

Irwyn stared, Waylan stared, Elizabeth stared.

“What?” Alice raised an eyebrow.

“What do you mean crows?” Irwyn asked. “I don’t see any.”

“Well, up above?” she pointed towards the sky. He had to squint a bit to notice the small black dots. “Mostly. One over there, another there,” she pointed at a nearby storefront, where one was sat half hidden behind a sign, then another was peeking out of a box on a pile.

“It seem like someone is waiting on us,” Waylan said looking towards the sweetshop. There was a cake drawn on one of its walls though the windows did not let one a good look inside from where the four of them stood. Alice seemed a bit confused but followed the others in their suddenly serious silent approach.

The place was not busy. In fact, it was almost completely empty despite the plethora of tables available. Just one was taken, right in the center. A gnarled old man waving at them. They shared a glance among themselves before accepting the invitation to sit.

“Please, do order something,” he encouraged as soon as they did. “The roadblock should take about an hour more to clear out.”

“What are you even doing here, Old Crow?” Irwyn questioned as they approached.

“I just barely caught wind of you all suddenly leaving for the North,” he nodded. “It would be terribly rude of me to not at least talk with you, given I was already in the city.”

“Would you like anything?” a waiter had approached at that point. An ordinary man as far as Irwyn could tell. And probably not someone they wanted listening in.

“Do you have a menu?” Waylan asked.

“Yes, of course,” the man nodded. “I can bring it for you.”

“Everything on it, for everyone,” Waylan ordered. The waiter smiled in surprise, then quickly departed before anyone could tell him otherwise. Of course, the rest of them were a bit too busy giving Waylan surprised stares.

“We cannot possibly eat *everything*,” Alice pointed out.

“I dunno what the best thing is,” Waylan shrugged. “Never been. Good chance to figure out my favorite while I still have an infinite money person around.”

“Then why order for all of us?” Irwyn questioned.

“Do *you* have a favourite?” Waylan questioned with a grin, shutting him up.

“I do,” Elizabeth was thankfully immune to such a rhetoric trap.

“Same,” Alice nodded along.

“Half and half, good enough,” Waylan shrugged.

“Are you going to eat all the leftovers yourself?” Alice questioned. “You did not even check how big their menu is!”

"I believe he has done quite a fine job distracting you from being overly serious," Old Crow chuckled just as they had almost forgotten him, startling everyone back to staring at him. This up close, Irwyn tried to have a proper look, but no matter how he looked, his old mentor still seemed like an ordinary elder. No sign of honing, mana, or anything else that he could detect...

And yet Elizabeth had once told him he could control crows and perceive the world through them. He clearly had deep enough knowledge of Honing to pick out manuals for some of the Tears. Nor had Irwyn forgotten the things he had been provided in the care package in Ebon Respite for all he had no chances to use them yet – many handcrafted and supposedly powerful, yet not magical.

"You want to give us advice then?" Irwyn took the earlier comment for an attempt to return to the actual issue rather than dance around the room.

"You have received some I presume?" Old Crow shook his head. "I have something a bit different in mind. Of course, first I will ask what it would cost me to keep this little encounter secret."

"In all likelihood, my mother already knows," Elizabeth simply said.

"Do not get me wrong, I do not underestimate our dear Duchess," Old Crow said. "But she is quite busy. Do you think she has a dozen mages subtle enough to not be noticed tracing your every move? Doubly so since you are supposed to be leaving the Federation. No. She has considered it and dismissed it as not worth the resources. The only way she learns of me being here in the first place is if you tell her."

"You are offering me leverage for nothing," she frowned.

"I am offering you basic guidance, as I would any friend and steadfast ally of my once-wards," he corrected. "That it produces leverage is merely a convenient byproduct. Now that you have something that can be held over me, we can trade after all."

"So then, you want to buy my secrecy, possibly a lie or denial," she slowly nodded. "That generally does not come cheap."

"How daring, trying to fleece an old man like me," he laughed. "But worry not, I have something you want: Tell me, do you actually *know* what your mother is doing in Abonisle?"

"Most likely, enjoying vacations," Elizabeth replied. "Though that will have to wait for the rebuilding."

"What an incredible crowning jewel the city is," Old Crow smiled. "I hear the story of why she cares so much is quite romantic and involves at least one dead dragon. But tell me, Elizabeth, is your mother so vain that she requires jewelry of this splendor?"

"No..." Elizabeth admitted.

"Yet still she built this wondrous city," Irwyn spoke the obvious implication. "You say there is more at play."

