

Positive

You start to wander away from the patrol trying to work out if the temporal distortions contain a physical distance component, looking for the changes (and you do see them) as you take each step. A scream behind you makes you stop and turn around.

The young woman - someone you recognise as a student in the Circle - screams again excitedly as you catch sight of her. She turns and glees excitedly with her friends before she comes running up clutching a book to her chest like a talisman. Not just any book - your book.

Breathlessly she says, "I didn't think I'd like get to see you here! I'm like your biggest fan! Would you like sign my copy of your book?"

You take the book, 'The Elements of Fundamental Consciousness by Thalassa Penderyn' with a smile, open it and start to sign.

"The way you like proved that there's an aspect of elemental magic behind like each emotion, and how that's like linked to the creation of the form spells, and like the difference between elves and sprites was just brilliant. I must have like read it like fifty times, it's why I like joined the Circle and not the Towers."

You hand the book back and smile and apologise that you're in too much of a hurry to chat right now. Your self-proclaimed biggest fan looks like she's already ready to pass out in happiness and lets you go without fuss.

Lasdathren is waiting for you at the ritual circle. It's time to put the theory into practise.

Entering the great domed building, you nod a greeting to the assembled watchers and your ritual team, your old supervisor among them. You collect the ritual foci from a beaming Lasdathren kissing him on the cheek in the process, and start placing them out on the required positions. Each one represents one of the four elements, with another matching four to balance out the opposing forces. When you're happy that each is placed exactly as required, you ask the assembled watchers to take a step back and then direct each of your ritual assistants to their correct positions.

You feel your heart beat nervously in your chest as you begin to draw forth the power from each of the elements. It's a slow and painstaking process to weave them together; slowly ever so slowly the elemental essence of a blank mind begins to take it's form in front of you. You barely hear the appreciative gasps and whispers from the gallery. Ten minutes in, the sweat forming on your brow, you start the final incantation to transfer the Domination from your mind to the blank.

Each word is a fight to say as if the Domination is fighting against your efforts, but you've had a lifetime of being stubborn to draw upon. Finally as you utter the last word you feel yourself grow light, then there's a brief flash of blinding pain followed by blessed relief. The blank mind flashes darkly for a moment before harmlessly dissipating. Joy fills you as you realise Styx's influence is well and truly broken.

You scream with elation and surprise as you feel Lasdathren wrap his arms around you, the sound echoing loudly in the domed chamber. You turn around to face him and find yourself back among the patrol with the Domination once more rooted in your mind.

Neutral

The shifting nature of Time on the local area is definitely having some odd side-effects on reality. As you walk along, it's possible to see trees popping into and out of existence as the conditions that caused them to grow and fall change from moment to moment. One particularly unfortunate change causes two trees to start rubbing against each other in a breeze you can't feel; a weird screeching, screaming noise issues forth from the branches behind you. You turn and glare at the Guard noisily dragging a portable barricade into place to partially block the tunnel; he has the decency to look embarrassed at the screech of wood and metal on stone, but the barricade stays put despite all assurances it won't be needed. You can understand why Churchill's putting some security measures in place, though not as many as Brom would have wanted - after all, people can change a lot in ten years, especially if they've been studying under some barely known beings of great power - but in your heart you know he's being silly.

Lasdathren puts a calming hand on your shoulder, smiling at you from the depths of his hood. Since Cassandra's message a week ago - *They're coming home in a week, be ready* - both of you have been making plans for the imminent reunion. It's only because you know him so well that you can see that Lasdathren is as excited as you are, for all that he's opened up a little over the last decade - he just hides it a lot better than you. Tia has been left in the care of friends for now, just to be on the safe side.

To occupy yourself you wonder how your friends are going to react to the changes around the Shift site. It's been slow going, but in the last few years particularly a lot of work has been carried out on the assumption that once the Kingdom has its own Shifters then 'trade routes' can be opened up to other planes. Where once stood the old archaeological site there's now something more like a port, complete with warehouses and inns. A permanent garrison has been set up to guard both the temple from the Kingdom and vice versa (a lesson bitterly learnt after that nasty business in 115AE), alongside small workshops for all of the research-minded or otherwise nosy Guilds. Mayor Loxley has even been negotiating for the construction of a canal to connect the site to the White River to improve the flow of potential traffic in and out.

Your body reacts to the old familiar whooshing noise of an incoming Shift before your mind does - everyone, yourself included, flattens themselves along the sides of the Shift chamber and covers their ears. All are equally surprised when, instead of the expected flash and crack of thunder, your friends appear in the centre of the circle with only a faint pop - evidence, perhaps, of how much they've learnt. More evidence still is in the indefinable sense that, for want of a better description, they've all grown up while they were away. Every single one of them has a bearing of calm, centred confidence that they didn't have before, a feeling that you could use them as mooring posts for continents. Laria, Laric, Marius, Crovax and Failbhe, all of them have that agelessness you previously only associated with the Durae'el, the last decade having touched even the humans only lightly.

Ignoring Churchill's earlier instructions to give him a chance to assess them before approaching you go eagerly to meet them, Lasdathren hot on your heels. In a moment of unusual insight you go to greet Failbhe, Crovax and Marius first, allowing Lasdathren the time to greet his cousins in peace. Up close you can see in all of their eyes just how much your old comrades and friends have changed - these are the eyes of people who have seen many things and learnt from many experiences, and while all of them are happy to see Sentrus again you get the feeling that 'home' is now somewhere out among the planes.

Lasdathren tugs on your sleeve, and he, Laric and Laria draw you into a group hug. Behind you you can distantly hear Churchill utter quiet orders to stand down - someone must have started to remove the barricades, as once again there's a screeching screaming noise that sets your teeth on edge. You feel the pressure of Laric and Laria's arms lift from you and look up to see the patrol waiting for you.

