

Elizabeth led the way towards her study - Irwyn had not known there was one, but it was hardly surprising in a mansion. First, he inquired about Waylan and Alice; the sneak was getting a crash course on 'do not get killed etiquette' while Alice was busy retelling what she knew of Steelmire's destruction and would likely be for a while, if not the rest of the day. It was not long until the main topic was brought into focus.

"Just as I had assumed, we will be heading North," Elizabeth pointed to the sheet. Where her finger landed was indeed written 'a desert surrounded by mountains of glass'. Except it was confusingly enough in the middle of a rather densely inscribed page.

"And the rest?" Irwyn frowned.

"Decoys for my mother, only this matters," she reiterated, then read out loud. "Past the Northern mountains, through eight nations and one, two other deserts and a lake as large as a sea. In between the Republic of Firland and the Scholardom of Imma."

"Why is it not just nine nations?" Irwyn questioned.

"No idea," Elizabeth shrugged. "Whoever gave the directions apparently had a feeling for flair."

"Who even wrote these?"

"Someone well-traveled, presumably..." Elizabeth said, pausing. "We can ask when we talk with my mother again. As loath as I am to say it, we will need her help with actually leaving."

"Is getting through the mountains difficult?" Irwyn wondered. "Does it require teleportation or some such?"

"Teleporting all the way through so much solid matter?" Elizabeth shook her head. "It would take a Truth mage specialist, I would guess. Black is terribly short on those at the moment... well for the past few decades. Our last one suddenly disappeared about 30 years ago? I remember reading something of the sort, but that's beside the point. No, the mountains are either bypassed by sea or traversed through a limited number of tunnels."

"You mentioned a while back that seas are unsafe because of the War," Irwyn nodded. "And I presume the tunnels are heavily restricted."

"That. We would also not be able to get to one without being seen," she nodded. "The easiest to reach by far is just North of Abonisle, and the city is still very much on high alert."

"What a coincidence," Irwyn smiled slightly.

"Abonisle used to be more a fortress than a city for centuries... maybe longer," she explained. "It was a natural place to build one such tunnel. Now that the beacon is so close, the others are scarcely used."

"So, we arrange a meeting with the Duchess."

"First, Alice," Elizabeth said. "I would like to make her officially part of my entourage and then convince her to come along."

"And Waylan," Irwyn said.

"The journey could be dangerous," Elizabeth pointed out. The implication was clear but also sensible.

“Eight nations and one,” Irwyn repeated. “I think we will go through plenty of cities where he will be right at home.”

“I will not argue against it if you think it’s fine,” Elizabeth shrugged. “Either way, this is for later. I don’t think I can handle two meetings in the same week.”

“Duel?” Irwyn suggested.

“I am supposed to be distressed,” Elizabeth rolled her eyes, then smiled. “We will have to wait until at least tomorrow.”

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Except on the dawn of the next day, Calm arrived to bring them to an altogether different occasion. He told them to wear formal attire, yet was evasive about what exactly they would be doing.

“It is more interesting as a surprise,” Calm smiled. “I don’t know if it will be quite to your taste, Irwyn, but Elizabeth will certainly enjoy such.”

“Now you have me even more curious,” she sighed as they walked out the front door. “What happened to ‘disturbed’?”

“Now you are putting on a brave face in public, while still staying mostly out of sight besides traveling in between,” Calm nodded. “Works well enough.”

“So, where we are going is not quite public?” she guessed.

“Oh, quite the opposite,” Calm shook his head. “We will just happen to be out of sight.”

“Where to then?” she asked.

“To the theatre,” Calm replied.

“Waylan and Alice?” Irwyn wanted to know. Neither of them had made it to the mansion so far.

“Alice is already waiting for you there,” Calm said. “Waylan had decided that he wants nothing to do with today’s festivities. He seems to have found himself something else to burn Time anyhow.”

There was a short lull as they left the building and headed towards the Voidways. There were still people blatantly watching them come and go, though far fewer than just the day prior. Irwyn, nonetheless, put some effort into not looking at ease before they quickly reached the gate. From there Elizabeth led them through as confidently as ever.

It was not long before they found themselves in a vaguely familiar hallway. There was no one around but Calm took over navigating, down two sets of stairs and then a bit further until they reached their suite. Inside, someone was indeed waiting for them. Or well, maybe not really ‘waiting’ as she seemed quite occupied.

“Alice?” Irwyn called out when she did not react to their arrival. The Time mage was sitting in one of the comfortable armchairs, intently staring into an open grimoire of some kind, all the while ‘juggling’ nine marbles of different colors. That is, if juggling could be confused with rapidly teleporting them on a strange trajectory. There was something mesmerizing about their staggering motion, though it ended before Irwyn could ponder it.

