

The Invigilator

This is a short story I wrote over the last couple of days in celebration of exam season. Enjoy!

The Invigilator sat facing a wall, eyes closed, watching every move in the pub behind her. In a place like that, there were plenty of eyes to look through, although the drunk ones made it harder. She had been on this particular case for two days, and there was a deadline. A certain valuable tome had been stolen from a certain Departmental office—she had not been told which office because the Faculty protect their own from outside scrutiny while viciously punishing incompetence internally—and her job was to retrieve it. The Deans had made it known that missing the deadline would not be tolerated, so she was starting to be concerned. The intolerance of the Deans could result in death.

A short while earlier, she had been walking through a rainy day in the Conjuror's Quarter. It was exactly the kind of place where she didn't want to be tracking one, specific object. The narrow, winding street was littered with all manner of useless junk, mostly furniture: couches, tables, endless broken chairs, tarnished goblets and plates. Townies picked through it, mostly for the firewood. The buildings on either side of the narrow road were covered in random adornments from all over the known world, and every half a minute or so, some new object would crash down onto the pile, usually breaking in the process, and a smug giggle would be heard from whatever undergraduate had conjured it. They called it "studying."

A moment later, a fight broke out. A dark woman, probably from across the western seas, and a heavy man who looked to be from the Eastern Empire battled over some allegedly valuable bauble. He had two shining, bronze fists, and she was throwing lightning bolts. Her aim was terrible, and if not for the rain, she'd have started a fire by now. A thin circle of speculators materialized around them as well as a few undergraduates watching through shutters and from rooftops.

"This won't do," she muttered, as she approached the fight. The Invigilator wouldn't have cared one way or the other—it wasn't her job—but they were using Arts ("flash" the townies called it), and stopping *that* was her job. She wasn't a

large woman, but a strong shout can end a lot of grief, so she pulled back her cloak and yelled in a voice much louder than her own, "Hold! Invigilator!"

Anyone who knew anything about the Academy should have known that her presence meant the fight was over, and a few did. They were the smart ones, the ones who ran for their lives. The ones who stayed could bear witness.

The fighters continued. They were in a patch of upturned tables, dodging around the legs. He was bashing them to pieces as she threw showers of sparks.

The Invigilator pushed through the junk, her legs batting huge oak chairs and desks aside with no visible effort. This brass-fists saw and understood. He lowered his arms and shot a look of warning at the lightning-thrower, but she didn't see it or didn't care because a moment later, a bright arc struck his arm just below the elbow.

That's when the Invigilator threw a wave of force that knocked them both on their backs. "That arm will probably never work right again," she said. "Let's make this even." She glanced at the lightning thrower, and the sparks guttered. Then her hand turned pale, and then grey. It would wither and die soon within a quarter of an hour. "Senate policy: non-students shall not learn Arts. That means no flash."

She leaned in closer, "Now, tell me where you learned this..." The lightning thrower's mind was racing, hard to read, so the Invigilator turned to brass-fists. She remembered his experiences. An undergraduate combat magician had taught him. He wanted a sparring partner, and townies are expendable. She knew the student's face and his name, now, which meant she could report him to his department. Not what she came for, but useful.

She turned back to lightning-thrower. "A little calmer now?"

"Clemency! I have information!"

"I'm sure you do..." The Invigilator pushed through the panicked thoughts and saw an older woman, a Faculty member if she wasn't mistaken, teaching her a few rudiments of invocation. This could be touchy. Depending on the department, her Chair might want to know about it, or they might want to make sure no one knew about it. She'd ask Chief Invigilator Migwi. He was savvier about politics.

"No!" the lightning-thrower said, "Not that! Something else. I'll share it all, I

won't hold back. It's worth more than a hand."

"Fine. Show me."

The Invigilator saw two groups of undergraduates. This woman didn't remember the exact words, but they were haggling over something. Three impressions float out of the garble: "stolen," "Faculty," and "office."

"Why yes, this is useful." The flesh of the hand was started to dry out and flake off. Then she looked lightning-thrower in the eye. "A fair deal," she said. The woman screamed in pain as life flowed back into her wrist, palm, and fingers. She inspected it—scars, a hunk of missing flesh—but it could feel again, and she could wiggle her fingers. That was enough to be thankful.

