

Irwyn only left the orphanage after hours, deep into the night, when Kalista decided that it was way past the time they needed to herd the children to sleep. He had to promise he would visit again soon and Waylan chose to stay. At least for the moment. Aaron promised to keep a closer look at the undercurrents of the underworld and any sign of the undead and would send their sneak friend over if anything urgent happened.

The only other notable thing was perhaps Narcinia freaking out when she finally internalized that Irwyn and Waylan were back - which Irwyn exacerbated by increasing and lowering the shine of his eyes. He felt a bit about it afterwards given how good of a dinner the girl had cooked.

Irwyn had no trouble finding the way back to the army's camp even in the darkness. The sentries were more of a problem as they did not recognize Irwyn. He ended up spending several minutes in a futile struggle to convince them that he was not undead trying to deceive one of them into leaving to get someone higher up - mostly by pointing out how extraordinarily inefficient such a plan would be given neither of the soldiers were mages. He never managed to get through to the men, though the abnormality was spotted and someone a step more important came to investigate, immediately recognizing Irwyn.

The Sergeant in charge of the night watch was blatantly far less than pleased at the unannounced return though even more clearly did not *dare* blow up in the face of someone they had seen shadowing the company's new Captain... Irwyn opted for politeness and promised to be 'more mindful of proper protocol in the future' after apologizing, which seemed to calm the man greatly. And Irwyn did mean that: He had always harassed Waylan about following their own protocols for safety, only to break the army one on the first day. It was at the very least embarrassing and needless. Irwyn decided he would damn well learn the whole manual the next day before finally going to sleep.

In the morning he was actually woken up by Elizabeth knocking on his door with an invitation for breakfast. They ate at the large table of the ground floor's meeting room. The camp apparently had a few dedicated cooks, though the quality was a bit of a letdown for both of them. Perhaps Irwyn was just getting spoiled by chef-made cuisine.

"You usually wake up on your own around dawn," she noted.

"I usually also go to sleep sooner," he sighed. "I got absorbed in conversation."

"Yes, I know, you tripped about six separate alarms when entering the building," she nodded.

"We have *alarms*?" Irwyn paused.

"Obviously," Elizabeth nodded. "Do you think the undead don't deploy assassins? This building has magical tripwires everywhere, bound to notify me."

"I have not felt anything, though," he frowned. "And this company does not have any actual conception mages, right?"

"My personal place of residence for what could be months was not warded by our mediocre enchanters, Irwyn," she shook her head. "A proper professional made them. This place is built to hold off even Ravener's long enough for reinforcements from City Black to come."

"Would those not just... wait for you to leave the building?" Irwyn asked.

“Not all undead keep that much of their sanity. Or patience,” she shrugged. “The whispers of the Betrayed drive them mad, stroking their hatred of the living until it sometimes boils over, suppressing even reason. There are records of Named Liches acting hastily.”

“I always wondered whether these ‘whispers’ are literal,” Irwyn asked. “The Book of the Name mentions them a few times in reference to the undead, though it is never elaborated on.”

“There are accounts of people not being immediately subverted by undeath,” Elizabeth nodded. “Mostly very senior inquisitors being hastily raised in the middle of major battles and then turning on their defilers. I think there used to also be a monk monastery famous for remaining clear-minded past undeath, though they were wiped out centuries ago. These people, before being put to true death, have repeatedly accounted for an actual incessant voice compelling them to destroy *everything*. It is widely believed that this voice is heard by all undead and belongs directly to the Betrayer.”

“Just those raised ‘hastily’?” Irwyn noticed the specification.

“Well, I don’t think Liches like disobedience in the souls they conscript for their cause. If any such cases happen when the necromancers have the Time to cut them out, they obviously don’t get recorded. You mustn’t forget that anyone important or powerful enough is bound by very potent oaths and other countermeasures against being raised. Only the strongest of Liches would be able to circumvent those in the first place.”

“Sounds nasty,” Irwyn nodded. It made sense to him. They had used something similar in Abonisle.

“How was your reunion?” Elizabeth changed the direction.

“It has only been three months since I left, yet a lot has changed,” Irwyn summarized. “It feels like much longer whenever I think back on it. But friends are friends, I suppose?”

