

Phoebe had to adjust to the dark interior of the adventurer's guild. The stone floor was cold, nor was there a hearth in the building where a fire could be had. Oil lamps were the only source of light in the large room. It felt claustrophobic anyway.

She felt Willa brush past her, the smirking woman ignoring the tense atmosphere, going towards the bar with confident steps. Ember and Mila entered as well, the heavy wooden door creaking before it shut, any fresh air that could've mixed with the stuffy sweat induced drunken mist masquerading as something breathable cut off from the interior of the old guild building.

Phoebe glanced at the patrons, a few of them passed out, one lying on the floor, occasionally twitching and murmuring something to himself.

[Axe Warrior – lvl 59]

She identified a few more, shifty sets of eyes meeting hers. Phoebe could identify them all. She didn't assume anyone here was competent enough to have an ability to hide their level. Though she didn't let her guard down, glancing at the wooden board where quests would usually be listed. There were no jobs there, either none available or everything already taken. Gesturing to the others, she joined Willa at the broad stone counter, colorful bottles of spirits set up on a wooden shelf fastened to the wall.

A burly man with gray hair and a deeply set frown steadied himself against the bar, his arms bare, a stained brown shirt covering his tanned chest. He was bald.

[Field Cook – lvl 42]

Is he the one?

Phoebe wanted to sign the others to check their backs but Willa already leaned against the counter with her back towards the wall. *Always ready for a fight.* She didn't deny that her teammate wanted those fights as well, but it was nice to know that Willa didn't overthink as much as she did. Mila stood close to her, Ember a little to the side with her eyes on the patrons as well.

Never seen a guild that was pretty much just a bar, Phoebe thought, wondering if perhaps this wasn't the original guild in Nara. The city was far too large for this to accommodate their adventurers. *Would they even have a need for a lot of adventurers? They're just confined in their walls, perfectly protected from monsters, and few would travel to the northern plains from here, surely.*

The cook said something, looking at her with black eyes. He obviously didn't give a shit about them, but he didn't seem outright hostile either. The problem was that she didn't speak the language.

"I don't speak Jissu," she said. "Are you the manager of this guild?"

He took in a noticeable breath. "I am. What do you want?"

"A drink would be nice," Willa said from the side. "Something that can cheer me up in this miserable shithole."

There she goes again.

To her surprise the man huffed in an amused manner.

“You can pay, I assume? Half the lot here are just waiting for a good time to rob the place,” he said. “Preference?”

“Strong,” Willa said with a broad grin, a silver piece in her hand a moment later. “Surprise me.”

He took a dark red bottle from the top shelf. “Four?”

“Aye, four,” Willa said, putting the silver down.

Phoebe watched as he filled four small shot glasses with the red liquid. “What brings you to Nara?”

Willa took three of them, putting one in front of Phoebe. “Last one’s for you.”

The man nodded and downed the shot, Willa did the same. First one, then the second.

Phoebe sniffed on the liquid before she downed it. Nothing worse than the poisons they had tried in the Headquarters.

One of the patrons murmured something in Jissu, spitting on the floor.

“You have something to say?” Willa asked.

“He is drunk,” the barkeep said.

“We’re just here to help out,” Phoebe said. “If there is anything a group of Sentinels could help with.” She gave him a long look.

He didn’t react.

The patron said something else, more hostile this time.

Phoebe could feel the tension rise, some of the people in the room shifting. She glanced back when Mila stepped over to the man and answered, in the local language too.

Two sentences, sharp words. She slapped him, the man nearly falling out of his chair, an adventurer twenty levels below her.

Phoebe watched with raised brows. Mila was usually quiet and subdued.

The small black haired battle healer shook her head and looked at the other patrons, some of them flinching. She turned back and walked to the bar, sitting down on a stool. Her hand trembled slightly.

Phoebe walked over, looking at her before she touched her shoulder. She signed a question.

Mila signed back. She was fine.

The barkeep watched it all happen, taking another bottle, this one a dark shade of green. He filled a small glass and set it in front of Mila, saying two words in Jissu.

She didn’t answer but drank it, coughing thrice in turn.

He chuckled.

“There is no work here for you, didn’t you see the people outside?” the man said, leaning forward a little, both hands back on the counter.

“We’re here on the recommendation of someone we met recently,” Phoebe whispered.

“I don’t want any trouble,” he said.

Mila chuckled. “You don’t want any trouble? What did you do before the Empire removed your king?”

The man looked at her, holding eye contact. “I was a cook.”

“For soldiers,” Mila said.

He waited, then nodded. “Yes. For soldiers.”

She asked him a question, using the local tongue.

