

Elizabeth led way through the camp confidently. How she knew *where* exactly to go Irwyn wasn't sure and didn't ask, their last conversation still weighing on his mind. A few of the soldiers eyed them on the way, though no one quite ever got the courage to question Elizabeth. Irwyn was observing though: There were mages among them, dozens from just what he could see or feel. Sure, most barely felt like mages, not even capable of imbuing intentions if Irwyn was reading them right, but mages nonetheless.

A quick question revealed that the company counted 305 soldiers including the two of them, from whom 33 were mages. Ten percent-ish... he would have expected more from what he was feeling, but perhaps he was just perceiving the majority of them from a distance while just not noticing most of the normal soldiers. Whether one in ten was a lot or a little, Irwyn didn't actually know, though any number was a lot for Ebon Respite.

The camp was littered with lightly enchanted stone buildings, each looking outwardly almost identical. Which was probably the point. From an outside perspective, if Irwyn wanted to attack the command center from a distance he would have no clue which building it might be. Sure, that could be remedied with spying and such, but what information couldn't? Looking at it like that, Irwyn felt it was a solid simple countermeasure, for all it could be a bit confusing.

The penal platoon did not appear any different at first... except that the entrance had a large metal gate. It was open at the moment, though Irwyn had no doubt it could be closed shut and tight if need be. Presumably in the evenings.

"And who is... augh!" a voice sounded attracting their attention, just in time to see a man getting smacked over the back of his head by a fellow soldier. Irwyn immediately noticed a distinct black mark had been tattooed to their forehead - and it wasn't hard to guess what it implied.

"Sorry, madam, sir," the second penal soldier was already apologizing as the first reeled. "My friend got a loud mouth, is all."

"Gather the platoon, soldier," Elizabeth basically ignored their theatrics and commanded. "I want to have a look at them."

"Eh... yes madam," the man paused hesitantly, then nodded, then dragged off the other man who had shut up. Some of the non-penal soldiers within earshot had heard them and were gathering as well, though only in the distance in small groups. Elizabeth let them be, therefore Irwyn didn't care either.

It took... several minutes for the lot to gather on the empty lot in front of their building. They streamed out of the building in small, rough-looking groups. For one, Irwyn didn't spot a single woman among them - not that men were not a majority in the army, it just wasn't 100% anywhere else. What he did spot thought were the old familiar habits and poses. Another bout of nostalgia struck as he damn well identified half the people as gang muscle, a formerly vital skill of being to tell who on the street was likely to try and rob him. Or just knock his teeth in out of principle. Most were not the nice type of enforcer from what Irwyn could see. Muscular brutes, massive arms, much less upstairs - at least generally. A fair number had ticks that Irwyn associated with narcotic withdrawals or scars from a shanking.

The other half generally didn't strike Irwyn with a particular impression. They seemed like... people. Men of various builds that generally looked nervous compared to the street scum used to the ever-present threat of death. One even wore spectacles! That being said, Irwyn still frowned. He kept looking over the faces yet recognition did not strike.

"35," Elizabeth was frowning as well. "There is one missing."

"Sorry, yer madamship," a familiar voice sounded from the right, making Irwyn snap to it. He had not noticed so much as a hint of anyone getting there in broad daylight. "I figured, make an impression, eh?"

"..." Elizabeth opened her mouth and was about to speak, though Irwyn did first.

"You look like a mess," Irwyn said, smiling fondly. The tattoos were certainly new. Not just the one dot on the forehead but countless engraving of black ink forming images and something reminiscent of letters on every bit of exposed skin, very much including the young man's face.

"Not half bad, actually," the other man grinned. "Shit's rough since a few cocksuckers are hoarding every shower time. Doin' about as well I would expect."

"Language, Waylan," Irwyn could not suppress his grin as he slightly chided.

"Ehm," Elizabeth cleared her throat. "I believe introductions will be in order."

"Yes..." Irwyn nodded and was about to introduce his best friend, except he was cut off.

"A less public place will do," she then turned towards the gathered penal platoon who were, frankly, staring. Irwyn was pretty sure he could point out one of them who had made some kind of issue with Waylan given that the massive man looked on the brink of fainting. "Dismissed."

"No... procedure or some such needed?" Waylan asked hesitantly a few moments later as they began to walk out of earshot.

"My word is procedure enough," Elizabeth smiled. "The census can be adjusted when convenient."

"Noted, madam," Waylan obviously did not argue for paperwork and promptly silenced himself. The walk back to the command building was the same, though it felt longer, passed in silence. It was still empty so they took up the larger corridor on the third floor.