"Sorry, a bit... distracted," Alice shook her head, closed the book then finally focused on them. "Am I imagining things or is the Beacon just *minutely* different from the one in Abonisle? Genuinely cannot tell if it's just in my head or a fact of things."

"If it is I have not heard about it," Elizabeth shrugged as she and Irwyn took their seats, then turned to Calm. "Would you finally tell us what this is about?"

"Look for yourself," Calm just kept smiling slightly, beckoning towards the stage.

The first thing Irwyn noticed was that they were a *lot* closer than during the Exenn. In fact, they seemed to be in just the second row from the very front. That gave them a much better view of the stage, if a bit sideways. Immediately, he also noted that it had been restructured: Rather than tiered platforms to denote the status of guests, it was almost completely level. All except the empty dragon throne, which had been moved to the very back, where it overlooked everything.

The main act concentrated around four people standing around an elevated box - about half an arm's length in each dimension. Two of them were almost nondescript: One wore a simple green robe, the other a white one. There were scarcely any other defying features to them and they mostly stood to the side.

The next also wore robes, though theirs were far more adorned: Pitch black but lined with silver symbols. Irwyn recognized the fort-like insignia of House Blackburg but also many others he was unsure of. Two that struck him were a pupilless eye and a depiction of an empty coffin. They were standing right behind the fourth person, a hand firmly on her shoulder.

The last one was younger, and far less ritualistically attired. Also visibly nervous, trembling actually. Irwyn was close enough to see the gentle but frequent shudders. She wore a blindfold - likely hiding a visage of fear - and a simple dress, all black. Though Irwyn recognized the person easily despite that. The black scars seemingly tracing old tears were quite telltale.

"Alira?" Irwyn frowned, never too pleased to see her. It was almost palpable that she was afraid though, and whatever was happening did not involve him directly, so he deferred judgment.

"Alira," Elizabeth confirmed, grinning an overjoyed smile. There was something intense about the stare she leveled towards the stage. Filled with thrill and anticipation. She also clearly already understood much more of what was happening.

"The person we do not like," Alice affirmed, playing off her apparent ignorance and confusion. "Though I still cannot put a face to her."

"The blindfold is quite traditional," Calm added.

"What is actually happening?" Irwyn asked. "Some kind of punishment?"

"Exactly," Elizabeth did not turn away from the stage as she answered. "It would seem that secretly hiring assassins against the Duke's explicit orders was a step too far even for House Fathomsight."

"Her family basically *begged* Emax to take her, lest he starts to consider if someone else shares the blame," Calm nodded, then paused. "No, I am giving them too little credit. For all they are stubborn beyond reason, the branches are not so duplicitous. They cling on to their principles and traditions to the point of obsession - not just out of convenience. Alira has defiled those in several ways, House Fathomsight would have done the same even without a word from the Duke - albeit more privately."

"They do so hate low scheming," Elizabeth kept smiling. "Everything has to be done in the 'light of day' as ironic as saying it that way is. In hindsight, it was obviously headed towards this the moment Alira's complicity in exactly that was discovered. Not that I mind the pleasant surprise, her own House turning on her has flair."

"As strange as it may sound, I am almost surprised to see some kind of justice done," Irwyn shook his head.

"Justice is subjective," Elizabeth shrugged. "Some people just have the power to enforce their point of view. As far as some of our elder mages are concerned, the world is overflowing with the justice they have put in place."

"Please, not philosophy," Alice interjected. "Next we will have to move on to subjective morality and how burglary or banditry can somehow be a good thing. If you do something, at least don't make any excuses."

"Fair enough, I don't suppose I ever cared too much for what is 'just'," Elizabeth shrugged.

"Hi, a former full-time thief here," Irwyn extended an arm to Alice in mock introduction. "Expert on the importance of law."

"Hush," Alice grinned. "Maybe I was a bit out of turn. I could never stand people justifying obviously wrong stuff in a circle."

"Perhaps a bit," Elizabeth nodded. "But we hardly mind. And I believe it is starting."

Just as her word sounded, Irwyn felt it too. It was... like the deep sound of a bell tower ringing, except without the sound itself. It had all the depth and gravitas, yet was also eerily silent. The effect was most likely Void in nature, yet Irwyn could not quite make sense of it. Either way, it signaled the beginning.

"Zett," the man – that was apparent from the tone now – in the ceremonial black robe spoke, then stepped fully behind Alira. Rather than just one hand, he placed both on her shoulders. His voice was deep and almost too loud.

"Did I mishear?" Alice frowned. "Or is it just accent?"

"I don't think that's mortal tongue," Irwyn opined.

"Zett means crime... but also more," Elizabeth translated, never taking her eyes off the stage. "It is also disobedience, acting beyond one's station, breaking rules. It is, fundamentally, behaving in defiance of society - of one's equals, lessers, and betters."

