

“Somebody is here.” The new mage said, suddenly wide awake. His eyebrows quirked up, an expression of surprise on his face. “They’re moving... quick. Arcane teleportation.”

Mauro sighed and put down his pen. The contracts would have to wait. If an intruder got out and informed the guard, he would lose quite a lot more time than this. Even being behind. “Who’s coming now? I thought we would have paid off everyone interested by now.”

“Come on guys, flush out and incapacitate. Hit to kill if he turns out to be dangerous.” He said and grabbed his backpack full of ash, a shroud of dark gray forming on top of his armor at the same time. “Zair, was it? You come with us. Show us where the intruder is.”

The mage looked at him with his one working eye, moving a towel to his other one. He dabbed it lightly to get the moisture away, wincing at the pain.

Half the mage’s face had been burnt, leaving him in this sorry state. Mauro had considered not hiring the man because of his hideous appearance. Distracting. He couldn’t afford to ignore someone as useful as him however.

His men got ready, putting on missing armor pieces and preparing their weapons. Maces, swords, bows as well as daggers and even that weird one with a whip. All present, all above level one hundred.

If Alistair had hired a Shadow Squad like Nolan had suggested, they had to be ready. Taking out their scout would be the top priority. After that it was simply a matter of cleaning up, finding and taking care of those that had talked and making sure the city didn’t have a reason to hire another squad.

“What do you think? Another one of them officers?” One of the men asked, slurring his words.

“Are you drunk?” Mauro asked. “Pan, get your ass over here and heal him. Anybody else that is still fucked up, line up.” Ash slowly floated out of his pack, a threatening gesture to make them get their move on.

The healer rolled her eyes, slowly getting up from her seat as she continued to eat her breakfast. “You don’t get to command me like that.” She said and moved up to him, a hand stroking over the ash covering his chest. “We don’t want something like that coming up in my monthly report, now do we?”

Mauro glared at her and nodded. “Of course, please just heal them.” They had an intruder in the caves, someone who had moved past the guards and all that acid and poison, all undetected. There was no time to argue with the Corinth bitch.

He sighed when she finally activated her spells, pulses of healing energy flowing through the room. His heart beat slowed down a little, his mind and body calmed by the magic. “Where are they now?” Mauro looked at Zair.

The bald mage bit his lip and shook his head. “Gone... too far. This way.” He pointed, finger slightly shaking.

“Go. Pan and Zair, you come too. Stay between everyone else.” Mauro said and moved out.

Torchlight flickered in the dark tunnels, dug out just big enough to let two men move through side by side. Anybody unfamiliar with the location would soon find themselves in a trap.

Many were annoyed at the complicated and paranoid nature of their hideout but Mauro thought it only reasonable. Nolan was on the right track. So far the layout had proved quite effective against sniffing dogs.

“I can see them again.” Zair said, pointing down one of the forking tunnels.

A light smirk formed on Mauro’s lips. “The hound’s den.” He motioned for the group to follow. Ten warriors, five mages, the healer and Zair. In these tight corridors he preferred the company of warriors. Tougher to kill and not flinging around dangerous projectiles or spells.

None made a noise, well trained and disciplined. The drunkenness from before was gone from their eyes, focus and concentration replacing it. The last officer who had come down here had killed one of their own, just the past week.

“Are they still here?” Mauro whispered, coming up to the closed grate.

“No.” Zair replied.

Mauro moved his ash covered hand over the rough wall, a little of the dry stone crumbled and fell to the floor before a rune glowed. A lock clicked and the grate opened inwards to the room, squeaking loudly all the while.

He waited and listened. “What about the hounds?” As he asked the question, he smelled the heavy odor of blood. Grabbing a nearby torch, he held it out and moved into the more spacious room.

Stalkerhound corpses littered the floor. All fifteen of them they had down here. Vicious beasts, released as soon as someone stepped in without activating the rune.

The beasts would kill most level one hundred mage and warrior. Skulls were smashed in, some damn near ripped apart. It looked like whoever did this was quite a bit stronger than your average intruder. *Not a rogue probably. Or we really have a Shadow down here.*

Mauro frowned as he touched one of the corpses and stood up once more. “Be vigilant.” Mauro wouldn’t want to face a Shadow alone but down here, with his team, a healer and his classes, he was at an advantage.

All tunnels were connected, the hounds’ den simply wasn’t a place any of their members would walk through to get anywhere.

He led them farther down, glancing at the splintered wooden spears shot out from a trap at the base of the stairs. *Good shields or armor too.* He was getting a little uncertain. Someone who could bypass the guards was not supposed to be a powerful warrior.

Most high level mages had shields of course and wooden spears would have a hard time penetrating those.

The thought calmed him down once more.