“Tell me more about it?” she asked, and so Irwyn did. He attempted to recount moments without the proper context, struggling to relay what they had been to him. Well, it did kill time if nothing else.

“I think my officers are arriving,” Elizabeth paused Irwyn as he was ending a short rant about Waylan’s targeted and continuous murder of all that is idiom.

“Yes, I can feel,” Irwyn nodded. Mages were approaching the building, seven in total. Soon enough they began to file in as Elizabeth stood up, Irwyn immediately following her example. By the time everyone had walked in - surprisingly enough all carrying clip boards, and obviously in uniforms - Irwyn remained the only person on the same side of the large table as their Captain.

He had actually remembered to study the military ranks since his time in Abonisle, therefore Irwyn could count the ranks in the small crowd. In total, they had four Lieutenants and three Sergeants present. The latter being a lower rank implied that the present trio was somehow outside the usual structure - and the night watch sergeant from the prior night being among them only reinforced that. They were all in their more advanced years, though not *old* old. Also, all were mages wielding intentions rather than concepts, most attuned to the Void.

“As you well know by now, I am Elizabeth von Blackburg,” the heiress opened. “I will be your Captain for the duration of our deployment in Ebon Respite. Next to me is Irwyn...”

“Pleasure,” he nodded as she beckoned.

“You may consider him my right hand,” she said. “He acts at his discretion with my confidence in regular matters. You may each introduce yourselves now.”

“Lieutenant Schwartz,” the first man introduced themselves, though Irwyn was rather confident he was going to forget. Well, he had some doubts about how important it was for him specifically to remember – the man looking extremely plain did not help. “I lead the First Platoon, specialized in urban warfare.”

“Lieutenant Blackadder, commanding the Second Platoon. We are best at trench and defensive battles,” the man had a mustache and strong eyebrows.

“Lieutenant Mattador, the Third Platoon. Reconnaissance and moving battles,” a cut ear was the most notable feature Irwyn could notice.

“Lieutenant Blackhill,” notably the only woman besides Elizabeth. More notably, her face and what little skin the uniform exposed were *covered* in scars. “I direct the Penal Platoon.”

“Sergeant Trecha,” said a man with a beard and mustache merging into one. They also had the feel of Time/Space magic on them. “I am in charge of the logistics squad, plus the adjacent scribes.”

“Sergeant Izeres,” the night watch sergeant spoke. “I manage in-camp security.”

“Sergeant Hiera,” the last man introduced himself. Irwyn noted that the man was by far the best in the officer group at restraining their own mana. “I lead a small elite squad outside the usual structure, should your Ladyship ever need to deploy us.”

“With introductions out of the way, best we start by addressing the most immediate concerns and establishing our overall strategy,” Elizabeth nodded. “As you may have guessed, I am behind on paperwork and procedure given my delayed arrival. If there is anything that should be addressed right away, best we speak of it now.”

“If I may your Ladyship,” Blackhill, the woman in charge of the Penal Platoon, spoke up. “Am I right to assume the individual you have removed from my care is to remain as such?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth nodded, not needing to even glance at Irwyn. “They may yet help us through Irwyn, but in a less official capacity either way.”

“In that case,” she nodded back, taking out two sheets of paper from her clipboard, then placing them on the table. “I have prepared the forms for pardon and a release from conscription. Just needing your signature and filling.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Elizabeth nodded, though left the paper lie for the moment. “Anything else?”

"I have a... concern I would rather first attempt to solve unofficially," Trecha, the logistical Sergeant said hesitantly after a few seconds of silence from the others.

"Speak then," Elizabeth beckoned.

"A very young but very talented mage has been assigned to my care," Trecha nodded. "However, she experiences what I can only call existential anguish. Should no remedies be made soon, I fear our first casualty may be to suicide."

"There are procedures for that," Blackhill pointed out.

"Which leave marks on their record, for decades and perhaps even centuries," Trecha shook his head. "Hence why I would, with her Ladyship's leave, at least attempt to resolve this without involving a committee and specialists."

"If said attempts produce no clear results or this mage's condition worsens, you will not hesitate to follow the necessary protocol," Elizabeth thought for a few moments before allowing the officer's plea.