"The introductions then," Irwyn suggested as he made them each a chair from solid Flames.

"Doesn't dis... burn?" Waylan stared at his hesitantly while Elizabeth was already seated.

"Perfectly safe," Irwyn assured. Containing all the heat within the magic at this range was downright rudimentary nowadays. "I can switch yours to Light if you prefer."

"Will take yer word," Waylan grunted and sat down with the look of a man jumping into a cold pool. He looked almost surprised that it felt just like a regular chair. A bit better even - Irwyn made chairs often enough he had spent the small effort needed to make them more comfortable than just a stiff board.

"Elizabeth, Waylan, my old partner in crime and best friend," Irwyn offered, "And Waylan, Elizabeth von Blackburg, *high* on that last name ladder."

"Pleasure," Elizabeth offered.

"Likewise, likewise," Wayland nodded twice, not quite hiding his eyes going wide, then he turned back to Irwyn. "Wow, I didn't know what to think when Old Crow said he got you into touch with help but... wow."

"Am I so unexpected?" Elizabeth inclined her head.

"I was thinkin', you know, maybe a political rival or sometin'," Waylan paused, then pointed at Elizabeth's insignia ring. "No offense, but my upbringing taught me a load of fear for that mark."

"My mother tells me that fear can be a healthy thing," she nodded.

"Your mother as in..." Waylan inquired.

"Yes, the Duchess," Elizabeth smiled, which was strange given she never did that when speaking of her mother. It was already unusual she would bring Avys von Blackburg up at all.

"How did you even end up in a penal platoon, Waylan," Irwyn changed the topic.

"The only way me knows how," he grinned, "Theft."

"Theft is not a crime severe enough to be relegated to there," Elizabeth's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

"Aye, usually not," Waylan nodded. "Except the cunt who grabbed me was sure it was a conspiracy and I was refusing to give everyone else up. It may have also been an artifact that went missing, which had the man pissy since he couldn't find the mundane little me for a fuckin' month."

"I remember a report like this," Elizabeth paused, thinking for a moment. "Almost a month ago, at the fortress South of Drathsol, they opened their war vaults for inspections only to find out the Mantle of the Impresent was missing."

"A named item, sounds important," Irwyn half asked.

"All artifacts are named. Well, almost," Elizabeth nodded. "It's the legend that makes them artifacts instead of just a good enchantment."

"Ye, it was a cloak blacker than black," Waylan nodded.

"How in the world did you break in, unnoticed even," Elizabeth seemed genuinely curious. "It was in a fortress' *vault*."

"Eh, all the security was magic," Waylan grinned. "I snuck right through. Getting dem keys was a problem since I figured there must be at least three separate keys to get in. I skulked around for a week before three holders got drunk enough at once to not notice till morn'. From there it was easy enough. Lazy, those soldiers."

"There are hundreds of protections overlaying a vault fortress like that," Elizabeth was exacerbated. "The foundation is domain magic."

"No clue what that is," Waylan shrugged. "But... actually, better you just see. Irw, use some magic on me, just try to feel where I am. Ye can do that, right?"

"Easily," Irwyn nodded, then summoned the magic with curiosity. Frankly, he did not have a proper spell for it but he wouldn't admit that. An idea had dwelled in his head for a while for something similar anyway. He just needed to downscale a bit rather than aiming for omniscience.

Irwyn was pretty sure his old dream of 'seeing everything touched by Light' was still out of reach. That didn't mean he couldn't go several steps back from that for a simple, improvised perception spell. He sent a wave of weak Light he *concealed* to be invisible, then he just perceived where the Light wasn't able to pass through. In theory, he should have easily been able to make out shapes and where they were as the light passed by and around everything in its way. For simplicity, as it was his first time using it, Irwyn kept it one directional.

And it worked... on the chair Waylan was sitting on. On the far wall, and the table and the other chair of the working station that happened to be right behind Waylan. All of that he could feel. But not his friend. It was as if Waylan was air.

"I cannot feel you at all," Irwyn admitted.

"May I try?" Elizabeth chimed in.

"Go on," Waylan shrugged, a smug smile tugging at his lips.

"Indeed, absolutely nothing," Elizabeth frowned after a moment. "This is far from my specialty but I should be able to feel *something* where you are. Or at least a hint of magical interference."

"That's 'cause this ain't magic," Waylan fully grinned.

"What else could it be?" Elizabeth frowned.

"Dunno," to that Waylan only shrugged. "But it's some serious stuff. Old Crow gave me this book which had all these tattoos of power in it, Waylan gestured over himself. "I wasn't sure about it at first. But then I found out I had apparently been doing these 'preparations' for it for actual frickin' years as daily exercise. Old Crow got me started himself on the first few and I filled my collections since. Stuff's *wild*."

