

It took two more days for Irwyn to fully recover after that. He slept a lot during that time, more than he would have expected to be proper. When he finally left that white-sheeted bed, he expected atrophy to have set in at least somewhat. Instead, to his surprise, his legs felt better than ever. Actually, his body overall appeared *stronger*, which should really not be the case after lying in bed for almost a week. Actually, he was feeling better than he could recall. Elizabeth had an answer when he asked.

"Well, of course," she raised an eyebrow. "It's not exactly difficult for a good healer to maintain the patient's muscle. They also adjusted yours a bit since you were not exactly in perfect shape."

"That's possible?" Irwyn stared.

"Very few things are not," Elizabeth shrugged.

"If I had known I would have asked *months* ago," he did not look away.

"A procedure like that takes a day or two where you cannot really move," she shrugged. "And practicing magic can mess with it. They need to Graft the muscle and then carefully settle any signs of rejection, at least that's the simple explanation I received. It would have probably been annoying and likely not particularly important."

"This is not important?" he shook his head. He felt *amazing*. Irwyn had never been completely out of shape - what thief could afford that? - but neither was he athletic. Waylan could always borderline lap him in a sprint and his body strength would not match a farmhand. Now thought? He felt strange dexterity that went beyond his magic. "I don't remember ever feeling *this*."

"*This*?" Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, confused.

"It's nothing in particular," Irwyn tried to explain. "I have always been healthy and healed right. But I feel just... better. Slightly, in almost every way. I cannot point anything out as different but it's genuinely incredible."

"I see," she paused, frowning. "Had I known the difference would be so marked for you I would have suggested it sooner."

"Probably one of those things lost in translation," Irwyn nodded, flexing his hand experimentally. It held strength it hadn't before. Nothing even remotely relevant in combat, but what was a rounding error in battle somehow had a far greater benefit in a different way.

"That being said we should get going," she interrupted. "I have already delayed as long as I reasonably could before people start to grumble about not fulfilling my duties."

"Going *where*?" Irwyn paused, frowning.

"You don't remember?" she frowned right back, then shook her head. "No, I shouldn't assume you remember anything during your sickness. We have received our deployment."

"Oh," Irwyn nodded at that. "Your mother mentioned you would be relegated to a 'position of no actual merit'."

"A captainship of a company in a city with most likely no actual undead infiltration," she smiled. "But recent enough undead-related accident that it wouldn't be unreasonable that I would be sent there."

"Then we should get going," Irwyn said.

"Aren't you a least bit curious *where* we might be headed?" she said with a slight pout.

"I mean, it will be the same either way for me, won't it?" he shrugged. He wasn't exactly well-traveled or particularly connected.

"Honestly," she shook her head. "And I had the whole conversation planned about getting you to guess it."

"Then somewhere I presumably know," Irwyn concluded from that. Then paused. *Oh.*

"You grinned," she commented, then copied the gesture.

"It's Ebon Respite."

"Got it in one," Elizabeth nodded, smiling.

Irwyn paused to really process that. Ebon Respite, the city he had once called home. Maybe it still was. It had been... less than three months or thereabouts since he had left. Probably. It felt like much longer. Irwyn just lost count of the days with how intense they oftentimes were. He had assumed it would be years before he accumulated the kind of power that would let him stride in through the front gate with his head held high, if he ever could come back. And yet, in such a short time he was returning, no longer a fugitive without recourse as he had left.

And he was... different. Irwyn understood that much about himself. It would be delusional to think otherwise. Magically for one, he had left as a whelp with once intention to his name - he returned with at least 6 and the hint of a *Name*. The *at least* was because he did have another vision during the Exenn. And with the following sickness he never had the chance to test its limits .

"Can we spare a few more minutes?" he asked. "And are we magically insulated?"

"Sure, what do you have in mind?" Elizabeth nodded.

"Well, I did have another vision during the festivities."

"And you improve after those."

"Exactly," Irwyn smiled. "I want to see how much further this brought me."