"On the surface, Abonisle itself is enough to justify its existence - the trade, shifting of political power, so on, so on," Old Crow explained. "But Avys is not so wasteful a person as to only fulfill one goal where five can fit. So, I have been ever curious about what she may be hiding here. The incursion's aftermath had provided me an opportunity."

“And you offer me that knowledge in return for silence,” Elizabeth concluded.

“It would be something to hold over your mother, if need be,” Old Crow elaborated. “And it is quite the conspiracy... perhaps not conspiracy, given Avys *is* working with the Duke’s knowledge and support. I wonder if there is a better word for it.”

“On who do we swear?”

“No need,” Old Crow shook his head. “Oaths are quite a bit more burdensome for me to bear than for you. Your word will suffice. After all, if you speak of meeting me, it will also hint at the secret you bargain for. Mutual profit and mutually assured loss are powerful enough motivators.”

“Which you have yet to speak of.”

“We are not in such a hurry,” Old Crow chuckled slightly. “Also, the food is here.”

And there was a lot. The same waiter had to make several runs carrying large boards in both hands, filled to the brim with sweet foods. From rolls, ice cream, puddings, cakes, cookies, donuts, and a few Irwyn was unsure of what to name. Elizabeth quickly snatched two bowls of ice cream, Alice usurped most of the cake. Waylan and Irwyn kind of tried whatever was closest - everything was rather sweet anyway.

“There are three strings that tie the secret into one whole,” Old Crow began to explain, himself slowly enjoying some pie. “First is missing nobility. Over the years I have gathered a list of people I believe Avys has made disappear without anything pointing towards her or the Duke’s involvement beyond motive. This list, of course, has several uses but for the secret I wish to share I find an interesting correlation among the hundreds. A total of 47 nobles with all of the following traits:”

“Each belonging to a bloodline of the Duke of Wrath. Each was not an immediate threat but overall unreceptive towards Avys. None of them were ever found dead. All were adults but before biological aging started properly affecting them. They disappeared either here in Abonisle or near City Black where the Beacon allows for quick and convenient transportation. In conclusion, I highly suspect that Avys has coordinated a gradual but relentless kidnapping campaign, centered here around Abonisle.”

“So, she has disappeared many of her enemies somewhere around here,” Elizabeth slowly nodded. “What am I supposed to make of it?”

“Second:” Old Crow raised two fingers instead of answering her directly. “There is a hidden facility built deep under the Spires. Beneath even the Dredge. A large and incredibly warded metal box. After great effort, I have managed to map its edges somewhat - 8 to 10 meters tall, about 1200 square meters in area, mostly a box in shape.”

“If it’s so heavily warded, how would you even find it?” Elizabeth frowned. “Any divination would be misled and encountering it would trigger alarms.”

“By digging, of course,” he smiled. “I have my ways to bypass many measures. Penetrating would be a different story, but just skirting around undetected is very much possible.”

“And you think the missing nobility is stuck in there,” Irwyn guessed.

Alice was shifting between seeming neutral, enjoying a bowl of pudding - apparently, her second choice after the cake ran out, she ate surprisingly fast - then staring intently at Old Crow

with something complicated in her gaze, though she did not seem inclined to speak. Waylan sat quietly on the side, listening but almost slipping away from awareness... And hiding whatever it was he was eating at the moment with some mild sleight of hand.

"Yes, which leads to my third point." Old Crow nodded. "After the semi-crumbling of Abonisle, their security has been shaken, which was exactly what I have been hoping for. It was how I was able to find the facility itself - though I had long suspected there might be something like it. It has also allowed me to pick out people likely going there in secrecy. Among them, I happened to find who happens to be Avys' most powerful Life mage on retainer."

"Who?" Elizabeth asked.

"You likely know him," Old Crow nodded. "I believe he has been going by doctor John Johnson."

And in a way, it was an obvious thing. Irwyn had known the man had been oftentimes in Abonisle lately, even in communication quarantine. That something secretive was going on. He may very well have connected the dots himself if he had a few minutes to think. Elizabeth shot Irwyn a wide-eyed glance just as he did the exact same. Old Crow did not let that slip by him. "I see you are already familiar then."

"Quite," Elizabeth frowned again. "To the point I find it suspicious you would not know already."

"Johnson is a dangerous mage to follow around," Old Crow shrugged. "My crows are very much alive and an anomaly might be noticed even if my control is not magic as you mages use it. And you, I have not paid much attention to until our personal meeting not *that* long ago - Avys was quite successful in hiding your abilities for years, after all. I had assumed you have met but estimating how often - or that Irwyn would have also made the acquaintance - would be a blind guess at best."

"So, you are watching me now, are you?" Elizabeth inclined her head.