One of the main storage halls was coming up, the team spreading out in the widening corridor. The massive steel gate was dented in, slightly pried open with brute force. Not quite enough to fit a person inside but certainly enough to disrupt the enchantments that had been placed on it.

“What the hell?” Someone whispered behind.

Mauro glanced back with an angry look. *Do you want to get us killed?*

One of the mages gave him a thumbs up and moved a finger to his mouth. "We are silenced." He said in a whisper.

"Good. Zair, who's in there?" Mauro asked.

"There was a teleport just now but since then... nothing. I can feel life forces but... there are many." The mage replied, uncertainty and stress obvious in his expression. He shifted his feet.

The men and women were clutching their weapons more tightly, preparing for the coming battle. The pried open doors as well as the dead Stalkerhounds were proof enough that it wouldn't be easy.

*No blood either. They're probably not injured.* Mauro thought. "We have to be fast. It might be a Shadow, perhaps more than one. We go in and spread out, not far enough for Pan's healing magic to not reach. Ten meters at most. The rogues, teleport to the prisoners and grab a couple. We might be able to stall them. One must remain, the others attack if an opportunity presents itself. The rest, immobilize and defensive. Let's wear them down. We know the place and the traps. If four or more die, we retreat. Slowly and together." He quickly explained the plan.

Rather simple but there was too little he knew. Mauro did assume there was only one person, otherwise they would have likely brute forced their way in anyway. With the power on display perhaps it was a metal mage or something of the like, on par with his own Follower of Ash class. *Maybe they know.*

He felt himself shiver, the hairs on his arms standing up as he contemplated the possibility. *They wouldn't have sneaked in, would they? People would have died.* The possibility was always there of course but they tried their best to keep their secrets hidden.

Breathing in deeply, he sighed and activated his Fury skills, his muscles tensing up and his mind focusing. He held up a hand, ash flowing from his pack. It slid off his shoulders when everything was out, floating around him.

Slowly, the ash spread along the damaged gates before he pushed.

Steel groaned as it was bent and pushed, the group of warriors and mages rushing in. Some teleported and others simply ran, forming up with weapons drawn.

The rogues vanished and appeared behind the grates where the prisoners were held, the section taking up most of the right side of the hall.

Dim magical light shimmered above, just enough to let one make out the other side of the basic hall, carved and formed into the dirt and rock far below Riverwatch.

"Where is he?" Somebody asked, the group glancing around the room, various spells and buffs adding light sources to the hall. Blades and arrowheads reflected some of it.

Zair pointed to the prisoners. "In there..." he whispered and took a step back. "They're... powerful."

"Be more specific." Mauro gnarled. His eyes went wide when he both felt and saw ash spread within the caged section.

Dull impacts resounded before one of the rogues suddenly appeared, flying out of the ashen mist and hitting the grates with a loud crash. Blood flowed from his face as he coughed and tried crawling to the side.

Mauro's own ash spread out and formed lances as he watched someone walk out of the mist, holding one of the rogues each. Both unconscious or dead.

The warrior was clad in bloodied bone armor, light and dangerous. Horns adorned his helmet and blue eyes looked coldly at the group.

Dull sounds echoed through the quiet room when the two rogues landed on the floor. Coughing resounded from the conscious one.

"Who are you? And why are you here?" Mauro asked, annoyed that he had been so thrown off by the ash. Of course there would be others. *Three rogues taken out in an instant.*

The warrior appeared outside the grates, standing in a casual pose. "Funny. That's exactly what I wanted to ask you lot." A woman's voice replied.

**[Healer – lvl ??]**

*A healer... what? Ashen healer?* Mauro didn't reply immediately, watching his men fan out a little more to get better angles as well as react to a sudden teleport. Their own healer was protected by two men standing right behind her.

"I heard there were slaves for sale here. Thought I'd come and have a look. A sorry state they are in." Her voice was cold. She shook her head and looked over the group. "And then you come and flash your daggers at me? No... I can't have that."

*What is she playing at?* "You sneaked in and attacked my men. Who are you?"

The healer sighed and looked down, crossing her arms. "My name is Lilith. I've come to investigate our... competition."

"Lilith... you own some places in the city. Are you a noble?" Mauro asked. He had heard the name before. One of the only remaining external unknowns. Most of the city was owned by various groups native to Riverwatch, Alistair and his government mainly.

She shrugged. "I suppose I am. Is all this... for sale?"

*Our competition. Is she smuggling too? Buying slaves? She's powerful if anything. And rich.* "Depends on what you mean by all this." Mauro said.

He would try to solve this diplomatically, considering the name and her high level. Eccentric nobles were nothing new to him. Many of their best customers actually fit that description.

"The people..." she said and paused. "Also... that man." She pointed at Zair.

The mage took a step back, a drop of pus falling to the floor as he winced.

