

The plan had been to reconvene at the camp. That was no longer viable. Irwyn remained very much aware that if things came down to combat he would stand no chance against one conception mage, much less two. In all likelihood, Hiera would have gone back to camp and relayed to Elizabeth what Waylan had shared about the situation. That meant a real possibility of reinforcements being on the way...

And yet by the time Irwyn arrived at the orphanage, not a sign of anything of the kind appeared. That was worrisome considering it should have been as much as half an hour since Waylan had gone to inform the Segeant. More than enough time for someone powerful to be sent from City Black and resolve the situation.

Perhaps the presumed reinforcements had merely gotten lost... But that could not be counted on. Irwyn was forced to assume no help would be coming. If it did, then great. If not, he needed to reconvene with Elizabeth and figure out *why* not. Therefore, he needed to grift the duo following him even further than he already had and with Waylan's warning his friends would be the best people for the job. He just needed to convince their audience of two that he did not mean to betray - that the act was and had always been the truth.

So Irwyn did not pause for a single step, entering the orphanage the Tears had come to occupy. Through the entry hallway and into the mess room, the door was unlocked and Irwyn did not meet anyone before their gathering place. There, he immediately noted the tense quiet.

"Mockingbird," Maxim waved at him, or presumably a shapeshifted Maxim given Irwyn did not recognize the face. That he did not use Irwyn's name told him that they were already on the same page. "Aaron's office."

"Yes," Irwyn nodded walking straight to the far away room, ignoring the uneasy or excited whispers from all around the room as well as the two mages following him. He only took off the mask when he was stepping through the doorway - best the kids did not notice his features had been magically altered.

Upon entry, he immediately noticed an absence. "Where is Kalista?"

"She felt sick," Rainer shrugged, his fingers hidden in gloves and partially under the table. He also notably did not look happy about it. "Bad timing but no helping it."

"We begin without her then," Irwyn nodded, not revealing his worry. The odds were Kalista had risked a peek at him and his pursuers, one of whom was quite literally the concept of Blinding given flesh. He would need to check up on her as soon as possible, maybe inquire about a healer if need be. "As we were afraid, it's a code nine."

"We could have guessed that," Rainer grunted in acknowledgment. If there had been any doubt about it before, they now knew for certain that they were not alone. "Waylan already told us some of it. What worries me much more is that he made it sound like you wanted to help the two twats."

"It is the best option," Irwyn nodded.

"It is the fastest road to a graveyard," Rainer shot right back.

"No, our Fowl is correct," Aaron agreed instead. "From what Waylan told us I agree we are fucked one way or the other. If we have to pick a side, betrayal *will* give us an edge."

"Unless those two betray us first," Rainer muttered.

“Not like the royal brat would protect us even if we sided with her - she wouldn't waste perfect bait,” Waylan joined the argument. “Mockie has a point. If we get bent over no matter what, maybe we at least choose how.”

“I don't like it,” Rainer grit his teeth. “But I can see when I am outvoted. Alright, what do we do.”

“First we recall anyone on longer-term assignment,” Irwyn said. “And get ready to move. Anyone we decide is not needed for the plan leaves tomorrow morning.”

“Already on that. Waylan,” Aaron nodded, withdrawing a sheet of paper from among the piles on his table. “Our members on duty and how to get in touch. Stress to each the need for immediate withdrawal.”

“I suppose I ain't no planner,” Waylan scoffed taking the piece, then briskly headed for the door. Not that he would actually be getting in touch with their people. At least not right away – Waylan could slip those two even if he was followed after all. “Aight, give me the short version when I am back.”

“Where do they go,” Aaron asked once Waylan left. Thankfully, none of the two hidden mages decided to give chase after taking a glance at the notes that had been passed around. Knowing Aaron the list was either real or very close to it.