Phoebe could tell a few of the patrons twitched.

“What is done, is done,” the barkeep said. “You are free.”

Mila cursed, shaking her head. “We won’t find anything here.”

“Another drink?” he asked, looking at Willa.

She shrugged.

He grabbed the bottle, putting it on the counter. “There is nothing here for you. I suggest you go back to your spotless thriving cities in the south.”

“There are thriving cities in the north too,” Willa said with a grin, removing the cork from the bottle. “This one is the outlier.”

Phoebe glanced at the man’s hands when they came back to rest on the counter. She didn’t miss the piece of paper sticking out below his palm. For just a moment she glanced at him, the two of them locking eyes.

She reached over to grab the bottle, pouring herself another shot. “No need for healers in Nara,” she said, pushing the bottle towards him, their hands close for just a moment. Enough for her to take his message. Phoebe downed the shot and shook her head. “Until the drink runs out.”

Willa smiled, Phoebe shaking her head before she made for the exit.

“You didn’t pay,” the man said.

She took a piece of silver from one of her pouches, flinging it behind herself before she reached the door.

The first thing she did outside was take a deep breath.

“The air in that shithole,” Willa complained when she appeared a few meters away. “Fucking horrible.”

Mila cursed again.

“So what do we do? Cause some trouble? Pay someone?” Willa asked, hands on the back of her head.

Phoebe signed for information and stealth. “We could pay someone. But not here. People were way too tense. Let’s see who else we can talk to in this city.” She looked up at the walls, the suns already seeming low on the horizon despite the time. *Like a prison for those living at the bottom.* Looking

to the left, she saw one of the towers, the round structure reaching far towards the skies, impressive in its height.

She checked the few people nearby and made for a random street. The sunlight soon didn't reach as the stone structures grew in height. The open square near the entrance seemed more an exception than rule within the design of Nara.

Little noise came from the dark alleys, most of them entirely deserted. *More a ghost town than anything else*, she thought and gestured towards a nearby building. Phoebe checked behind them and teleported in, the others following a moment later.

It was dark inside, water dripping from the ceiling. Nobody had lived in here for some time.

"Whatcha find?" Willa asked.

Phoebe removed the small piece of paper from a pocket in her simple pants. She activated her main aura, vein like embers glowing on her arms as she unfolded the piece. "It's in Jissu."

Mila walked over. "The Bearclaw Den, with simple directions," she said and grinned. "Kram ret Baralia," she said. "Down with Baralia. This is it."

"So we have a location," Willa said with a smile.

"We investigate at night," Phoebe said. "Quietly. Hidden. And without starting a fight."

"We might not have a choice," Willa said.

"In that case we call for Aki," Phoebe said.

Willa sighed. "Come on. If we can take them, we can take them."

"Don't joke around. We're not in a known environment anymore, with other Sentinels," Phoebe said.

"Bold of you to assume our training excursions were in known places or controlled in any way. Other people will hesitate," Willa said.

"And you won't?" Phoebe asked. "Just because you're a Sentinel doesn't mean you're ready for everything. Don't get cocky."

Willa opened her mouth and shut it, glaring to the side.

"Objections?" Phoebe asked.

There were none.

Night fell over the ancient city, the group of Sentinels stirring as they prepared to investigate the Bearclaw Den.

Phoebe took in a deep breath. She brushed away the sweat on her brow, the dense houses and high walls still retaining most of the heat from the summer day. She signed to the others, teleporting into a dark apartment on the other side of the alley. Her team followed.

She had the enchanted cube at the ready in case they were discovered or needed reinforcements.

The search was quick, the description concise and the location rather central. Of course the barkeep hadn't specified what or who would be waiting for them at the Den, nor did they know if it was a bar, hideout, or perhaps even an established club of sorts.

The building looked like most other stone structures they had seen in Nara. The top half showed heavy damage, tree roots still remaining. Nobody stood at the entrance of the ground floor, the simplified drawing of a bear on a weathered wooden board hanging from above the metal door. There was no light in the alley.

Phoebe pointed up, the others following when she teleported. She pointed to the building across the narrow alley and vanished.

Willa, Ember, and Mila appeared by her side.

It was quiet. Phoebe signed for no more teleports, lest they appear between a group of unknown people. She activated her ash armor, the others following suit. "Quiet now," she whispered. "Information only. If we're discovered we activate the cube and run. Understood?"

The others nodded.

Phoebe signed again. *Focus*. She led the group forward and towards the damaged stairwell. Short teleports worked fine, as long as they didn't go through entire floors or into rooms they hadn't scouted out.

Ember and Mila checked the hallway at the same time, Phoebe and Willa stepping out a moment later.