"More than before, true, though you have no secrets I truly desire," he shrugged. "While I am sure the details of your power are fascinating... my appetite lies more in politics and subterfuge."

"Which is notoriously rather scarce in the Duchy of Black," she pointed out.

"Yes, among your nobility," Old Crow nodded. "Which makes it all the more concentrated among the people who hide beneath their feet."

"You say Johnson is involved," Irwyn pulled at a different thread. "And he is undoubtedly a powerful Life mage, even if I don't know how much exactly. But I am not sure what exactly he does."

"He is obsessed with research and broadening his knowledge. A skilled healer if he chooses to be, albeit distractable. Eccentric by about every standard," Elizabeth nodded. "But even I do not know what exactly his expertise is. He must have at least several domains to be as old as he claims... possibly even a Truth if you so confidently claim he is the most powerful Life mage in our employ."

"Clearly, you are familiar with the man and not the mage," Old Crow said with a nod. "Johnson has come to our Federation from the North alongside the Duchess before anyone would call her that. But do you know his history there?"

“Come *back* with her,” Irwyn corrected, shaking his head. “But not much besides that.”

“Me neither,” Elizabeth mirrored his gesture.

“My homeland also happens to be the North, though I had left it behind a lifetime ago,” Old Crow said. “But even then, I had made a name for knowing things that few others did. And Johnson, well, he had left blots on the pages of history. Not by that name, of course, not even by that appearance. But if you look between the lines, you can find it in historical records: Similar quotes, similar mannerisms. Words an eccentric man, appearing at a time of a disaster, solving the impossible, then vanishing once again after a few years.”

“Disasters?” Irwyn asked. Johnson had struck him as many things but not someone particularly heroic.

“Not just any, of course. Medical or close enough in nature. I have never found anything that spoke of him dispensing justice or slaying monsters - at most killing a few ungrateful toughs or soldiers trying to apprehend him during other deeds. What I meant are plagues, strange local diseases, miraculously saving a deathly ill monarch – thus preventing a civil war... Such things. The oldest I could find was from over 300 years ago, though such ancient accounts are vague.”

“Now I am curious,” Elizabeth admitted. “During our travels, it might be worth visiting one of the places he had saved then.”

“Many happened in nations that have long since ceased. But I do have one if it strikes your fancy,” Old Crow said. When he received a nod from her and Irwyn, he began. “It was some 140 years ago that the city of Gollatei was struck by a truly strange disease: Anyone within its walls would become wholly infertile. Not just those who lived there but even travelers passing through. Such a phenomenon was not noticed for a few months at least but when it did, such affliction caused an obvious ruckus. A city has no future without children. Not to mention that travelers and merchants avoided it as any other plagued city.”

“Then, one day, a man claimed to have found a cure. First, he was disbelieved as a liar. Then his patients proclaimed to be healed and so the city was at his fingertips. Still, he refused the wealth and power they wished to shower him with, simply continuing the work of a physician. Then he was named the Good Healer of Gollatei, saving a doomed city. When the strange disease truly vanished, he remained there for some ten more years before vanishing. Dying by some exaggerated accounts, even.”

“Perhaps I could see it,” Elizabeth hummed. “If Johnson thought the strange plague was interesting enough to research. Maybe staying a few more years to observe any lingering effects.”

“That is one possible conclusion,” Old Crow nodded.

“Which implies others,” she immediately noted.

“Yes,” he smiled. “But you wanted to know more about the secret here in Abonisle, if I recall, not my conjectures on history.”

“From what you have told it would be guesses that you offer me anyway,” Elizabeth frowned.

“The best secrets can rarely ever be taken whole,” Old Crow just chuckled. “But I am an exceptional guesser: My conclusion is that the Duchess is trying to secretly raise a new generation of those terrifying Shadows of House Blackburg. Only loyal to her and Eza.”

“A single Shadow may arise from ten thousand oath-sworn mages,” Elizabeth said dubiously. “The requirements on talent, training, mental predisposition, and sheer dumb luck to attain a domain is ludicrous. Unimaginable for most.”

“Which is why no one would suspect it,” Old Crow nodded. “If she has things her way, the little civil war that has been brewing over the past decades will be won in a single ambush. Before rivals even realize they had been had.”

“I remain doubtful,” Elizabeth replied.

“If you reject my conclusion in favor of your own, that is no one else’s decision to make,” he shrugged. “But I believe this does fulfill our bargain for a little bit of secrecy.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth nodded.

“Too serious,” Waylan spoke after being silent for a while. He then proceeded to steal the last piece of pie Irwyn had just been reaching for, shooting his friend a grin.