“Drathsol,” Irwyn immediately decided. For all it was an act it was best to play it as if it was real whenever possible. Then he would be much less likely to get tangled in the necessary lies. “I know of a shortcut we could take the rest through once it's done, that way we can reconvene in the city.”

“We have a hideout set up there,” Aaron immediately nodded. “Not enough space for everyone but the advance group can use it as staging ground.”

“I will leave the details to you,” Irwyn nodded. “The real issue we need to figure out is *how* to do what we need to.”

“Presumably you have an idea since you brought us into it,” Rainer said.

“Yes, I do,” Irwyn nodded. “It's all about believability you see. The soldiers will not leave their camp while they think there is something capable of killing them prowling about – not the important ones, anyway. Yet to leave they need something that drives them yet doesn't spook them into getting more powerful help. A bit of a paradox, because with undead they supposedly *always* presume the worst.”

“And how do we solve that?” Aaron nodded.

“With a decoy,” Irwyn smiled. “Their worry is that everything is a smoke screen made explicitly to bait someone important into the open. So, we will have them hire *us*, Maxim to be specific, to pretend he is that someone important. And when the person in disguise does *not* get attacked it will give them the confidence to leave.”

“Will that work?” Rainer asked doubtfully.

“I think it will from my read on them,” Irwyn nodded for all he thought it would not. He wasn't so sure even body doubles would abate Elizabeth's paranoia nor whether they could be made reliable but the concept sounded plausible enough. If one presumed gullibility and arrogance of the army, that is. “They will probably want to be involved, faking the feel of the soul and whatnot with their own magic, but I think they will bite if we time it right. The Blackburgs will never expect us to betray them after all. Out of both our fear and the mutual undead foe.”

“How do we convince them there are *actual* undead attacks though?”

“By leaving all the signs they want to see,” Irwyn immediately replied. “Tell me, Aaron, what is the main reason to have a garrison in an unimportant place like this?”

“So it doesn’t get suddenly overrun by a horde?” Aaron guessed.

“Exactly,” Irwyn nodded. “I had a peek and they have all this equipment to detect anything large scale... but what about something smaller? Like a family disappearing in their own home. We tell them to send their soldiers to see to it, making sure they find some damning evidence.”

“We cannot fake the magic,” Rainer pointed out.

“Which they will assume is the undead covering their tracks.”

“What do we use as our proof then?” Rainer wondered out loud.

“A corpse,” Aaron suggested before Irwyn could. “Just a scrape of rotten meat - far too old to be from the family - stuck somewhere strange. An unnoticed accident.

“Exactly,” Irwyn agreed, then turned to Rainer. “Looks like you are going hunting.”

“We can probably find someone a week post shanking in the severs,” Rainer sighed. “Not looking forward to it. Where do I bring it?”

“I have a place,” Aaron quickly scribbled an address on two sheets of paper, handing one to Rainer and Irwyn each. “Conveniently lived in until yesterday. We can have the place roughened up by dawn. Make sure the neighbors are not inclined to spoil things.”

“So, in the morning, when we have this ready, I will go report it alongside a few other rumors,” Irwyn nodded. In the morning then, better late than never. For all he would rather be discussing with Elizabeth an actual plan rather than the theatre, he could not afford to hurry over much. “And when they check it they will have their proof of Undead in the city.”

“That is not enough for what we need though,” Rainer pointed out.

“No,” Irwyn smiled. “But it is a precursor. We fake two, maybe three more scenes in a similar way. That will get them on edge. Then, we commit arson on a place just as I report it.”

“It will look like undead covering evidence,” Aaron smiled. “What then?”

“Then, they will naturally want to send their best Flame mage to the scene – so that they can salvage what can be and determine if and what magic was used,” Irwyn grinned. “It just so happens that their best one by a long shot is our new friends’ mark.”

“I don’t think we will get any better,” Aaron nodded. “Rainer, I will need you to run a few messages for me before you go below. But don’t expect to sleep much tonight, either of you. We will go over every detail, then double checked and triple check that we are not overlooking anything before we commit.”