The Invigilator had stood, turned, and was walking away when she reached out and found the parts of the fighters' minds that had learned these Arts. She gripped those parts and pulled them out, root and stem, not particularly caring what else she removed in the process. Both of them screamed, collapsed, and starting gasping for air. They might recover their wits in a few days.

The Invigilator pushed through another pile of broken junk and leaned against a pillar. She called up her scariest childhood memory—walking through a web and feeling a spider slowly crawling up her bare neck—and projected it outwards. No garbage picker would get through that.

Then, she felt for Chief Invigilator Migwi's presence, nudged it gently, and waited. A moment later, he appeared, visible only to her.

"Invigilator Nikhita Nanda," he said with a wide grin, "forgive my whispering. I am being kept waiting outside of a Deans' meeting. They are taking particular interest in our missing object, and I believe they are about to ask about your progress, so your timing is fortuitous. Time being in short supply, I believe they are also about to authorize me to tell you more about what we are looking for."

She was silent for a moment. The Deans were taking a special interest in *her*. That was rarely a good sign.

"Yes," she finally said. "Good," she blinked several times. "Chief Invigilator, I've just found a lead—"

“Not like the last two, I hope? They resulted in recovering the bodies of seven undergraduates,” he whispered. “Dead and useless. The Deans would not be pleased if that were to happen again, and I would not want to see their displeasure visited upon one of *my* Invigilators.”

“I don’t know, Chief Invigilator,” she said, “not yet, anyway. “I saw two groups of students in an orphan’s mind—”

“Why are you chasing orphans?”

“Flash fighters, Chief Invigilator. I couldn’t ignore it. And,” she said, “they were both able to identify their teachers. I’ll need to speak to you about them in more detail.”

“Ah.” He understood. He would help her with the politics. “And?”

“And one of them saw something else. Two undergrad gangs haggling over something. She remembers them referring to a faculty member’s office.”

“This was a *clear* memory?” he whispered.

She pursed her lips. Of course he could tell it wasn’t. “Not entirely, Chief Invigilator.”

“But it’s all you have.”

“Yes.”

“Fine. I can sell that to the Deans. They rarely question what I say. I’m too far beneath them.” He pondered for a moment. “Ah! But the details, Invigilator Nanda, the details that they are about to tell me to relay to you should prove quite useful. The object is a book, a *new* book, not from the Library, and not a book of Arts. I think I know what that means, and I suspect you do too.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Yes, of course. End of semester.”

“Indeed,” he whispered. “You were always clever.” All Invigilators are clever, but he really did mean it. “So, a new book and faces you can recognize. This should be enough for you to make your next move?”

“Yes, Chief Invigilator.”

“Good,” he said, grinning again. “You should proceed then, Invigilator Nanda, especially as I’m certain I’ll be called into this meeting at some point. Surely, they’ll eventually realize my time is not totally worthless.”

“Yes, Chief Invigilator.” She felt his presence recede, and then he was gone.

She closed her eyes and examined the woman’s memory, again. The students were dressed in colourful clothes and fancy hair, and they had a certain melodramatic swagger about them. Illusionists. She was certain. They’d be on their Street of Glamours if they were anywhere. And she could track a new book, written by a Faculty member, especially now that she knew where to look and what it probably was. It would leave an impression. Retrieving it two days early would not mean much to the Deans, but Chief Invigilator Migwi would know. And so would she.

She let her fear projection drop and heard several garbage pickers groan with relief. Perhaps it had been overkill. Then she glanced to her right, leaned forwards, and ran up the street faster than any human had any right to move. A few moments later, she was in the illusionist’s ward. Day had turned to night, the cobblestones appeared to be made of gold and emeralds, and the street lamps contained naked, gyrating fire elementals. At the Academy, they taught that good illusions were subtle, inconspicuous. Off-campus, those rules did not apply.

“Die, you squirmy bastards!” The yell came from above, and whoever said it definitely meant it. Two students locked in a grapple tumbled down a sloped roof. One had snakes for arms and brown feathery wings. The other was surrounded by an aura of bright, flickering lights.

The Invigilator recognized them, not individually, but the gangs they belonged to: the Lakesiders and the Magic Lanterns. They’d been in a hot-and-cold war for years. The two students rolled off the roof and hit the cobblestone in a wet thud, and topped moving. It was proper Arts, not flash, so the Invigilator took note of it but kept moving.