"You read a book?" Irwyn inclined his head teasingly.

"And where might it be?" Elizabeth asked.

"Aye, even I could bear with it for *this*," Waylan nodded. "And I burned it when I was done, just as Old Crow asked me to."

"Shame," Elizabeth sighed.

"What can you do though?" Irwyn was much more curious about the effect than the source.

"I am much sneakier in basically every way," Waylan nodded, leaning forward. "I can slip through tighter spaces. My body is a bit improved. And... that's it."

"That's it?" Elizabeth repeated, dubiously.

"It ain't magic, as I said," Waylan nodded. "I can't throw fireballs or just make chairs with a thought, never will. Old Crow said that magic is amazing and all, but also all about talent. Those who don't have that must do with lesser options. Then it's better to be super specialized so I can match mages in at least *something*. So stealth it is."

"Why are you so hard to detect though?" Elizabeth frowned.

"The book called it 'Will of the absent one'," Waylan explained. "As long as I focus on it, I can have magic – and other things, though I am not sure what – just act as if I wasn't there... Well, magic not tryin' hurt me. Damn exhausting if I do it more than a few minutes thought."

"But you did an entire heist under the effect," Irwyn noted.

"I have pills that let me use it longer," Waylan shrugged. "Well, had. They got confiscated."

"Those could be recovered," Elizabeth suggested.

"Don't bother," Waylan shook his head. "The cunt who grabbed destroyed all my shit just to get a rise outta me."

“What happened to the Mantle of the Impresent then?” Elizabeth asked. “I don’t believe it was ever recovered, so it must be somewhere.”

“I ‘ate it,” Waylan nodded.

“That is a strong feeling to have towards something *you* stole,” Irwyn inclined his head.

“Not ‘ate, ‘ate,” Waylan said, then paused. “Like, eat. Eaten. In before out.”

“Oh,” Irwyn paused at that.

“What do you mean you ate an artifact?!” Elizabeth’s reaction was far less tame.

“Chomp?” Waylan mimed biting while inclining his head.

“That is ridiculous,” she remained very exasperated.

“I never knew you liked swallowing cloth,” Irwyn added.

“More like chewing,” Waylan shrugged. “I chewed and swallowed whatever power was in it, then spat out the rest. No leather broth for me again, thanks. It passed down to the tattoos thought,” he pointed at his body. “They grew four, five times as many after that. Gave me goosebumps for *weeks*. I have gotten much better after.”

“That doesn’t explain *anything!*” Elizabeth seemed on the verge of losing her composure.

“Presumably anything that has power could be subverted into something else, right?” Irwyn guessed.

“Maybe raw magical enchantment, but artifacts don’t work that way,” she shook her head.

“Artifacts are no longer magic, at least not fully. Those that were originally magical might retain some mana but artifacts are *defined* by their legend. By great feats that left a mark on Fate itself which transformed their power into a part of a living myth. The Mantle was the favorite cloak of *the* Impresent, a Named from many centuries ago. It is said they perished casting down 3 Named liches, leaving only this cloak behind in the ravaged battlefield.”

“You are speaking as if I could explain it,” Waylan simply shrugged. “Maybe Old Crow could. I just followed the manual.”

“If...” Elizabeth opened her mouth, then hesitated. She glanced at Irwyn before sighing. “I don’t know who I would even consult. I cannot just *ask* about this openly because we don’t want my mother getting interested but the curiosity is *burning*.”

“You will most likely meet the Old Crow eventually,” Irwyn suggested. “You can ask yourself then. Or we can by proxy, I suppose.”

“Please do,” she nodded.

“We should head out, though,” Irwyn continued, glancing at Waylan. “I was going to scout out the underworld before the letter sent me down this quest.”

“The Guild relocated,” Waylan nodded, hesitated, then continued. “I can bring you. Not exactly an address.”

“Haven’t you been locked in with the penal platoon?” Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

“Built to keep in normal blokes,” Waylan shrugged, smirking slightly. “I easily slipped out in the nights when they thought we were in a box. Who do you think brought the package to Irw?”

“Well, it will certainly make things faster,” Irwyn supposed.

“Ye,” Waylan nodded. “Let’s get going.”

“Just be back for the officer meeting in the morning,” Elizabeth reminded. “I will decide the details in the meantime. You leave me with a lot to think about.”

“See you then,” Irwyn nodded.

“Bye,” she was already walking back to her work desk, waving back in their direction instead of turning around. Irwyn and Waylan quickly made their way down the stairs and exited the building.

