and the way she shifted under your hands when you gave her the Iron Skin just doesn't bear thinking about.

The Pathfinders manage to breach the walls of the orphanage - and, on cue, Jed immediately gets caught in a nasty trap. While your Endurance has prevented the physical and very pointy teeth of the bear trap from doing any real harm, it could do nothing about the miraculous terror tied to it that also pins him in place. When Pathfinder Sergeant Lilah shouts a warning you redouble your efforts to get to Jed before anything else can.

What greets you is the sight of a horde of small human children - the youngest at your best guess 3 or 4, the oldest not yet into puberty. Each carries a wicked looking weapon as best they are able, the smallest practically dragging them along the floor behind them, all running towards Jed. You freeze, memories of the Prince's Vale welling up in your mind, unable to think of anything but the bodies of those children breaking beneath your magically enhanced blows.

"Do something you stupid man, protect ME!" Traci's shrill voice shocks you out of your reverie; you step in front of her, technically doing your duty, content to let Marshal Tennent and Warden Elan deal with the children with carefully placed stunning strikes. With mounting horror you watch as the flat of the Marshal's blade bounces ineffectively off the skull of the toddler, the children's own blades cutting through the patrol's protections as if they weren't even there. The anarchy cult have clearly done something; you frantically try to think of a way to disable the children without killing them

"HIT THEM!" Traci shrieks. You hesitate, unwilling to hurt them but equally unwilling to let your fellow patrollees die. "Why are you just standing there? Go on HIT THEM! Do something you stupid, STUPID MAN!" Traci continues to shout in your ear even as she takes shelter behind you.

You're about to turn and rebuke her when you hear her mutter something; suddenly your legs and arms begin moving of their own accord. You can do nothing but watch in horror as the cold chill of the magic in your mind makes you strike out with your full force. The toddler's head flies clean off its shoulders; a little girl with her hair in pigtails is nearly split in two, the body erupting into flame. The same miracle that is making the children's weapons so deadly seems to be having the same effect when you strike at them in earnest. Every strike that

connects is accompanied by a matching blow of pain and fire to yourself, but your protections hold - leaving you feeling only bruised, not disabled. *Shunk*. You stab and a small boy slumps over the end of your spear. *Thump*. A girl's rib cage shatters, spraying gore. *Fwoosh*. Another child goes up in flames. It's taking only seconds, but each cut, each hit feels like it takes an eternity, an eternity punctuated by the children's screams of pain and terror in that instant before death when their minds are briefly once more their own. The sound tears you apart in ways your Retributed attacks never could.

Ten seconds and your mind is once more your own. Ten long seconds, and the broken dismembered bodies of thirty children are scattered around you. You stand there stunned, unable to react, manic laughter emanating from somewhere deep in the orphanage. Elan and Tennent are focussed on healing their own wounds, trying to catch their breath, but you are just numb, barely able to grasp what's just happened. Then you feel it; bony fingers grab your butt and squeeze.

"See what you can do when you put your mind to it?" Tracy grins lasciviously. "Come on then, no point standing around there's work to be done. COME ON!"

She begins to march away, heading for the breach; the wind changes direction again, the smoke quickly obscuring the orphanage grounds and filling your eyes. You cough and gag - whether from the smoke or revulsion or both you can't say. As it clears, still feeling sick to the pit of your stomach, you find yourself once more looking at the Mad Ox patrol.

R

The patrol passes a patch of marshy ground - it wasn't there a minute ago, and it won't be there after you've passed, you know this, but it's still quite interesting to watch. Especially when the marsh births a small ball of gas which, ignited by a stray spark, lets off faint wisps of odd-smelling smoke. You turn away from the smoke caused by the inevitable fireworks let off by Biscuit in an unwatched moment; it is just another background annoyance to be ignored. Out in the ring Skulk is juggling; the items in his hands changing with Breeze's whims. Half the 'fun' of Skulk's performance is apparently watching him not quite dropping the more random ones, although where Breeze got a live swordfish from is still a matter of mystery. You get on with your preparations, making sure that there's nothing on the plain grey bodysuit that can catch on the equipment, running through your series of limbering up exercises.

Hattie - no, Miss Worthington, she's only Hattie to her 'Professors' - drops by to let you know that the rigging is all checked and ready to go. She asks offhand if you'd consider getting engaged, but you know better than to accept - you saw what happened to the one punter daft enough to go for it. Something about earning a badge? Either way, you're neither interested nor suicidal - and you have a show to perform.

Skulk finishes up his act by throwing the pile of vegetables, knives, small tools and assorted shiny things high in the air - where they stick in the shape of a giant letter S. The Unwedded Brides run in with a large sheet and catch the assortment as it falls while the crowd cheers - that's your cue to head up the ladder backstage. "Spoons, potatoes, and distinguished guests!" you hear Biscuit cry from the ring, "For your delight and eructation, please make absolutely no noise for - the Grey Warden!"

You're used to the title enough not to wince, keeping your expression neutral and focussed. After all, you are focussed - the audience awaits. Aurinyan brings the spotlight around to your platform, and with no fanfare or flourish you unhook the first trapeze and begin. Each swing, each tumble is perfectly executed, the pinnacle of the art. You perform in complete silence, your helpers in their blacks barely a shadow in the tent roof. Biscuit and Breeze had once tried to insist on sequins and feathers and magic and colour, but you had refused - this was art, and as such should be treated with the respect and solemnity it deserves.

Backwards somersault, flip, flip, swing, pause and balance - the only music is the beat in your head as you count off. Even the audience are silent now as they should be - it always takes a few minutes for people to get the idea, even with Biscuit telling them. One or two forget themselves as you execute a particularly tricky manoeuvre involving split second timing and a boost by a briefly-appearing Breeze but it barely registers on your consciousness.

You nail the final landing back on the platform - like every other trick - perfectly. Without a word or a pose you simply turn and start to climb down the ladder - the crowd, finally realising they're allowed to make noise again, go wild, but all the applause you need is the knowledge of a job well done. You head out the back of the tent to the pump to strip down and clean the sweat off, once again wishing that someone would think to put some kind of tent around it to make it easier to get out of your bodysuit in private.

Of course, when you're halfway undressed is the moment when Biscuit finds more fireworks.

With a muttered oath you throw yourself - perfectly - over and behind a pile of boxes, clouds of smoke rolling over where you were just standing. Coming out of the tuck and tumble you realise that the boxes are part of the woodland and the patrol are waiting...