“Then perhaps let me lighten the mood with gifts,” Old Crow reached under the desk. There were distinctly no drawers where anything could have fit but he nonetheless began to pull out items. First of all was a metallic tube, which he handed to their sneak. “For you, Waylan.”

“Which is?”

“I am not certain. But it once belonged to an order of assassins that had developed the Honing techniques that you now use. It is a sealed scroll case which is likely to contain more of their methods. If you can locate their temples in the great forest Kal’pur, it may yet be possible to unlock its secrets there.”

“And which way is that?” Irwyn asked.

“Not a clue,” Old Crow shrugged. “It has been well over 80 years since I have emigrated. Geographical details have left me long ago. Though for you, Irwyn, I have a collection of keys, card, or other such access tokens for a great variety of Northern libraries – I do not guarantee they all still exist,” he handed Irwyn a thick leather folder.

“There have to be hundreds,” Irwyn quickly counted. It was almost like a book in that it had ‘pages’ where these various means of entry were sorted by type, then categorized by what he presumed were names. From carved pebbles to metallic cards, there were all kinds. The folder also seemed even bigger on the inside.

“For Elizabeth, I have prepared a brooch.”

“Thank you,” she hesitantly said. It was, obviously, a pitch-black crow, carved from some kind of dark wood. But it was cut in a strange way - all straight lines and sharp angles - that Irwyn did not recognize. Either way, anything pitch would go well enough with Elizabeth’s wardrobe.

“It is done in a classical style of my people. I could not think of many physical things that you could not obtain with a word. I thought that perhaps something more cultural would work,” he nodded, then turned to the last member of their group. The one who had been quiet for a while.

“And for you, Alice, I have answers to all the questions you have been hesitating to ask. If the rest of you would please settle the bill and give us some privacy?”

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They waited for Alice for some 15 minutes. Irwyn could only speculate most of their conversation would concern Alice’s late father. When she finally walked out, she looked no different from usual, if more thoughtful. She was also carrying a bowl of pudding from the store. Irwyn supposed that after such a large order they would let them keep a dishware or two.

“Are you a’right?” Waylan still asked.

“Still have the ring,” Alice smiled, letting it become visible for a few moments. “Do you think the road will be open again already?”

“It has not been an hour, but it might be,” Irwyn speculated.

“No harm in checking, I suppose,” Elizabeth nodded.

They head back towards the elevator, just so getting joined by a group of four mages as they entered. Irwyn felt Light from them but not more than an intention or two, so he quickly put them out of his mind. It still meant that their conversation would need to avoid most of the topics they wanted to actually talk about.

“It looked like it’s snowing North,” Waylan broached instead. “Maybe we should get cloaks.”

“The snow isn’t actually cold,” Elizabeth said.

“How can snow *not* be cold?” Waylan squinted.

“It’s magical,” Irwyn remembered.

“The storms that cling to the side of the mountains most of the year are manifested purely from mana rather than water,” Elizabeth explained more. “That means that Finity...”

The elevator suddenly shuddered and stopped moving. Everyone looked around in confusion, finding one of the other passengers had initiated an emergency break - naturally, elevators had something like that. What was rather more worrying was that the person as well as the other 3 mages were drawing handguns, aiming at their group.

“I think the saying is ‘your money or your life’,” the one who had stopped the elevator said. Irwyn reinforced his barrier, the other barrier he maintained around Waylan, then took the half step needed to stand properly in front of his friend. He did not *feel* anything that would be a threat to him but was not going to completely discount the possibility.

“Very funny,” Elizabeth did not seem to share that caution. “Is this a convoluted suicide attempt?”

They did not seem to find it as humorous and fired in unison. Everyone had their defenses ready, and the bullets all ended up headed in Irwyn’s direction anyway. They had a bit of Light magic infused into them, yes, but not nearly enough to even scratch his defenses. The metal evaporated upon impact, not coming within a rounding error of a noticeable threat.

They did not seem to pose danger despite the hostility. Irwyn still hesitated for half a second. Should he aim to kill just in case the four had a genuinely dangerous trump card up their

sleeve? Or perhaps it would be best to disable and interrogate. In that case, rely on ropes of Light as he had in the past or outright maim with scorching Flames?

Elizabeth in the meantime had manifested a blade of Void magic, clearly showing she did not think they were in any actual danger and was thus not taking their adversaries seriously - otherwise, she would have opened with a swarm of ranged attacks to help close the distance while vanishing from sight. Instead, she was halfway into the first step of rushing ahead, her weight shifting. Nonetheless, it was still too slow.