“Until dawn then,” Irwyn nodded. Overtime it was. After all, their audience was still looking over their shoulders, looking for a lie. A slip up. They would find none. Irwyn trusted his friends with that much.

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With the first rays of dawn, the Tears evacuated. They would not actually flee the City if they could help it but the act had to go on. Kalista would be going along with the escapees as the

only other person besides Irwyn who could reliably detect the two mages in case one or both decided to double-check on their escape. For all it would at a price for her in that case...

They could not talk about it in the evening prior, but the fact that Kalista also wore an eyepatch underneath her glasses in the morning was rather telling. So was her paleness and Rainer's worried glances. Irwyn sincerely wished her the best of luck and that no further sacrifice was needed from her.

That thankfully seemed to be the case as Irwyn was followed by both the mages on his way to the garrison's camp. There was a certain tension to it, as he wondered that perhaps, despite all the effort, the two would decide that letting their apparent collaborator talk to the Blackburg was not worth the risk at the very last possible moment. That tension slowly drained away as Irwyn approached his destination. The duo finally left altogether when Irwyn reached some arbitrary distance a few blocks away from the main camp – about two corners away from the buildings being in eyeshot.

He was still wearing his mask as he walked into the camp, only removing it when those manning the checkpoint gave him an unimpressed stare. Belatedly he also remembered to change his appearance back to the one they recognized, immediately being let in afterward. Nonetheless, Irwyn made sure to never turn around and allow his face to be in the line of sight of the gate - just in case.

When his meeting with Elizabeth came about not minutes later, she was both visibly shaken, disheveled, and trembling with fury. He could not recall seeing her so angry. Not even after the attack in Abonisle.

"They *denied* me," she seethed after their short greetings, red in the face. He could almost see the effort it took her to not scream.

"I figured out as much after the first few hours," Irwyn nodded slowly. Elizabeth would have known where he was, especially after Waylan had gone out and presumably updated her. That no squad of elite mages arrived to bail him out was rather telling.

"Not just denied, categorically refused," she continued. "Said to my face that my 'belief' was not good enough. That if I wanted someone who can kill two conception mages that I needed proof, not *speculation*. I was basically called a liar to my face, Irwyn!"

"They don't know you," Irwyn pointed out.

"I am still a rightful heiress to the House! When I say that two conception mages need to die, who are they to question me? How dare they? I was not asking the impossible, not even the unreasonable. Not with such blatantly poor excuses! Moreover..." she looked away, a different emotion than anger flashing across her face "My mother does understand, and she still refused to send me help when I asked,"

"Ouch," Alice opined with a slight flinch from the side. She also looked rather worn.

"It's not that I am hurt, just that I would expect her to be at least *reasonable*," Elizabeth shot Alice a glare. "And yet she insisted that if she gave me what I wanted it would be too expensive."

"She had taken a risk on my behalf before," one thing did not add up in Irwyn's mind though. "Surely it would not be so costly as to risk my life if the Duchess considers me an investment."

"Well, yes, she..." Elizabeth glanced at Alice, hesitated, then decided to speak anyway after a moment. "Somehow my mother knew I had lent you the contingency. Or maybe just guessed

and I had given the truth away by my surprise. She insisted that if the situation had been so dire as to truly need immediate help, you would have had already used it.”

“Ah,” that made significantly more sense. If the Duchess thought he would not be made any safer then forcing the reinforcements through would have been a pointless waste in her eyes. And for all the night had been stressful – and he definitely would have liked to be rescued. “Now that I am here, is help any more likely to come?”

“Yes, actually,” Elizabeth sighed. “Now that I can truthfully certify that you can truthfully certify about two conception assassins, I cannot be denied. Likely more help than we even need since my mother had the whole night to get her affairs in order.”