“Let me just go grab my stuff,” Waylan nodded. “Better not leave the stash lying around any longer than I need to around the penal cunts.”

“Haven’t you lost everything?”

“That was weeks ago,” Waylan pointed at his fingers, wiggling them with a grin. “I was gathering supplies to make a run for it before Old Crow got in touch.”

“Did he mention me?” Irwyn was curious.

“Yep,” Waylan nodded. “I needed to get you that box after all. Though the schedule was a bit different than I was told to expect.”

“I was sick, which is why we were delayed,” Irwyn nodded. He and Elizabeth were supposed to arrive a few days sooner. “Also, you weren’t even mentioned in the letter. Just the penal platoon.”

“What, sick?” Waylan paused. “You don’t get sick.”

“Cursed,” Irwyn corrected, which apparently satisfied Waylan’s curiosity well enough.

“Well, there was a good chance I would meet you before you got to read it,” Waylan shrugged. “Or maybe the Old Man finally remembered mischief – the older adults used to talk about how he would be less serious before our time. Anyway, I will be right back. Wait for me two streets down from the southern gate. You will know where.”

“See you soon,” Irwyn nodded, blinked, and then Waylan was just gone. Not a sign of the fact that they had been *literally* looking at each other. If he needed any proof that Waylan had gotten even way better at stealth, that was it.

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Waylan snuck out of both sight and mind with two quick steps, getting behind Irwyn before his friend finished the blink. He was not above making a game of it and it was also good practice, given what had become of his friend. Waylan wasn’t sure Irwyn even noticed just how many times better his reflexes had gotten. And the muscle. Probably magic since that wasn’t 3 months’ worth of exercise kind of improvement.

Waylan wasn’t the same either though. Yes, the stealth was maybe the most ‘magical’ part of his new abilities but there were other benefits. For one, he was pretty sure he had gotten inhumanly fast. Not to a ridiculous degree but he could move faster than almost anyone he had ever seen besides mages. Also more flexible, more precise. Deceptively stronger as well. And he hadn’t been sick in a while, which he supposed finally put him on even-ish footing with Irwyn in that department.

Speaking of Irwyn, he did not seem surprised whatsoever by Waylan's disappearance. Not even shrugging or looking around as he left. Well, that meant Waylan was not getting any more close-quarters stealth practice so he headed to do what he meant to. Instead of towards the penal platoon's building, he was right back into the structure they had just come out of.

Some things were better left secret, even between friends. *Especially* between friends. He made his way up to the second floor, waited a few seconds then made sure to walk the last set of stairs up as loudly as possible. Nowadays, it took conscious effort to not be soundless and traceless but he didn't want to surprise the terrifying girl. By the time he made it up, she was looking in his direction.

"You are back rather quickly, Waylan," she inclined her head and Waylan had to suppress a flinch. Another benefit he had obtained from the tattoos, and intentionally did not mention, was a sixth sense for danger. Nothing major, just a slight tingle which misfired at times. But boy, was Waylan feeling in danger.

"Ye, I figured we best have a chat in private," he nodded, approaching. There was no chair to sit on and the noble was not kind enough to conjure him one, so he stood.

"Not fifteen minutes and you already go behind Irwyn's back."

"I figured it be best since neither of us wants him to hear what we have to say," Waylan shrugged.

"Which is?" she raised an eyebrow, her eyes exactly as predatory as they had been from the moment she had first glanced at him. Downright territorial.

"I am going to send letters that I suspect you might be planning to get me killed," Waylan decided to open with his strongest card. "One to Old Crow definitely. Then a few to some people only Irwyn and I would know. The kind that wouldn't come up in a conversation."

"I am not..." she didn't *quite* flinch, but there was a reaction. Good, because Waylan hadn't been *completely* sure his gut was right before that moment.

"No, but you are considering it," Waylan shrugged, playing it casual. Unworried, at least outwardly. "So, I am here to make sure you stop before you commit to the idea."

"That is a... considerable accusation," she frowned, gears blatantly spinning at a thousand rotations a second behind those eyes.

"I am not accusing you of anything," Waylan shrugged again. "But your eyes don't lie. Honestly, I think Irwyn would have noticed too if he wasn't so biased."

"You throw harsh critique at him."

"Only the fair kind," Waylan grinned. "Which, by the way, I am genuinely impressed by. You couldn't have known each other for more than a few months and he acts with you close to as he would with me."

"Close to?" she suppressed a frown.

"Lady, I have known Irwyn for what feels like most of our lives," Waylan sighed. "Saved each other's ass more times than we can count. Yes, that is not getting overtaken in a tenth of that time. Honestly, are you usually this greedy? Or is it just envy? I hear Void mages are prone to those."