"Of course, I have prepared her dossier," Trecha nodded, presenting the relatively thin file to Elizabeth. Irwyn glanced at it with idle curiosity... Then paused and focused fully on the picture.

There, a bit more disheveled was a familiar face. More than that: Recognizable. And Irwyn could put names to fewer faces than most. But this one, he had not forgotten. He was quite certain he was looking at a picture of Alice, the young heiress to Steelmire whom he had met alongside her artificer father in Abonisle.

"Something the matter?" Elizabeth had noticed his slight shift.

"I recognize her, your Ladyship," Irwyn frowned, his mind spinning. He knew that Steelmire had been destroyed, supposedly wiped out to the last child. Yet the girl was clearly alive... barring undeath. But an infiltrator would not act so disturbed as to be singled out. But then, it could also be a girl who just happened to not be in Steelmire when disaster struck... while her entire family had been.

"Is that so? From where?" she asked.

"The exact identity might be sensitive," Irwyn thought through his words. "I would rather err on the side of caution with discretion."

"Then we can discuss in private later," Elizabeth affirmed. "I will let you know soon Sergeant, though I expect a familiar face may be welcome."

"Thank you, your ladyship," Trecha nodded.

"Then if there is nothing else," Elizabeth paused and only continued when no one had another issue to raise. "We need to get on the same page on what this company will be doing in Ebon Respite."

"We are supposed to suppress any arising undead threat," Blackhill pointed out.

"There is no point in denying that this close to City Black we are not performing a glamorous duty," Elizabeth shook her head. "Though we are not likely to actually encounter any undead, I expect the company to perform adequately enough so that I can give out any reasonable commendation and we can move on. Hence, we must be on the same page on the methods."

"The third platoon is the best trained for searching, Your Ladyship" the mentioned platoon's Lieutenant spoke out.

"Not necessarily in an urban setting," Schwartz shook his head. "The first specializes in tight streets and from what I have seen of this city the architecture would test even the best doctrine. Our scouts require actual experience for that."

"Is there any point in patrolling at all?" Blackadder - whom Irwyn was intently trying not to mix up with Blackhill - spoke up. "My second platoon is best dug in, waiting for an attack."

"The Penals cannot be let loose, obviously," Blackhill added. "They will be staying in camp where I can see them until we know of an actual undead force."

"Ebon Respite is far too large to feasibly patrol," Irwyn pointed out the obvious. "Why not outsource information gathering?"

"To whom?" Blackhill asked.

"I have connections in the city's underbelly," Irwyn vaguely admitted. "It would be the lowest of the low who should be first targeted by any potential undead. The people no one would miss or notice being gone, except each other. I say we ask for eyes to be kept out."

"And the price?" Trecha questioned.

"All things are negotiable," Irwyn said as he had no idea. Aaron had provisionally agreed to keep an ear on the city's dead nerve endings but they had not exactly talked money during their reunion. And of course, with more resources more could be learned - not to mention Irwyn wouldn't want to pay his friends less than they were worth but rather the opposite.

"Budget can be discussed. Or expanded, if need be," Elizabeth said and there was no discussion in that direction after that.

"Patrol our immediate surroundings, then prepare search squads for any potential discovery," Schwartz suggested. "Mixed squads, first and third."

"We will need to start training them to work together. Today, if possible," Matt... Matt something said. *It's been just minutes!* Irwyn wanted to curse. He would need to ask for a name list at least, then study it. "But it is agreeable."

"Do so then," Elizabeth nodded. "For everything else operate as you usually would. I do not expect perfect cohesion in a week but aim in that direction. Thank you for your time, dismissed."

What followed was a round of bowing and polite goodbyes before the group indeed left.

"The girl?" Elizabeth asked when everyone was safely out of earshot.

"I am quite sure she is the preferred heiress to Steelmire or something along those lines," Irwyn nodded, glancing at the file which Elizabeth opened up again.

"Steelmire was obliterated," Elizabeth frowned.

"So I have heard," Irwyn nodded.

"This doesn't mention such an affiliation," her frown deepened, staring at the dossier. "Rather, it has a completely different background. But you are sure."