Traumatic

As Orchid brings the party to a halt a strange plant catches your eye. Bending down to get a closer look you realise it's flickering between two time streams; in one it is bloom, in the other it wilts and dies. You reach over and carefully stroke its petals; somehow they feel both alive and dead at the same time, your fingers struggling to understand,

Then you hear the scream.

Standing quickly from your flowerbeds you stare at the rear of your Heusenbergh townhouse recognising the sound of Tia in terror. You push through the door, rush across the kitchen and up the stairs, heart pounding in your chest; the screams are coming from the room you share with Lasdathren. A strong smell of blood catches in your throat making you gag, slowing you until another scream rekindles your haste.

You open the door and are confronted with the sight of Lasdathren spreadeagled on blood soaked bed sheets, a huge gash down his torso, his vital organs seemingly shredded and a wicked looking knife stabbed through his exposed heart. Tia screams again, tearing you from your horror; she looks so tiny curled up in terror in the corner of the room. You rush over to her and pull her close, keeping both her and yourself from the sight, struggling not to retch from the smell.

She says something quietly and you feel your body suddenly go icy cold, frozen in an instant. She slips away from you, revealing the manacles she had hidden behind her, and locks them over your wrists. As you start to move she casts again, using the magics you taught her to hold you in place. This time you hear the sound of a knife being pulled from flesh, and feel searing pain as she slices through one of your hamstrings in a single savage blow.

Crying out you collapse to the floor, staring up at the wicked grin on Tia's face; a small click behind you makes you start and look around wildly. The door has been closed behind you, and standing in front of it is a woman with a bow casually slung over one shoulder and a man with a slightly crazy gleam in his eyes. They both salute over your head, and for a mad second you think they're saluting Tia.

Turning back to her you see the other occupant of the room - with mounting horror you recognise the red gills and regal, arrogant bearing. Lord Tarantraal places one hand on Tia's shoulder and says, "I should thank you for bringing my newest General to me. For teaching her such useful skills, for letting her see your backwards ignorant excuse of a Kingdom."

He kisses Tia on the forehead like a father kisses his daughter. "Tell me again that phrase that marks this creature as our toy."

Tia smiles, stares you straight in the eye and says, "Pin your ears back..."

As your screams fill your ears, the room becomes forest once more, and surrounded by the patrol again you scream and scream and scream...

Ridiculous

While the changing landscape around you is something that definitely needs to be stopped - if only to find out what's happened to the inhabitants of Mad Ox - your inner researcher is still intrigued and begging to be allowed to go and investigate properly. A breather gives you an opportunity to take a look at a bird that seems to be stuck in one place as each time it makes any progress through the air it gets reset back a few inches; suddenly behind you you hear a scream as a log vanishes unexpectedly from under Faliece.

You immediately head over from the counter to where one of your apprentices is apologising profusely to Pathfinder Sergeant Dem; you can see why he's screaming, given the mess that's been made of his hair... Poor little Ti'ner is sent to the back room to calm down while you work your magic, your scissors flashing in the sun. Between your attentions and the generous discount you give to the Defenders as a token of your appreciation for all of their hard work - it's only fair given the dangers they face - he's calmed down and sent away with a smile on his face.

If anyone had asked you what you would be doing with your life a couple of decades earlier you would never have included hairdressing as an option on the list. Head of a research team in the Circle, maybe. Developer of new spells, perhaps. Hero of the Kingdom - well, a girl could dream. Hairdresser would have been somewhere underneath Illuminati, Marshal or Warden.

Then again, if they'd asked you any time after that patrol to Mad Ox, you would have at least considered it. You'd seen it was a possibility, and while you'd rejected it out of hand at the time...something about it had lingered in the back of your mind. The Thalassa of the future had had a sense of calm, practical, enthusiastic purpose that the Thalassa of the past just couldn't match. When more and more of your time had been taken up with looking after Tia, and less and less on patrolling and researching, you'd reached a point where you'd had a desire to try something new - so you'd tried, and discovered to your delight that you'd had a hidden talent with scissors and comb that you'd never even dreamed of.

The thought of that memory makes you suddenly thoughtful - and then you grin. You remember the Sergeant's tantrum from that vision, and that means...you're about to do some of your best work to date, and on the people you love to boot. On cue, Laria, Laric and Lasdathren walk into the shop, Tia in tow. Like a miracle it appears that all of your apprentices have cleared their chairs of customers at once; directing the four of them to sit down. You call everyone into action with a double-clap, even Ti'ner emerging from the back room to help wash Tia's hair.

Each of your friends and your daughter has their own signature style, but your squad of young men and women know exactly what prep work each of them needs for you to work your magic. Tia gets a complex cut that highlights the beauty of her high cheekbones and gills with subtle highlights to bring out her eyes. Laric's hair is trickier to work with, inclined to be flyaway - your secret serums make short work of that, and you pattern in white and black streaks forming them into twin braids to restrain the rest. Laria's hair soon reflects the brilliance of her personality - something not dimmed by her inclination to Balance - with glossy dyed rainbows that shimmer in the sunlight. Lasdathren's is much subtler, as he likes it - patterns of colour barely shades off what's natural that change depending on the light like a butterfly's wing.

When everyone is complete you finally allow them to see what you've done. While all are pleased Laria makes up for the quiet appreciation of Laric and Lasdathren by hugging you and squealing loudly, bouncing up and down and carrying you with her. The world suddenly shifts; Laria and your studio are gone, and the patrol to Mad Ox is back.