She listened, and looked, and smelled, and felt, and after a few seconds, caught an impression of the book. It was in a pub. Of course. Because that’s what undergraduates do when they’re not studying or panicking about studying. And since she was on the Street of Glamours, she knew the pub: the Blue Ruby. It had been in possession of the Illusionists since they’d won the street from the

Elementalists, back when it was the Street of Fire. Hence the demons in the lampposts. The Illusionists' way of thumbing their noses.

That's how she ended up sitting by herself, facing a wall, watching the pub through other people's eyes. She caught whiffs of the book. It was near, but the scent was muffled, so she waited.

She was nursing a third drink when she saw one of them, one of the faces from the lightning-thrower's memory: a young woman with pale skin and bright-blue eyes. In fact, as luck would have it, the Invigilator was seeing that face through the eyes of someone who was watching blue-eyes very closely. A contact, then. Maybe even a fence.

Blue-eyes walked directly to her viewer's table, and the Invigilator watched through yet more eyes as the two huddled together. She listened, now, through nearby ears, but heard only gibberish. It was a simple but effective technique. First-years used it for privacy. It wasn't hard to push through, but the Invigilator had to be careful not to let them feel her doing it.

"I don't have it with me, darlin'. I'm not stupid." The other one was older, grizzled. Not grey-haired, but grey-skinned, grey-souled. Most likely, she was a freelancer, one of the many people who'd found a way of making a living in a city run by gangs of half-trained sorcerers. "A lot of people have been killed for this book."

"Well, they were idiots. And they're going to drive up the curve!" blue-eye said. "But whatever! I'm not going to try to kill you. I just want the book."

"Half now, and half when I show you to it," grey said. "It's standard."

"Half a fortune is a *small* fortune! Show it to me, then you get your money. All of it."

Grey sized up the younger woman. She had the harried look of an overworked student: bitten nails, jittery movements, huge bags under her eyes.

"Okay, you don't look like a killer to me. Follow me out, but try to relax." The two of them headed for the door.

The Invigilator left a very strong impression that she was still sitting at that table,

drinking that drink, and not, in fact, standing up and following blue-eyes and grey to wherever the book was. Illusionists might see through an illusion, but they weren't as adept at mind tricks. Grey followed blue, and the Invigilator followed them both.

Outside, grey reached up to a lamp-post and seemingly put her hand directly on a dancing fire-demon. There was no heat or smoke, of course, but the demon did struggle and curse. As she pulled it down, though, it turned into a book, the book, in fact.

"That's actually clever," blue-eyes said.

Grey narrowed her eyes at the girl.

The Invigilator smirked. It *had* been clever. It had kept her from going straight to the book. It also meant that she had to track them, which means she was about to punish them, though.

Grey held it up, well out of reach. "Take a look. Feast your eyes. This is it: the book!"

Blue-eyes studied it frantically, the decorations on the spine, the colour. Finally, "Oh thank God! That's it!"

"Yes," the Invigilator said, "it is."

Both of them froze. She was standing right next to them, literally close enough to smell her. Blue-eyes tried to run. "No," said the Invigilator, and the younger woman was petrified in place. She slowly tipped over and fell to the ground, stiff as a board.

Grey didn't run. She just crossed her arms. "Damn," she said. "She was going to give me enough to buy land, really set myself up!"

"You will be banished," the Invigilator said.

"I'd check with your Chief, first. You wouldn't want to go to all that trouble just to have to—"

"Banishment," she said again, the old woman shot into the air and out of the city in what, from the ground, looked like a gentle arc across the rainy sky.

The Invigilator knelt and touched the blue-eyed girl on the arm, and her body relaxed. "I will be contacting your supervisor," the Invigilator said. Blue-eyes curled into a foetal position and started sobbing.

The Invigilator opened the book, ostensibly to authenticate it, but really because she wanted to know if she and Migwi had guessed right. They had. Around final exams, books like these were stolen from Faculty offices and then recovered by Invigilators who were, of course, never thanked because doing so would acknowledge that the Faculty, despite their vast powers, had failed to protect them to begin with.

She looked down the neat rows of numbered exam questions. "All this just to pass finals" she said, loud enough for blue-eyes to hear. "Have you ever tried studying?" She didn't answer.

The Invigilator tucked the book under her arm and sped off to the Registrar's Office to file her report.