Their four attackers suddenly fell to pieces. Literally. One moment they were standing, the next chunks of bloodied meat crumbled. Like they had each been cut by a thousand impossible sharp blades in an instant. Irwyn glanced to his side at the third mage of their own group in surprise.

Alice was staring in visible horror, paling before his eyes. "They had... no defenses?" she muttered in shock. Her eyes were growing wider, features paler, hand beginning to tremble... then suddenly she was overcome with a sudden calm. Then the terror re-arrived in her eyes. Once again, color withdrew. A second later, it started to return along with a fleeting moment of serenity. And then dread again, accompanied by panicked gasps. To and fro, over and over. Irwyn noticed the ring had once again become visible on her finger, this time not intentionally.

"Are you a'right?" Waylan approached her before Irwyn overcame his own surprise.

"Waylan," she slowly said. Her serenity broke halfway through the word, voice cracking in terror. "Could you... cover my eyes? I..." the calm returned. "...cannot look away."

"Ye," Waylan nodded and hurried to put his palms over her face. That seemed to finally pacify Alice at least for the moment. Her breathing calmed and any signs of shaking left, therefore Irwyn could turn towards the bodies... Or the shredded pieces that once were people. It was just puddles of red chunks with the occasional bit of white or brown. The scene was gruesome enough that Irwyn had to fight hard not to flinch, though it reached a point where the corpses were so detached from the image of a human being he wholly avoided any instinctual nausea.

Elizabeth was also already kneeling by what was left of the four, looking back at Alice in visible surprise. A layer of magic protected her from the blood as she seemed to ascertain from a distance that Alice was fine already. Then she looked back down to the bodies as Irwyn approached.

"Nothing left to salvage," she shrugged, standing up. Unlike Alice, she was taking it in stride. "Assuming they even would have had anything to identify them. Even the weapons were shredded."

"What do you make of it?" Irwyn asked.

"Desperate idiots."

"Nah, that wasn't the look of desperate folk," Waylan disagreed, raising his voice a bit to be heard. "No dirt behind nails, good clean clothes, no fear. Ain't last leg folks, that."

"Desperate for mages," Elizabeth reiterated. "Or maybe just incredibly greedy. We do look quite young. Four intention mages with weapons against a group of teenagers, one of whom is not even a mage? I can kind of see how they could believe they held the advantage. Many people



our age have not even reached imbue ment, perhaps they mistook an inability to feel our for a lack of it.”

“Then how do we handle the bodies?” Irwyn glanced down. “Do we... report it?”

“Too much trouble,” Elizabeth shook her head, Voidflame dancing at her fingertips. She let it flow down to the ground, along her leg, then latch onto the bodies. Unlike regular Flame, the Void of it gobbled up even the ash.

“Not a trace,” Waylan commented. All it took were a few seconds.

“There might be something left of their Souls still dispersing, but that takes a specialist to find,” she added. “We will be long gone if someone even notices.”

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Thankfully, unengaging the emergency break was simple enough. Once back at the barricade, they had to wait for a few minutes longer but the road ahead was already in the middle opening when they arrived –. They spent those minutes by trying to find a carriage willing to take them to the edge of the city. That proved surprisingly difficult before Irwyn thought about it:

There was actually basically nothing North of the City. A few small settlements at best but mostly just the Barrier mountains themselves. The carriages headed that way were all aiming somewhere in the outer city rather than leaving Abonisle altogether. They did manage to talk one of the drivers into a bit of a detour though, so they made it near the bridge itself quickly enough.

It was a lot smaller than the one Irwyn had once upon a time entered the city by. A single carriage could maybe pass through it but that was about it. It did not diminish the fascinating view of the bottomless Void lake surrounding the city. Waylan and even Alice certainly gaped.

The checkpoints were each manned by a single soldier who glanced at them and promptly decided the group was not worth bothering. Over the bridge and then a bit further, they found another carriage that had been originally arranged to take them all the way to the mountains.

It moved fast, a lot faster than any such vehicle Irwyn had ever ridden - but they had to travel a long way. The journey would still take them 3 hours. Alice’s jolly mood gradually recovered, taken by the excitement of what may await them up North.

The weather eventually broke and they found themselves with storms raging overhead. Snow piled in heaps – or building-sized piles at times - that gradually vanished from the bottom as Finity made the purely magical particles cease to be. A single road seemed to be warded as to be always possible to traverse and Irwyn never spotted anything resembling... well, anything except hills of white along the way.

For all that had happened though, they held an aura of optimism by the time they arrived at the small encampment at the very foot of the mountain. And then it was into the Northern lands beyond.