"I'm sure we can find an arrangement. I'm Mauro, co owner of the Gray Company. Would you like to discuss this in my office? With a drink?" He asked, glancing at the dead or injured rogues.

Lilith looked at him and glanced back. "They are alive. Neither are your goods damaged. I even healed some. You should take better care of them. It's a waste if they die."

Mauro gulped and nodded. "I'll take that into consideration. They're moved quickly normally. Fed and healed when necessary. We do take proud in our quality, with slaves and everything else we sell. I'm sure there are things you would be interested in."

She tapped the side of her helmet. "Perhaps... perhaps. I will have that drink."

“May I get the injured?” Mauro asked. “They didn’t intend to attack you. We simply responded to your intrusion. I hope you understand.”

Lilith turned and put her hands on two of the metal poles before she forced them apart. One quick move.

Mauro gulped, looking over to one of the warriors. The man shook his head in disbelief.

The metal was enchanted and strengthened, not comparable to what even the city prisons used. A single escaped slave could spell trouble after all.

The healer threw the bodies out and glanced at Pan. “Are you with an order?” She asked, her voice sounding amused before she turned and pulled the metal back.

They weren’t straight anymore but it was enough to prevent anyone from escaping. Mauro would have an enchanter have a look later. *This damn woman.* He forced himself not to sigh and smiled instead, gesturing towards the destroyed entrance which made him even more annoyed.

“The Corinth order, child.” Pan spoke with disinterest. “But your uncivilized kind wouldn’t understand our ways.”

“Your ways...,” Lilith spoke before she laughed.

“Pan.” Mauro glared at her with an intense look. “Keep your wits about you.”

“What order do you belong to then? Lilith.” The words were laced with venom.

*Fucking healer women.* Mauro ground his teeth. He was so close to deescalating and getting this insane intruder out of here. With a deal even.

“None of your business. I’m uncivilized after all.” Lilith said and slowly strolled towards the gates. “I didn’t know you would work for slavers... or what would you consider yourselves... Mauro?”

*She’s gauging us. Perhaps she knows less than I assumed.* “We trade goods. All goods and all services we can provide. To any and all. As long as they pay.” He explained.

“Hmm.” Lilith mused and sighed. “Could I buy an assassin to have her murdered?” She asked and pointed at Pan.

Mauro looked at her, keeping his face straight. “Yes. As soon as she is not in our employ anymore.”

“You dirty bitch.” Pan spat. “And how dare you disrespect us like that. You know who I am... who I represent.”

*This day couldn’t get any fucking worse.*

“We have a reputation to uphold and a clear business model. You are not in danger as long as you are in our employ. I wouldn’t dare offend the Corinth order and you know that very well.” He explained.

Lilith chuckled and walked to the entrance.

Mauro nodded to one of the warriors, letting him lead the way. He was happy to find Lilith didn’t care to have damn near everyone else walking behind her. It was impossible to tell if she really was who she said she was. If she was a Shadow, perhaps she was adapting to the situation.

Mauro was sure that Lilith was more than she let on but something about her demeanor made him want to run. Either she was the most confident actor he had met or she was the most dangerous person he had ever had dealings with. *Second most dangerous.* He thought and smirked.

*Whoever she is and whatever her goal is, she knows what she's doing.*

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Ilea had no idea what she was doing. Most of the place was full of traps and complicated enough to make her retract her steps constantly.

It had taken her half an hour just to find the big iron gates. The prisoners confirmed most of Vin's story to her. At least the name of the smugglers and the fact that they were in fact intended to be sold.

None of the Riverwatch officers were around but she was sure there were more storage halls, prisons and whatever else these sick fucks could cook up in these tunnels.

The rogues had gone for the prisoners, likely in an attempt to use them as hostages. Somehow she had been detected. Her sphere made her think it was the scrawny mage with the scarred face. His magic was... extraordinary.

Mauro, if that really was his name, had chosen not to engage. Even with the injured rogues. A sensible decision, she thought and had decided to play his game. For a little while at least.

Contrary to the Baralia officers she had killed the day before, he seemed to know what he was doing. It made her feel even more disgusted. A powerful man to be sure, an Ash Wielder or something similar at level two hundred and nine.

He was aware of it all, the horrific nature of his actions. With Baralia, Ilea understood that people grew up in a system, knew that a lot of their beliefs and decisions came from an upbringing of ignorance and opulence. Arrogant and self righteous in their morality.

This man however, seemed more like a mere businessman. Ruthless and cold. Ilea itched to let loose, to paint the walls of the dark tunnel with their blood and guts. To bring a speck of equity to the world, a tiny bit of vengeance for all the suffering they had caused.

Yet she remained calm, collected. The people in the cage were safe, merchandise not to be damaged. And she was Lilith, powerful, mysterious and most importantly, rich. She would find out more, would get them to spill some secrets. Her act however would come to an end. Sooner rather than later.