

Irwyn practiced until lunch, quite quickly finding a plateau of his improvement. In a few hours, he realized that he could no longer tell if his proficiency was getting any better, having long gotten to the point of not needing to voice the spells without losing most of the incantation's benefit. When the time to eat came he and Elizabeth shared to large ground-floor table again.

"Sorry about earlier," he apologized.

"Don't worry," she shook her head with a smile. "You are not the only one of us two to ever be overzealous with new spells. Ugh, but that is a story I am not keen to retell."

"I will not ask then," Irwyn nodded, then changed the topic to something else dwelling on his mind. "Now that I think about it, what else besides practice *are* we supposed to do while around here? Assuming you are right and no undead appear."

"Sit tight and not die of boredom," Elizabeth shrugged.

"Surely that cannot be the best allocation of resources," Irwyn frowned.

"This is not a glamorous post, Irwyn, that's the very point," Elizabeth shook her. "We are *expected* to achieve nothing but a garrison has to be in the city. Because otherwise it's too easy of a target."

"You say that but a single conception mage would be a massive problem for us to deal with," Irwyn pointed out.

"You are not accounting for *scale*, Irwyn," she shook her head. "In a Lich War everyone but the strongest mages are just numbers. Not just on our side. Sure, the undead could send a conception mage here to wreak havoc, but they would die quickly. Approximately 20 seconds for an emergency response team teleport in and kill them, to be exact.

"You could be a target," Irwyn pointed out. "One more than worth such a sacrifice if the undead are planning ahead."

"Which is why I am rather extensively protected," Elizabeth nodded. "And my talent has been widely underreported. Perhaps some of that was dispelled in Abonisle but I could have just as easily been using an artifact instead of my own power, at least from an outsider's viewpoint. There *are* ways of temporarily jumping several intentions ahead."

"But you dislike them," Irwyn nodded.

"As I said yesterday, no artifact will help me claim a Name," she affirmed.

"I thought they would still come after any children of Duke Households," Irwyn admitted, returning to the prior point. "Even when downplayed, you are still widely known to be talented."

"You are not wrong," Elizabeth shook her head. "My mother thinks that this Lich war will be particularly bloody for heirs, even. Usually there the undead might struggle with identifying the right targets, but this incursion is caused by remnants hiding from the last. That implies cunning and planning, including in the war over information. The reason I don't feel endangered is, again, numbers. How many conceptions mages do you think the undead will have, Irwyn?"

"Thousands? Tens of thousands?" Irwyn guessed. It was a large number... but the Lich War would envelop the whole of Duchy Federation. What percentage of mages reached conception? A fraction, clearly, but how small of one?

"That, probably more. Hard to estimate before the real fighting starts," Elizabeth nodded. "But what they will *certainly* have is ten times as many places those mages could be used. And so do

we. Both sides are forced to prioritize, analyze what constitutes a justifiable assignment. What is a worthwhile goal to sacrifice a single conception mage for? What about ten of them? A hundred? As I said, numbers. And I am not going to make the priority list. Not this close to City Black where any attack is a guaranteed one-way trip.”

“But there still needs to be someone to make Ebon Respite not be a cost-effective target for weaker undead,” Irwyn grasped. “So that a random necromancer with barely any power cannot just secretly inflict damage.”

“Exactly,” Elizabeth nodded. “We have barely over thirty mages here, and I expect a good chunk of them will be reassigned when the War really picks up somewhere else. And non-mage soldiers are a plentiful resource. We are ultimately a cost-efficient deterrent.”

“Hence why you keep saying that we probably won’t meet any undead,” Irwyn nodded.

“There is no critical infrastructure to destroy, no cultural institution to shake morale on a large scale, no particularly vulnerable mages. The closest thing to a strategic target the city has are the manufactories making mundane ammunition or casing for more advanced weaponry. And with our garrison here any possible damage to even those would be minimal without a disproportionate investment. Hence why this city is not worth attacking as long as we keep an eye out.”