“I am glad things are suddenly going to be easy,” Alice jabbed with a roll of her eyes

“Then let’s get to it,” Irwyn immediately re-railed the conversation instead though. “What do you need from me.”

“It’s simple. Just...” Elizabeth held out her insignia ring, gesturing for Irwyn to touch it. He did.

“What now?” Irwyn asked. He felt a link of sorts form, latch onto his Soul. It felt fragile - like he could break it with just a thought - for all it likely carried significant magic.

“Do you confirm the presence of two hostile living conception mages in Ebon Respite?” Elizabeth asked with a degree of solemnity. There was a nudge. A compulsion to tell the truth Irwyn had no reason to resist.

“Yes,” he nodded.

*Is that enough for you?* he heard Elizabeth’s voice again, though she had not opened her mouth. It took Irwyn a split second to recognize it had been sent directly into his mind.

*Yes, quite,* a different yet familiar voice sounded as well. It belonged to none other than Avys von Blackburg herself.

*Is this... some kind of communication magic?* Irwyn questioned. Speaking without speaking came to him almost naturally, though it felt slightly off as he could still ‘hear’ his voice despite never making a sound.

*You have been temporarily induced into the circuit,* Avys confirmed. *It is enough of an official channel that I can use snippets in legal proceedings. I do apologize for not sending help sooner – you had the misfortune of being assigned to a hostile coordinator. At least, with my daughter breaking **many** rules, you were nonetheless safe.*

*Why do we have hostile coordinators?* Irwyn questioned. *That sounds irresponsible at best.*

*Hostile to you,* Avys explained. *House Fathomsight has allies and associates after all. As I said, unfortunate that you happened to run into one who could obstruct you without technically breaking any rules.*

*I had been under the impression the nobility disliked scheming,* Irwyn frowned. And what else could such interference be called?

*It is more petty revenge than a conspiracy. The coordinator was never instructed or rewarded for what he has done. Quite the opposite as they will find out soon enough. Just a saboteur of opportunity.*

*You could have sent someone despite that, even if it raised eyebrows, Elizabeth spat harshly as if waiting for the opportunity.*

*And have it be found out you gave out your lifeline to seemingly just a follower? Avys scoffed. That is called emotional leverage, Lizzy. You would do well to not have it be known. By the time your report came the situation was already unlikely to deteriorate - have some faith in your man. That is completely ignoring the political capital it would cost us.*

*But we will get help now?* Irwyn made sure while diverting the topic.

*Why, it is quite possible the assassins might be after the heiress!* Avys chuckled darkly. *Their goals are, ultimately, just conjecture. House Blackburn must thus answer adequately. You will have a Shadow.*

*Which?* Elizabeth immediately asked while Irwyn processed the information in stunned silence. Dervish was a Shadow. So was Alira's once guardian who apparently went by Oxen. Each of them Irwyn had met, however, had been a domain mage. That was downright excessive force for just two just in conception.

*Impression, Avys answered as Irwyn's thoughts coursed. She has been inducted into their ranks just weeks ago after an unexpected breakthrough, thus you would not have heard of her.*

*Still a domain mage though, right? That seems almost too much.* Irwyn opined.

*She remains unstable after forming her domain and her specialty is the exact opposite of what is usually needed in a Lich war: She is a spy and interrogator using exclusively Soul magic. Horrible match against necromancers of equal power.*

*When can we expect her?* Elizabeth asked instead.

*About... twenty minutes?* Avys' smile was somehow almost audible. *Anything more is her stalling, Impression can be deceptively quick. She has also been noted to have quite the attitude by her past handlers but I expect you will have no trouble wrangling her.*

*Yes. Thank you...* Elizabeth reluctantly said, sliding her hand away from Irwyn's. *We will await her then.*

"We should head upstairs," Elizabeth said after a moment, turning towards the last person in the room who had been just... awkwardly standing around during the entire conversation she could not hear. "Alice, sorry, but I am not permitted to involve you despite my protests. I can brief you later, probably when this is all over. Or call you if you are needed, though I do not foresee that being the case."