They continued in their trained formation all the way to the ground floor. It took them a few minutes of searching to find the single door that led into the same area Phoebe assumed the Bearclaw Den to be in.

Ember signed for enchantments, the woman stepping up to the door before she crouched down, gesturing again at the entirety of the wall.

Phoebe waited, checking her auras as she listened. Something sizzled, Ember signing that the way was clear.

Willa signed for a teleport and rush formation, the others agreeing.

Phoebe counted down with three fingers before they appeared in a dimly lit hallway.

Snoring could be heard from ahead and towards the alley, the sound of metal cutting into wood coming from the same broad room. A bar or restaurant, Phoebe assumed based on the wooden tables and chairs, most of it rather haphazardly strewn about.

She could see the main entrance. The other way was a hallway leading to the back of the structure. She gestured towards it, the team moving with silent steps, covering each others backs until they came up on a stairwell leading down.

Willa took point and suggested a formation.

Phoebe agreed, following the woman down the stone stairs and into the cellar of the building.

What they found was old shelves, large storage boxes, and a lot of dust.

Their auras provided a little bit of light. Enough for them to make out the walls. Something had to be hidden.

Mila stepped to the back wall where a small shrine stood. She touched one of the small figures, a section of the wall lighting up before another hallway became visible.

They moved in with silent steps, finding a set of rooms on each side with various personal belongings and two sleeping mages close to level one twenty. Above each of them.

Phoebe saw the grin on Willa's face as they passed into a more spacious hall. They froze and hid in a side room when voices resounded, speaking in Jissu.

A group of people, walking on the other side of the hall. They soon passed.

Phoebe glanced at Mila, seeing the woman's hands tremble slightly.

"They spoke of... trade. Some of the words. It's true. The wares are people," she said.

"There you go," Willa said, looking out of the room and in the direction where the group had walked.

Phoebe sighed. Once again, information and stealth.

They moved out, ash armor and auras at the ready. Another hallway, this one with cells on each side. The last few were occupied.

Phoebe ground her teeth when she saw the people inside.

One young girl rushed to the steel grate and spoke in Jissu.

"Retreat," Mila said, her eyes wide.

The word wasn't easily said, Phoebe teleporting back into the previous hall with the rest of the team appearing next to her. She felt a magical pulse, turning her head to see blood explosions rupture through the hallway.

They teleported again when a group of people cut off their way, armor and weapons coated in magic, mages to the side.

She had no time to identify them when a pulse of loud noise rushed out and struck her. Her ears were blown out as she staggered, her balance gone. She teleported again, appearing near a wall, her orientation still gone as she grabbed the enchanted cube and activated it, her ears healing when something bright came flying from her left.

She pushed herself off the wall and skidded to a halt.

"... now the Sentinels are informed. Kill them and destroy everything," a woman in black armor said, her face covered in a simple red mask.

Phoebe saw Willa teleport back, a man in gray robes appearing next to her. He ignored the ashen copies that appeared and grabbed onto her arm, pulling her closer when another pulse of sound originated from him.

Ember stumbled right after she appeared next to them, Phoebe rushing forward when a set of stone projectiles pierced her armor. She managed to dodge to prevent her heart from being pierced.

The sound mage grabbed onto Willa's face, magic surging near his palm before his spell was released.

Phoebe teleported next to him and punched, her magic lashing into him before another pulse sent her reeling.

[Sound Mage – lvl ??]

She glanced to the side, seeing the heavy chunk of stone coming. Phoebe could just barely raise her arm before the thing sent her flying. She tumbled twice, landing hard on the floor before she coughed up blood. Her healing fought to keep her conscious, another teleport activating to dodge the three lances that came her way. She appeared to see the sound mage gone, only three people remaining beside a downed Ember.

Phoebe summoned an ashen lance but had to dodge when one of the people appeared in front of her, daggers slashing at her.

[Assassin – lvl ??]

She dodged four strikes before the woman rammed a dagger into her stomach. Phoebe blocked the second one coming for her throat with the palm of her hand. Dulled explosions resounded from behind.

The assassin ripped away her blades and vanished.

Phoebe could barely comprehend the message about being poisoned, her healing already overwhelmed with all the injuries she had sustained. Her vision blurred as she pulled herself forward on the ground. She teleported towards the downed form of her friend, blood from her gut mixing with the blood of Willa, her body unmoving. Phoebe shook her, her arms trembling when her healing told her what she didn't want to believe.

She grit her teeth, coughing again as more explosions resounded. She heard shouts from above, finding Mila near one of the walls with her arms around Ember, face coated in blood. They looked so small. Her arms. Her vision went dark.