“Which is why just have to sit and not die of boredom,” Irwyn recounted with a sigh. “You know this used to sound a lot more exciting.”

“This is barely the third day,” she rolled her eyes. “And we do have two days off every month.”

“Am I even getting paid for this?” he rolled his right back with good humor.

“Yes,” she said without a hint of jest.

“Really?” Irwyn paused. “I thought I wasn’t *technically* part of the army.”

“It’s not the army that’s paying you, but me,” Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “Did you think being part of a retinue is rewarded with just gratitude?”

“In all honesty, I have not put that much thought into the matter, given what was happening at the time,” Irwyn admitted. It had originally been mainly presented as part of his escape from imminent execution.

“You have a salary, going to the account you have made with our Duchy’s bank,” Elizabeth nodded. “I asked the accountant to make it particularly generous. And if you need funds you *can* just ask, you know.”

“I would, but do not think I do,” Irwyn paused. “You have already been covering all my expenses ever since I got to City Black. And I was never exactly prone to shopping around – not that there is much expensive to buy here... besides property I guess?”

“I should bring you to a proper marketplace then,” Elizabeth frowned. “City Black has incredible shopping districts... well, will have them again once the Lich War is over. Most of said goods are going to be deployed against the undead for the moment.”

“Do the owners not complain about that?” Irwyn frowned. “Especially merchant types hate any losses. Or is the Duchy buying out all their stock?”

“They might complain but what good will that do them?” Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

“Nationalization of weaponry and supplies is a common practice in face of a Lich War.

“People tend to leave if they feel openly robbed,” he pointed out, surprised that was actually the case.

“And go *where* exactly, Irwyn,” she pointed back. “Every Duchy in the Federation repossesses all magical weaponry they can for the War. It’s not like crossing somewhere else will change the situation.”

“They could leave the Federation,” Irwyn suggested.

“The trip would be arduous and expensive. The Everburn Isthmus is impassable and the seas are a fool’s gamble since long sea routes are no longer kept safe by our navies - which are instead on standby in case there is a need for them. The only way would be through the Divide mountain range in the North... but the lands beyond it are known to be not nearly as prosperous and therefore far less profitable. So no, merchants cannot just ‘leave’ because their goods get taken for the fight.”

“I suppose everyone is in the same mess,” Irwyn sighed.

“There is a reason Lich Wars are often framed as Federation-wide natural disasters,” Elizabeth nodded. “It makes it much easier to swallow all the losses - not for just merchants. Seeing everyone else also struggling in the aftermath definitely helps reduce bitterness. There has been a lot of thought by many great people over the centuries put into perfecting the methodologies for fighting and then recovering from Lich Wars.”

“Which you were taught,” Irwyn nodded.

“Well, not everything and not in complete detail,” Elizabeth acknowledged. “Another Lich War was expected at the very least decades from now, so it hasn’t been a priority. But I understand the general principles at play.”

“I think I will just focus on spellcraft for the moment,” Irwyn sighed.

“Well, it’s likely too late for you to study the socioeconomic impact now,” she nodded. “Not to mention not particularly relevant for us since we don’t make the decisions. But it is *fascinating*. I, for one, am very interested in whether the postwar markets will develop as theory predicts.”

“I will probably head out in the afternoon,” Irwyn changed the topic again to something less out of his depth. “You mentioned the glasses?” Hopefully that would help Kalista.

“Yes,” she nodded. “You should go bother Alice, she *is* part of the logistics team. And our cover if it comes to it.”

“Will do,” he nodded, looking down at his empty plate. And finished tea. “Is she going to be done with lunch?”

“Presumably,” Elizabeth shrugged. “The other mages are not served significantly later than us.”

“I will drop by before I leave camp,” Irwyn nodded. They traded short goodbyes, then Irwyn left.