"I have mastery over my emotions, thank you very much for your concern," she was controlling her face well, so Waylan wasn't sure if she actually was. Not that he needed to.

"Am I an obstacle?" Waylan wondered out loud. "I don't need to be, you know, depending on what you want."

"Why would what I 'want' have anything to do with you?"

"Too defensive," Waylan shook his head, half speaking out of his arse, hoping he was doing it right. "Clearly, you have intentions for Irwyn, because - let's be real - that is what gives me enough relevancy to warrant removal. You were not mad enough about my stealing the cloak for it to be that. So, let's figure this out. Talk before knives, saves stars."

"Fine..." she said after a moment. "To dispel a misconception, any consideration for your death has barely crossed my mind as a possibility. I was thinking about different things."

"Sure, I will give you the benefit of the doubt since this works better that way," Waylan nodded. "I am still sending those letters thought."

"What if you actually die from disease, or an undead ambush?" She frowned. Which was a fair worry since Waylan wasn't a mage which made him fragile in comparison.

"Presumably, you and Irw would be doing your best to protect me already," Waylan raised an eyebrow instead of admitting the point though. He most likely wouldn't actually send any letters... maybe one to Old Crow who exercised discretion. If he died he would rather not bring down whatever Irwyn was attempting to build here with him.

"Fine," she said after a pause, realizing full well she couldn't do anything about it. Waylan had exactly one card to play and it was that Irwyn trusted him. Good thing she both realized that *and* cared.

"You got what I want: Survival and adventure," Waylan nodded. "Maybe some fun times sprinkled in between. Now, tell me what you want that I can help you with."

"I..." she hesitated. "I want Irwyn's support, I suppose."

"The heiress to House Blackburg needs a thief's support?" Waylan asked skeptically.

"I want to be free Waylan," she spoke, suddenly her gaze burning. "From my mother and her machinations. From House Blackburg and its bindings. From... the very shackles that is humanity. I want to be something more... one day. Far in the future. I know it will not be soon, decades, maybe centuries into the future. But I want to walk that path. And... I want Irwyn to walk it alongside me."

"And not be dragged down by that mostly mortal old friend," Waylan connected the pieces.

"Mages live longer, don't they?"

"*Much* longer," she affirmed.

"I would think that not even twenty is too soon to think about relative lifespans," Waylan shrugged. "And my end goal in life is not chugging mountains at anything that annoys me. I am gonna retire one day with a castle's worth of gold and maybe a lover, then live my last years in obscurity somewhere safe enough. Pretend to be an old merchant or something like that. Haven't thought that far yet. I am not going to keep following Irwyn around when I am utter dead weight and only prone to get myself killed."

"That is not the issue I had thought of," she slowly admitted.



“What then?” Waylan frowned.

“You will be spending... much time with Irwyn, won’t you?” she carefully said, then hastily added: “You could drive him away from me.”

“Oh,” Waylan paused. “So it *is* just plain old jealousy,” he snickered. Well, it was better than the alternatives, at least in most ways.

“Not I...”

“Alright, listen Elizabeth,” Waylan cut her off. “I do get wanting *all* of Irwyn’s time: He is a great bloke. As you had clearly seen since you expect that to be even feasible. But I am not going to just up and leave. Certainly not yet. And Irwyn does need breathing room from people. Less from me and apparently you, but still some. Force him into too many conversations in a day and he will squirm.”

She remained silent.

“I will tell you something, though,” so Waylan continued. “I have said this before but I don’t think you realize just how *incredible* it is that Irwyn trusts you as he does in so little. I could count on one hand all the other people he would trust his back to without hesitation and all those bonds took years to build. You did that in months. I nearly jumped out of my chair in surprise when he just *started sharing secrets* out of his own volition in front of you. Girl, I am not sure what exactly you are trying to build when you talk about immortality but the foundation is solid, at least here.”

“Do you... really think so?” she said hesitantly. And also without the hostility that had been there. Ah yes, he knew that look. For all that she was a terrifying mage, an icon of a House synonymous with terror... Waylan noticed the young girl deep down. Younger than her age would imply, perhaps, in some ways.

“Yes, I do,” he reassured. “I said I was going to help, aren’t I? I know more about Irw than anyone. We can talk... later. I should get going before Irwyn gets suspicious.”

“Yes, of course,” she nodded. Paused. “Thank you, Waylan.”

“Think nothing of it,” Waylan nodded as he left, happy enough with the results. An emotional lass was *much* better than a cold manipulator.