"Well, at least I will have a secret to puzzle over instead of just doing nothing all day besides bleeding off the tension into my ring," Alice shrugged, taking it in stride as she turned to leave. "Good luck with whatever. We are getting help though, right?"

"More than enough," Irwyn confirmed with a nod.

"See you later then."

"Tea?" Elizabeth asked as they turned towards the stairs.

"I would like to hurry things along," Irwyn admitted. "My friends being left unattended with those two does not sit well with me."

“Understandable but we will be forced to wait a few minutes no matter what we do. Might as well use them productively.”

“Fine. Please,” Irwyn belatedly agreed to the earlier offer. Not five minutes later they were sitting at one of the top floor office spaces, enjoying a hot beverage. Elizabeth had taken the opportunity to also get some more paperwork done as soon as they sat down.

“How can you even focus on that?” Irwyn questioned.

“Well, I will have to write an entire report about *all* of this,” she sighed. “Might as well get started. Actually, you could help me with describing the parts I am not aware of. Waylan only knew so much and admitted a lot of it was conjecture. Just his ‘beast read’.”

And so Irwyn did. He couldn’t be sure what she already knew and so he explained everything to the best of his memory – the retelling rather slow given Elizabeth kept asking for details. It was almost 25 minutes later that he was cut off.

“You took your time,” Elizabeth’s eyes suddenly sharpened as she turned her head towards the doorway. Irwyn turned, seeing nothing there. Then he blinked and a short woman suddenly stood in the doorway. Thanks to Waylan’s conditioning to that exact scenario Irwyn was barely even surprised by the sudden appearance.

The Shadow felt like... Irwyn frowned. She felt like *something*. Irwyn was absolutely certain she gave him a suppressed but distinct impression. Much like Dervish or Oxen, a domain was hard to completely suppress and neither had Impression. It was just... just... no matter what Irwyn did he could not *remember* what the impression was. Like trying to hold water, it slipped right through his fingers, leaving the vague feeling of metaphorical moistness and absence of something that had been there. That feeling, Irwyn belatedly realized, also applied to her clothing and appearance. He knew the Shadow was a woman... but that was likely just because the Duchess had told him so. The effect was, nonetheless, impressive.

“Your Young Ladyship, I am Impression, at your command.”

“Control yourself,” Elizabeth was not impressed. “Your domain does not need to be held so loosely.”

“My apologies,” she bowed and Irwyn could suddenly tell much more. The Shadow seemed vaguely middle age, was definitely a woman with a pixie cut of... uncertain colour and wore all black robes. She took a seat, even though there was no chair – Irwyn barely noticed the strangeness of that. “I have not been properly briefed. All I know is that I am to interrogate then either capture or kill two domain mages.

“Irwyn, if you would please enlighten our help on the situation,” Elizabeth beckoned him

“Of course,” Irwyn quickly nodded. “It is like this...”

Irwyn once again repeated the most important point of his encounter with the two assassins. This time rather than great detail he focused mostly on the most important points. Namely, the need to ideally hurry.

“Strange, I could not feel them when coming here,” Impression frowned. “Were they hiding their Soul particularly well?”

“I think they were both Light mages,” Irwyn shrugged. “But they had tampered with some memories. Could be I did not feel a minor Soul element?”

“Subpar mastery would not hide them from me,” she shook her head, biting her lip. “Tracking is not my specialty but Conception Souls should be rather blatant...”

Irwyn caught the implication: That a reason for that could be the absence of such mages in the City. “One was Blinding made flesh and the other Fettering... with a hint of submission or something of the kind,” Irwyn thought back, making a realization as he spoke. “That is likely Soul-based, a secondary element to support Light. Is that reasonable?”