He found the logistics building seemingly abandoned, not a soul on the ground floor. Except Irwyn could feel there actually were people, just at the very top. Four mages, presumably the entire supply squad. So Irwyn made his way up the stairs, past the rooms of the second floor, then to the top.

He expected the same office cubicles that were in Elizabeth’s command building but what he found was far more casual. There were still four desks available for work in the corners of the room but rather than being divided, the floor was mostly open - including some more leisure-

inclined installations. A few were clearly enchanted devices with various shapes and buttons Irwyn could not wager a blind guess to the function of. He was pretty sure he recognized one as a communication tool though – Irwyn remembered seeing a few just like it in Abonisle.

“Irwyn, good afternoon,” he was obviously spotted, Sergeant Trecha calling out to him. All four of the mages were seated around a large table placed squarely in the middle of the room. Notably, empty plates of food were still on it. The other two mages besides Alice - a man and a woman - were actually surprisingly young, not much older than Irwyn himself... although they felt extraordinarily weak. Irwyn was sure that if Ebon Respite was not so meager in ambient mana he would not be able to even feel them from a distance.

“Sergeant Trecha,” Irwyn nodded, “Good day to you as well.”

“What brings you?” the man asked, shooting him a curious glance.

“I wanted to speak with Alice,” Irwyn glanced at the gathering. It seemed... casual. Almost comfortable. “But I am not in a hurry.”

“Come sit then,” Trecha invited, beckoning him forward. *And why not?* There was no fifth chair, so Irwyn conjured one from Light.

“Wow,” the young woman - not Alice - almost jumped in surprise. “I couldn’t even tell you were a mage.”

“I try to keep my mana contained,” Irwyn inclined his head, not sure what else to say.

“You have been the center of everyone’s gossip,” the young man jumped in.

“Have I?”

“Suddenly appearing alongside the Lady, striding in and out of the camp, not even wearing a uniform,” the man nodded. “Who *wouldn’t* want to know more about you? Especially after you somehow saved Alice as well.”

“She mostly helped herself,” Irwyn shrugged, looking at the woman in question.

“You shouldn’t downplay how much you did,” she said with a weak smile. Alice was, presumably, pretending to be more sullen than the day prior, as they had agreed to with Elizabeth. “I couldn’t have woken up from the nightmare by myself.”

“You are not a healer by any chance, are you?” the young woman asked.

“Far from it,” Irwyn shook his head.

“We don’t have one in camp then,” she grimaced slightly. “Damn.”

“Now, now,” Trecha chided. “We are rather unlikely to see much action.”

“And city Black is within reach, even on foot,” Irwyn added. Well, it was more than a day’s march but it was not a completely unreasonable distance.

“I don’t want to find out if they have the capacity to teleport me to a healer when I am waiting for the Stitching potion to run out,” she shivered slightly. “My grandpa died that way. His potion reverted before they got him to help. He was not that much further away from City Black at the time than we are.”

"The War has barely started, no need to already be so pessimistic," Trecha tried to wave the concern off. "I hear it might be remnants from 17 years ago. It's possible it will all be over before we see a single zombie."

"I wouldn't bet on it," the other young man shook his head. "My aunt overheard that the Duke himself said it would not be easy."

"Yes, he seemed quite sure it would be as bad if not worse than usual," Irwyn confirmed.

"You saw the Duke's speech?" Trecha asked, everyone staring at Irwyn. They seemed surprised by that.

"Well, yes," Irwyn looked at them, slightly confused by their befuddlement. "Her young Ladyship did attend the Exenn."

"What does that word even mean?" Alice asked. No one else seemed to recognize it either.

"So I am *not* the strange one for not knowing it," Irwyn noted out loud with some satisfaction before elaborating. "A big gathering for the nobility. The Duke's speech actually started it off."

"How was the Duke?" the girl asked, eyes glinting a bit.

"Well, he appeared... normal I suppose. At least from a distance, I did not get close," Irwyn recalled. "I think you could almost mistake him for someone ordinary from afar, if it wasn't for the ceremonial jewelry... and the dragon throne."