"Ferre Zcel," his hands moved along the shoulders until they grasped Alira's neck. The hold was firm enough to appear almost as if he was choking the girl from behind. The blindfolded heiress opened her mouth as if to speak but no words came out. Her trembling had only gotten worse.

"Ferre is judgment. 'Pruning of Fate' to be exact. Void can destroy a great many things, even parts of Fate can be cut away - until only one path can be trod. Though of course, that is not what is actually happening here," Elizabeth explained again. "Zcel means paragon. The single best individual in a community. Here in the Duchy of Black such rituals use it interchangeably with 'Duke'. It makes it clear that the matter today falls firmly within my father's authority."

"Xen," the robed man spoke the third word after a long few second of silence. His hands flickered, and for a moment Irwyn did not even notice what he had done. He still held Alira's head firmly in place, except, the rest fell away. Literally.

Alira's body fell to the ground, severed. Not a drop of blood fell. There was no sound, not even the thud of a torso hitting the ground. The executioner merely held the blindfolded head up, as if to show their audience.

"Xen is death," Elizabeth didn't even pause with surprise while Irwyn and Alice mutely gaped. "True death. Erasure of Life and Soul, such that no Rot can bloom from so barren a corpse."

Irwyn was a bit too stunned to respond so he merely watched. The two other robed men approached the corpse, touching it together. After a moment they stepped away and gave the executioner an exaggerated nod, whereas the corpse immediately turned to dust – or whatever the appropriate term was for Void magic. Next the two approached again, touching the head and affirming something again.

Next, the head was placed into the box, blindfold still on, which was then closed. When that was done, the other two robed mages approached it and placed a colored seal each on it - White and Green, just like their robes. The actions were slow, ceremonial.

"The closest kin may come and reclaim," the robed man spoke in the common language when all of it was done, taking two steps back and staring dead forward.

Shakily, a young boy walked onto the stage. He was clearly in his early teens, eyes bawling out of their sockets. Step by stumbling step, the boy made his way to the center, stared upon by countless strangers within the theatre. He never stopped crying as he accepted the marked and locked box from the executioner, then haltingly departed the same way he had come.

"I don't think they quite realize how their little prodigy will come to despise them for all this," Calm finally broke the silence.

"Not as much as he will hate me, I imagine," Elizabeth finally looked away, still very much smiling.

"Yet you will be leaving soon enough from what I have gathered," Calm shrugged. "Out of sight, out of mind, as they say. That will leave only one other group he can load all the blame onto."

"This feels too far," Irwyn finally brought himself to speak.

"Would you advocate for a light sentence?" Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, the smile slipping a bit. "She had *literally* hired assassins after your head."

"Which were unexpectedly powerful, yes, but from my understanding the presumption was that they almost certainly would not be," Irwyn spoke, unsure of what to say. "And maybe I am wrong to offer her any pity... but this? This felt too far for comfort."

Not the death – Alira had done enough to deserve it in his eyes. The ceremony of it. The prolonging and the observers. They were in a *theatre* of all places. It was different than just killing. It was not heat of the moment of battle, nor self-defense. Not survival - entertainment.

"It is not the assassination attempt that warrants death," Calm interjected. "That in itself would not be enough. In reality, out of her three crimes, that is the lightest, as far as the nobility reckons such things. What matters much more is that she has willfully defied the Duke's decree and that she had endangered an heir of similar or higher status. Either of those two would have ended her Fate when exposed."

"She already received more than she had ever earned with the fanfare," Elizabeth scoffed. "The only redeeming circumstance is the opportunity to witness it."

“All mages executed during a Lich war must be examined by a Life and Soul mage, as to deny them possibly being risen. At least in theory – it is not necessarily followed for those before conception. Since the nature of her crime had become somewhat public in the recent days, House Fathomsight has at least ensured the event would be sufficiently ceremonial. That way they can shed at least some of the shame.”

“This is all a bit too macabre for me,” Alice spoke suddenly. She had been silent long enough to be almost forgotten. “I think I want to leave now.”

The three of them turned towards her. Now Irwyn noticed how she was completely stoic... uncharacteristically so. Elizabeth spoke before he could think of something. “Very well. It is over either way.”

The way back was somewhat silent. Alice remained stonefaced and Irwyn was not in a mood to speak either. Elizabeth’s smile had shifted into a slight scowl while Calm had excused himself before they even left the theatre, leaving the three of them to trod the Voidways without him.

Back at the mansion, Alice asked only to be shown to her rooms, which fell to Elizabeth as servants were still absent. Irwyn did not dally in more communal areas either, opting to retreat into privacy. His thoughts remained quite uncertain well into the evening.