"I do not remember most faces," Irwyn nodded. "But I think I would not mistake the few I do. They are people who left impressions."

"And she had?" Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

"Well, perhaps not *just* her, but the day was notable," Irwyn shrugged. "It was when you temporarily left Abonisle. She came to Abonisle with her father, I think I mentioned Hen Daut."

"I read a report, yes," Elizabeth nodded, biting her lip. "It only mentioned that the man had reported he was coming with his *apprentice*."

"Is it that easy to lie when traveling by teleportation?" Irwyn raised an eyebrow at that.

"I don't run the duchy's intelligence network or any sort of inspection," Elizabeth sighed. "I would assume my mother would have known, or at least one of her subordinates would have... but I obviously do not double-check every smidgen of paperwork I come upon with her."

"What do we do about this, then?" Irwyn sighed. "I can see *why* she would take on a fake identity but it is only a matter of time until someone else makes the connection."

"Assuming my mother already hasn't and this isn't some kind of long-winded ploy of throwing her my way," Elizabeth sighed. "It passed the recruitment criteria, I suppose, so the forgery cannot be completely paper thing at least."

"How likely is that this is the Duchess' doing?" Irwyn questioned. If he had not met the Duchess himself he would have thought it just paranoia. Now he was genuinely wondering.

"Hard to tell with what little I know," Elizabeth sighed again, wearier. "How good is she?"

"Hmm," Irwyn thought back. They had competed, briefly. Restrained in a game sure, but it was something. She had used... around a dozen two-intention constructs? Thereabouts. The math from that was not hard. "When I met her I think she was close to achieving four intentions."

"And she is our age as well," Elizabeth paused. "Well, I suppose the heiress to Steelmire would have to be a genius by the usual standards. What element does she wield?"

"Time," Irwyn replied. "I had sensed nor seen anything else. And I am not the best judge of skill since I have scarcely ever met any other such mages."

"A prodigious Time mage, huh," Elizabeth bit her lip. "What did you think of her? As a person, I mean."

“We have not talked too much,” Irwyn shrugged. “A bit arrogant and naive, I suppose? Competitive. Though she must have shifted somewhat given her trauma. She seemed rather cheerful and careless before, for one.”

“Hmm,” Elizabeth hummed, thinking. “What do you think we should do then?”

“Well, checking up on her does sound simple enough to do,” Irwyn nodded. “After that? I do not think I honestly care *that* much.”

“If possible, Irwyn,” she spoke hesitantly. “I would like you to try to recruit her to my banner.”

“What happened to ‘not making allies’?” Irwyn raised an eyebrow slightly.

“With Steelmire gone, its inheritor wouldn’t have enough connections to be considered ‘threatening’ as politics reckon such things,” she sighed, then hesitated again. “I hope you won’t think less of me for it, but my reasons are rather calloused.”

“People get used,” Irwyn just shrugged at that. “I dislike needless cruelty, Elizabeth, but I will not draw a line at using basically strangers.”

“Alright. The reason I want her is twofold,” Elizabeth nodded, her gaze sharpening. “First of all, she is a talented Time mage. Having such on retainer is *incredibly* convenient. If she progresses her magic far enough in the future, having an established relationship with her could spare us a lot of problems.”

“I suppose teleportation does sound convenient,” Irwyn nodded.

“Not just that Irwyn,” Elizabeth said. “Transportation, safekeeping, preservation of items, warding against offensive Time magics. Mages like her excel at all those and more.”

“I see.”

“Secondly, there is a good chance my mother will attempt to investigate Steelmire and what happened there more closely,” Elizabeth resumed. “At such time, if Alice is already staunchly following us, my mother would need to bribe me into allowing interrogation. Which is why I hope you can obtain Alice for me.”

“Well, I can try, but I am not exactly an adept recruiter.”

“You don’t need to be,” Elizabeth shook her head with a strange smile. There was a shred of pity in it, though certainly not for Irwyn, “She is a young girl who has lost everything. All you need to do is be comforting, understanding. Offer a helping hand from the quicksand of despair. Then bring her to me. I never excelled at those lessons, Irwyn, but I am still my mother’s daughter.”