"Who would make a *throne* of all things from a dragon?!" Alice suddenly burst out, seemingly enraged by the very notion.

"Well... the Duke of Black?" Irwyn felt a slight smile tuck at his lips.

"Do you have any idea what an artificer can make from a dragon's carcass??" she seemed to forget her melancholy for the moment. "The hide could become an armor worthy of domain mages - or beyond - dozens of sets of them. The ivory into weapons that tear through magic as if it was water. Organs and ichor for potions with effects most cannot even imagine! A throne?!?!"

"I remember that story, though I never knew if it was true," Trecha interjected. "Legend has it that the Duke - just an unfavored heir at the time - had slain a dragon that was devastating swaths of the Duchy while his brothers ignored it, infighting over the Dukedom. Seeing the destruction he had sworn to claim the Duchy of Black rather than leave it in unworthy hands."

"Slaying a dragon," the supply squad's young man nodded, staring a bit dreamily at nothing in particular.

"It's suicide, that's what it is," Alice scoffed. "Dragons have slain Named mages in the past."

"No way!" the other young woman exclaimed.

"Very much way," Alice shook her head. "Dragons are terrifying. My grandpa had told me... a story about one. A Time dragon that once ravaged the Duchy of Teal. It could teleport hundreds of meters several times every second, its claws could rend even domain magic as easily as the air, striking as fast as Sunlight. Being around it contorted *directions*, going as far as to make right literally left, up down and so on - except switching around haphazardly at unpredictable intervals."

"And its breath?" the other woman asked, entranced.

"It aged anything it touched," Alice said, slowly. "A mage caught in it would die of old age a dozen times over before it passed. A limb caught would rot and wither away in a blink. It was so potent that even sheer rock would visibly age before one's eyes if struck. Worse, the dragon could control it. Wield it like we would a spell, except the breath was far faster and could also be teleported by it."

"I know that story as well," Trecha nodded. "The Aeonwrath of Rakachel, it was called - named a town in the Duchy of Cyan it had spontaneously appeared next to and destroyed. I was just a wee lad when it was slain but everyone talked about it for months - though with fewer details."

"Were you from close to there, Sergeant?" the Irwyn asked.

"Not every Time mage is from the Duchy of Cyan, Irwyn," Trecha chuckled. "Well, I was born close to the border but lived most of my life in City Black or on deployment."

"That reminds me," the young woman - still not Alice - chirped up. "I would have thought we would have heard about someone like you in the academies. Were you home-tutored like Alice?"

"In a way," Irwyn said agreeably - admitting to being half self-taught would probably not even be believed - glancing at Alice who had seemingly remembered she was supposed to be morose after her earlier story. "I want to keep most of my past to myself but I used to actually live here, in Ebon Respite."

"Really?" the boy asked, surprised.

"I have been meaning to reconnect with some old acquaintances," Irwyn nodded. Although the 'old' in this case being significantly shorter time than the others probably imagined.

"Does her Ladyship just allow you to leave the camp?" the young woman gawked.

"Yes?" Irwyn inclined his head with mild confusion.

"Irwyn is technically not part of the military," Trecha jumped in, spotting the misunderstanding. "Though he lives at the camp, he is not subject to most doctrine. He is only beholden to her Ladyship's wishes rather than our discipline... or curfew. And speaking of discipline, our lunch break is over."

"We already checked all the teleportation wards," the young man pointed out.

"Then we should get started with sorting the expanded crates," Trecha nodded. "We need to finish a full inventory and make sure that none of them are close to expiring because of Finitude. Trust me, you don't want to be cleaning the aftermath after a cartful of beef explodes in the cellar."

"We don't have a cellar," the woman said doubtfully.

"Are you volunteering to dig?" Trecha raised an eyebrow and that silenced further protests.

"Just a moment of your time, Alice," Irwyn nodded to his latest ally as the Sergeant marched the other two young mages off, down the stairs.