“Not common but not unheard of either,” Elizabeth concluded. “Minimal focus on Soul magic would explain the sloppy memory suppression coming from a Conception mage. And a Binding adjacent concept could also help with hiding - wardens may be inclined to hide the location of their inmates. A bit of a stretch, yet a plausible explanation.”

“I will judge for myself when I see them,” Impression nodded.

“How so?” Irwyn paused. “I do not wish to doubt your ability but I do worry...” he started. He was sure that... about what?

Irwyn frowned. His thought had been starkly cut off and he did not like that. There was also a strange feeling of wrongness coursing through him. Since he did not know who else to ask he would need to find Elizabeth... except he had no inkling where she might be. Perhaps down... down where? There was nothing below his feet as far as he could recall. What was he even doing?

Tightness spreading through his chest reinforced his... newfound inkling that something was wrong. Except he could not guess what. He wanted to sigh, except there was no breath to do so with. Ah, he was not breathing. He was quite sure that was bad. Except, how did one breathe? And what was the point of...

Irwyn took a deep breath a tremble going through his body as he fell to the ground. It could not have been more than a few seconds if that and he had not moved but the chair conjured of his own magic beneath his feet had at some point collapsed, “That was... unnerving,” he admitted, giving the Shadow a stare. He only half recalled what had just happened but it made his head spin. There could also only be one culprit.

“You are overstepping your boundaries,” Elizabeth’s gaze was significantly more heated as she was rapidly reaching a conclusion about what had just transpired.

“He wanted proof, did he not?” the Shadow looked at Elizabeth with certain condescension. Irwyn bit back an unpolite response. “That is not unlike consent.”

“Are you used to getting away with rudeness?” Elizabeth’s voice lost its heat, turning frigid instead - not that it was a good sign. Her eyes turned to the desk, the half-done paperwork still strewn around besides just the neat piles of older reports.

“I wouldn’t call it rudeness,” the woman just shrugged nonchalantly. “A doubt was raised and I quelled it.”

“I see,” Elizabeth nodded, as if to herself. She grabbed an inkwell, then stretched the hand out towards the other woman. “Drink.”

“You cannot...” Impression immediately spoke, clearly startled by the command.

“I suspect you have been lethally poisoned and this ink is the only known antidote,” Elizabeth interrupted her. Her expression was cold, not once shifting as she stared the Shadow down. “All of it. At once.”



And for all the ridiculousness of it, Impression did not speak any denial again. Her arm struggled and writhed, muscle doing everything it could to disobey what it was being forced to do. Nonetheless, the hand visibly had been detached from its owner's free will. All that remained was an inviolable command. The Shadow took the ink vial from Elizabeth and slowly, strugglingly, brought it to her lips.

Irwyn watched spellbound as the woman - the most powerful mage in the city by so many degrees of magnitude it was beyond proper comparison - tipped the small bottle and swallowed its mostly full contents.

To her credit, Impression barely choked. As the ink went down her expression cringed, then she gagged a little, followed by some dry heaving. It was a break of composure, yes, but Irwyn was half expecting a spray of vomit or perhaps a much more... volatile reaction to it. None of that came. All that followed were seething grit teeth and burning words swallowed in fear.

"For all I do not seek conflict, neither will I tolerate overt insults, Impression," Elizabeth unblinkingly stared at the tail end of the Shadow's expression twisting. "Not from someone who is so utterly not in the position to deliver them. Do you think that just because my cousins are too idiotic to figure out the loopholes of your fetters that this applies to the entire bloodline? Or that because some of my family's delegates were spineless that the Duke's progeny has forgotten Wrath? That just because you are now a Shadow you have somehow become more than you have always been?"

"No... Your Ladyship," the woman managed to force out. There was still a bit of heat in those eyes but also something not unlike fear as far as Irwyn could tell - and much more of the latter.

"Then we stop wasting Time on outbursts," Elizabeth nodded. "There are rogue mages in the City under my watch. That shall not last."