To that she only gestured for him to go ahead. Not hesitating Irwyn began to summon rods of Flame, five intentions each. It was the most reliable metric he could measure. One, five, eight, 12, 15... and no more. He was close to the 16th, sure, but he still frowned. It was small compared to the leaps he had made in the past.

"A lot less of an improvement than usual," he commented. From 13 to not even 16. Fraction of the previous time. Yes, still incredible for what was essentially 30 minutes... perhaps he was just getting spoiled.

"Maybe it's because of the frequency?" Elizabeth suggested.

"I don't think these visions particularly care about the binding of Time," Irwyn shook his head.

"But your body does," she mirrored the gesture. "The Universal Law of Flow: Any magic that affects things or beings susceptible to Time will be affected by its passage to a greater degree than it otherwise would be, unless the magic already fully complies with its flow."

"I had no idea there was such a thing," Irwyn paused.

"It's not exactly one on for the beginner textbooks," Elizabeth shrugged. "Spells that bend or outright break the rules of Time are above even most Domain magic, no need to bother the average mage with knowledge that will never affect them. I only know this because my father is skilled enough at such bending for the Law to matter."

"I suppose that is good to know," Irwyn sighed. "Let's get going then."

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The travel was not difficult. City Black had its temporal beacon, which meant they could be far more easily teleported out. Ebon Respite wasn't too far to begin with, the town named for its proximity to the Duchy's capital. Irwyn did note one thing while they were making their way over to a translocationist that would send them, though.

"You are carrying a bag," he squinted at Elizabeth.

"My dress' subdimension is too difficult to access without a Beacon," she shrugged, inclining her head. "You know that."

"Well, intellectually perhaps," it did matter quite a bit during the Abonisle incursion. "It just goes against the usual image, I suppose."

When they exited the Voidways they were not even made to wait, blatantly skipping the line in whatever the teleportation center was called. The Time mage that sent them along was notably barely middle-aged, though Irwyn supposed that Ebon Respite really was not far. He blinked, then they were somewhere else, in a room with only a door and nothing else in it.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"The administration building," Elizabeth hummed. "Want to show me around?"

"Figures," Irwyn did not have the best memory of this place. "Unfortunately, my best familiarity in these parts happens to be with the dungeon beneath, and a passing one at that. I suppose I could try and point out the spot where Alira cursed herself."

"I meant the city," she rolled her eyes. "I have been here once or twice in the past, though only ever in this building or thereabout."

"Are we not supposed to introduce ourselves to the soldiers?" Irwyn raised an eyebrow. "I assume they are already in Ebon Respite. And you are going to lead them."

"They set up on the edge of the slums," she nodded. "There was still enough rubble from the undead attack a few months ago that they weren't really displacing anyone setting up in the middle of the city."

"Which side?" Irwyn nodded. Only the most desperate or most isolated would even try to live in undead-made debris.

"Side?"

"Well, yes," Irwyn inclined his. "Which slums - the Mainside or the Otherside?"

"There... are two?" she asked hesitantly.

"Otherside is a lot smaller," Irwyn nodded. "It used to be ruled mostly by a gang called Stars. Actually, kind of amusing in hindsight. It's probably Mainside thought, that's what most readers think of when they say slums."

"You are overwhelming me a bit with the slang here, Irwyn," she paused. "What is 'roader' even supposed to mean?"

"Road street folk," Irwyn shrugged. "The big fancy street going through the middle of the city, around the road that goes to and from City Black."

"You know that is a lot more than just one street, right?"

"Everyone called it Road Street," Irwyn shrugged. "Same kinds of people all way along."

"You would know better I suppose," she nodded. "We should probably ask for exact directions. I am not sure anyone even noticed we have arrived."

"There did not use to be any mages here," Irwyn smiled. "Not after that magelord guy died a few years back. I wonder if that has changed before the army came."

"There has never been any magelord staying in Ebon Respite," Elizabeth frowned.

"That is what everyone called the bastard," he just shrugged. "I do not recall their name, obviously but they were not very liked."

"I haven't studied the city's recent history to know the exact people garrisoned here in recent years," she said. "But it certainly wasn't a magelord. That is a *very* exact title."