"What do you need?" she nodded.

Starborn penetralia. Irwyn used the opportunity to cast his new spell, an invisible bubble of isolating Starfire rising above them. It was temporarily a bit weaker due to his practice overuse

but Irwyn had managed to reliably cast the spell without speaking even the spell's name out loud.

"You are using a proper spell now," Alice noted.

"I realized it was a tool I was lacking yesterday," Irwyn nodded. "So, I added it to my arsenal."

"Overnight?" she raised an eyebrow. "That's fast."

"I strive to impress," Irwyn smiled, deciding not to mention that it was more over the morning, most of which was actually spent with another spell.

"Mind if I test it?" she smiled.

"It would actually be quite convenient to know how effective it is," Irwyn nodded.

"Alright, I always had a knack for bypassing these," her grin widened. Then she closed her eyes and let magic flow from her.

It was a conservative amount and she was clearly trying to be subtle about it. Irwyn still perceived it but did not comment for the moment. He was not measuring his mana-sensing skills so he let Alice gently prod at his spell. She did it without ever directly touching it with her own magic. Then she paused, took a deep breath and *leapt through*.

"I felt that," Irwyn announced, if only barely and for a split second only. Her spell had passed through his gapless bubble without ever touching it but the violation of the boundary still left a distinct impression of wrongness. "Really good to know that this is what it's like. I probably would have been confused about what happened if I hadn't known you were trying."

"It's not bad at all if you could perceive that, though that might have been more you than the spell," Alice complimented. "It's also almost always harder to get in from the outside."

"Well, you still go through," Irwyn pointed out. He noticed she had opened and maintained a small portal above her palm. Miniscule in scale but that was enough to let sound and sight pass.

"The important part isn't being impenetrable," Alice disagreed. "It's knowing when someone tries to break in. Which you clearly will, at least at our level. With the ring I don't think most mages before conception are better than me at this... well, except specialists and such I suppose."

"That is reassuring, thank you for the help," Irwyn nodded.

"Think nothing of it, I like solving spells like this," Alice nodded back. "What is it you actually wanted to see me for anyway?"

"Well, it's nothing major..." Irwyn began, explaining that he needed shielded glasses for a friend in the city, vaguely why he needed to go through her, and that he might need to use Alice as cover if a stronger pair needed to be obtained.

"Well, conveniently, I already have a useless pair on me," Alice nodded, pulling the spectacles from her personal storage hung by her uniform's belt. "The Sergeant had the same thought that they might help me sleep. I obviously don't need them anymore."

"Thank you," Irwyn took them from her, putting the pair into his own spacial bag, never looking away. That allowed him to witness Alice's eye watching his hand, followed by her expression freezing for a moment... Then she half stumbled, tears cascading down her cheeks in a spontaneous waterfall.

“Are you alright?!” Irwyn exclaimed with alarm, flabbergasted and unsure what to do.

“Yes, sorry,” she nodded as the tears stopped, just as quickly as they had started. Her expression had never even shifted. “I am fine now.”

“What happened?” he stared

“That...” she pointed to Irwyn’s waist level “...was made by my father, wasn’t it?”

“Oh,” Irwyn paused as realization struck him. “Yes... I thought the ring helped you?”

“It did remove the pain and despair,” Alice nodded, caressing her finger where the ring was - either invisible or even hidden from more than just sight. She had obviously concealed it again once her deal with Elizabeth was concluded. “But it’s not perfect. Sometimes the Soul remembers even through the glass. I will likely suffer from... outburst when the wrong thoughts invoke associations, for a while at least.”

“Are you really fine?” Irwyn had to reiterate.

“All I need to do is tell the ring to swallow whatever is dredged up,” Alice nodded. “It’s not too much to handle.”

“Alright. Thank you again,” Irwyn said, though the conversation had turned awkward. They said their goodbyes, then he left as quickly as he could without looking hurried.