"What does it mean then?" Irwyn inquired, ignoring that they were still, in fact, standing around in the room they had arrived in.

"It declares someone's right to start a House... or School, or Sect or whatever, depending on where in the Federation they are," Elizabeth explained. "The title requires both appointment from a Duke and for the mage to attain at least a Domain. It's also universally accepted in the entire Federation."

"The same level as Dervish," Irwyn noted, quite amazed.

"Not quite the same level," she shook her head. "Dervish has three and each is a massive leap in both power and difficulty. He could pounce right through most mages at one without even slowing down."

"Fascinating, thank you," Irwyn nodded, thoughtful. "But we should probably get going."

"I wonder how many more times that will end up being said before we actually do," she smiled.

Well, they did actually get things done after that. They found some kind of office worker nearby who became *very* nervous upon noticing Elizabeth's quite visible insignias. Though the first person did not know what the duo wanted, they were quickly escorted to someone who did. Soon enough Irwyn and Elizabeth were out on the street, on their way to Elizabeth's appointed company.

"As I thought, mainside," Irwyn nodded when they were out of earshot. "Barely even the slums, really. More like the outskirts." The slums proper did not *have* street names or exact addresses.

And they were on their way, getting a carriage to take them down the roadstreet. It was almost strange to walk down here as if he belonged... until Irwyn remembered that he did, in fact, belong. He looked around at the vaguely familiar sights: The overabundant guards, the massive warehouse complex where that fateful heist had taken place, streets he had trod upon in the past... It was strange to look down at them so.

It only took a few minutes to arrive at their destination. The coach took a side road that led towards a few establishments not far from the main highway, letting them depart at their leisure. They needed to cross to the other side, though instead of heading for the nearest overpass - the road itself was generally not really crossable with all the traffic - Irwyn had another idea. He conjured steps of solid Flame, leading up above the carriages and wagons, then gestured Elizabeth to go on ahead. She did with a laugh.

Then they trod overhead the many merchants and rich folk heading down the road, one step at a time appearing in front of them then vanishing right behind. It would certainly start rumors aplenty but that was quite fine. Those were not always a bad thing. And well, for all he was here with Elizabeth, Irwyn was also Young Mockingbird. And he had both old 'enemies' and friends in this city. Rumors would spread and the right ears would recognize him. Because what he used to call enemies a few months back no longer scared him. And he didn't really need to hide his identity anymore, did he?

The company's camp was still a good few minutes of walking away from the Roadstreet. When they were close Irwyn decided to slow down to be that formal half-step behind. Elizabeth, though, would have none of that.

"Side by side, Irwyn," she smiled.

"I thought that was considered inappropriate," he raised an eyebrow though did not object, taking a few faster steps than matching her pace again.

"On a formal occasion, in the halls of politics and politeness," she nodded. "Here, we are showing soldiers that you have my implicit trust. So that they don't doubt you if you ever need to borrow the authority that is my blood right."

The camp itself was both simple and amazing. The soldiers had cleared out more than a few blocks, setting up a large perimeter around a pit, palisade, and a fence of metal rods behind all that. Beyond were buildings from unmarked grey stone which could have only been erected by Realm mages in such a short time. For all they looked improvised, Irwyn assumed they had to be solid, though he did not understand what regulations the army applied. It certainly allowed for a much more condensed campside than tents would though.

Irwyn and Elizabeth approached a bridge - one stood approximately in each cardinal direction. The soldiers manning the checkpoint noticed them well before they even left the cover of buildings around the clearing, visibly spreading the word of their approach to anyone nearby. By the time the duo arrived, there was a whole welcome party. What followed was a barrage of formalities and names Irwyn frankly struggled to retain.

Elizabeth took it all with easy grace, handling the soldiers with the authority she had been born into and clearly taught how to wield. In a few minutes time the group of two dozen split apart to spread her message. She would hold a meeting among the officers the following dawn and expected all of them to be present. Just one soldier stayed along to guide them to Elizabeth's personal building which would apparently also serve as the point for officer meetings, vault, office space, and a few other functions if need be. Irwyn had doubts about putting all that into one target but wasn't going to question the doctrine of an ancient organization that presumably knew better than him. The building itself looked unassuming at least, no different than the surrounding constructs of rock, lightly outwardly enchanted as they all seemed to be. He wondered where the soldiers got all the raw material from.

“Dismissed,” Elizabeth nodded to the soldier that had brought them who saluted and quickly left. “Well, this is presumably where we will be staying for who knows how long. Pick any of the bedrooms on the first floor. They should all be the same.”

“I might be out often,” Irwyn said, eyeing the lobby. It was a spacious hall taking up the entire floor with several boards, a large table as well as a map of Ebon Respite. No guessing where official meetings would be held, he supposed. “I have to figure out how the city has changed while I was gone. And reconnect with old friends. The Guild could be very helpful in spotting any undead machinations there might be if we are taking the assignment seriously.”

“You do that,” she nodded. “I will be busy with paperwork today. I probably have a backlog from the delay.”

“Is there a lot of paperwork given the... nature of this deployment?” Irwyn raised an eyebrow. They were basically supposed to just look for a possible budding incursion that was most likely not even there.

“You would be surprised,” she sighed. “I practiced for this, you know. Had tutors dedicated to explaining how all this works and to guide me through practical exercises. The company has scribes to deal with mundane stuff but unfortunately the Duchy of Black’s doctrine has been historically very top-heavy when it comes to decision-making. It’s supposedly a lot better than before my father took power but I cannot delegate all that much.”

“I would help but you know...” *paperwork.*

“Yes, go reconnect,” she nodded. Then beckoned him towards the stairways. There were two, one on each back end of the hall. “But pick a room first. Also, be here for the meeting tomorrow morning. I have to at least tell everyone that they should listen to you.”

“I will probably be back to sleep,” Irwyn shrugged. “It’s what, barely noon?”

“Just past,” she affirmed. They were up the stairwell at that point revealing that the second floor was more of a long rectangular corridor with rooms in the middle and a narrower circular stairway in each corner. There were grated windows to the sides, providing natural light as well as what seemed like ceiling enchantments for the evenings. “The bedrooms are here. The top floor is office space.”

“This is certainly a curious arrangement...” Irwyn stared a bit. He counted four rooms, split into two rows. The doors were also notably made from solid metal.

“The idea is that anything ambushing you in your sleep has to go through two walls, giving you a split second extra to react,” she shrugged.

“What about being buried in debris,” Irwyn questioned.

“The doctrine prioritizes the survival of competent mages above all else,” she explained. And just one floor’s worth of rock with a small drop wouldn’t bother those. “Barracks for non-mage soldiers are built differently.”

“I will take this one then, I suppose,” Irwyn nodded, pointing to one of the rooms. It stirred some memories about his old room with the Tears: A windowless chamber on the second floor of a building with split stairways leading up. Feeling that reminiscence, he ended up picking the third room on the left, which coincidentally felt the same distance from the stairwell as his old room had. Not that he measured, it was just a feeling somewhere in between nostalgia and muscle memory. He was back in Ebon Respite, after all, it was only appropriate.

"I will have your things brought over," Elizabeth nodded, then she went up to the upper floor.

Irwyn meanwhile entered his room. Unlike the previous corridor, it was dark inside, which he quickly solved with a bit of Light magic. He noticed there was actually an enchantment in the room's ceiling that connected to a switch imbued into the wall by the entrance, though he would honestly probably not use it.

Looking around, the room was simple, if surprisingly spacious: It had a bathroom corner with a toilet and a sink - luxuries he presumed most did not get in their own rooms - an open closet, a wooden table with two chairs, and a bed. What more could he really ask for? Irwyn hummed and was about to turn around and leave when he noticed something else underneath the bed. Frowning he leaned down, checked it for magic, then pulled the thing out when he felt none. It was a wooden box which he promptly put on top of the bed, nondescript, except for a single detail:

A minimalistic drawing on the top. Really more of a few scribbles that most people would not be able to make sense of. But Irwyn did recognize it immediately. He had seen it quite a few times, drawn *exactly* like that. It was, after all, a crow.