

Irwyn found Trecha, the supply Sergeant, in the building dedicated to the logistical squad and their adjacent personnel. The setup was a bit different than Elizabeth's abode, even though the buildings seemed outwardly the same. The starkest difference was immediately apparent on entry though: The bottom floor was not open, rather, it was dedicated to many individual cubicles to the side with a small area in the middle looking like something between a waiting room and a communal rest area. It was there that Trecha awaited him.

"Sergeant," Irwyn greeted. He was the only man on the floor though most of the surrounding cubicles were occupied by manaless scribes, or notaries, or whatever the correct term was in the army.

"Irwyn," Trecha nodded back. "I expected you would take longer to deliberate with her Ladyship. I barely got back myself."

"I may have made my concerns sound more serious than they are," Irwyn smiled. "As I said, better to err on the side of caution."

"So, you will try to help?" Trecha asked, hopeful. It was almost strange the man would care for Alice so much.

"We have met before on good terms," Irwyn nodded. "Perhaps not the closest acquaintances, but a familiar face might be what she needs. Either way, I will try."

"Whatever you think might work," the man nodded. "I truly wish we could at the very least make her *somewhat* better before getting mind mages involved. Fixing dark thoughts is exponentially less damaging to one's career than... despair."

"You seem very... caring," Irwyn spoke. Then paused. "That sounded very cynical, did it not?"

"A bit," Trecha laughed. "An old friend pulled some strings to have her assigned under my command. Looking after her and her career is the least I can do, isn't it?"

"I will not argue with that," Irwyn nodded. "The second floor is bedrooms, right?"

"Yes, she would be in her own," Trecha nodded. "I will bring you."

"I can only feel one presence on the second floor," Irwyn said. Two more mages were at the very top level of the building. "I will find my own way, thank you."

"You can feel through the floor?" Trecha paused. "It should be enchanted against that."

"It is not too hard," Irwyn frowned. It was trivially easy, actually. "The mana in Ebon Respite is so *thin*. Most mages shine like candles in the night."

"Well, I suppose an ordinary mage would not be the right-hand man of her Ladyship," Trecha smiled. "Go then, please, see if you can stir something."

"I will do my best," Irwyn nodded and headed up past the Sergeant. The end of the room had a stairway leading to a second floor almost identical to the one in Elizabeth's building. Six bedrooms in the middle and a hallway on the edges of the room. It was not hard to track Alice's aura to hers.

There was no reply when Irwyn first knocked at the door. Nor the second, nor the third. He might have doubted Alice was inside at all if he did not feel her magic. It was scarcely restrained after all.

“Alice, are you awake?” he said, softly but loudly to be heard through the door, “We need to talk.”

There was quiet again after that, the presence inside frozen in palace for a few more seconds... but just as Irwyn was considering trying something else it moved. Sluggish, draggingly. From within the room to the door before the handle leaned down – then even slower the door opened.

Alice looked terrible. There was simply no other way to put it. In the picture Irwyn had seen in the file she had looked more worn than he had recalled, yet it failed to encompass the extent of it standing before him. It wasn't that she looked sick - perhaps only the deep circles beneath her eyes did. It was the... stillness of it. Hair uneven and unkempt, chewed and overgrown in places - all of it disheveled. The stale stench, not of decay but of a body unwashed, room uncleaned. Stained clothes with several small torn holes that couldn't have all been recent. Eyes snooping, tired to the point of exhaustion yet failing to find respite when they shut, then glancing into emptiness for too long moments.

“You are... Irwyn,” it took her solid 20 seconds after opening the door to register she had a visitor. At least she recognized him.

“Hello, Alice,” Irwyn nodded. She appeared to somewhat stir at the mention of her own name. “It's been a while. May I come in?”

“Hmm,” she stared straight through him and did not move.

“Alice, may I come in?” Irwyn asked again.

“Okay,” she nodded, then paused. After a few seconds she did indeed step back though, allowing Irwyn entry.

The room was no less of a mess. It was built similarly to Irwyn's own, though almost unrecognizable from it. From the dirty clothes strewn around to unattended stains, Irwyn would hesitate to walk through the room without boots given the accidental caltrops omnipresent across the floor. Alice though just returned to her bed and collapsed. Not daring to try anything else, Irwyn summoned himself a chair of Light after closing the door.

“You don't seem in the best state,” he tried.

“Hmm.”

“Do you need help?”

“Hmm,” she remained faced first in the pillows.

“Alice, can you hear me?”

“Hmm.”

“Alice.”

“Hmm?” that was at least close enough to recognition of sorts.

“Alice, speak to me,” he urged

“About what?” she moved her head from the pillow at last, facing Irwyn at least somewhat before grunting.

“Anything.”

“Why?”

“Just speak to me, Alice.”

“I don’t want to,” she closed her eyes again.

“Speak to me, or speak at all?”

“Hmmm.”

“Alice. Silence will not make you better.”

“Speaking won’t either,” she grunted, then turned away from Irwyn.

“It might,” Irwyn said. “So try. For your own sake.”

“Not worth the effort.”

“So, you want to just wallow in pain forever?”

“Hmm.”

“Alice!”

“Not forever,” she turned to him again. “It has to end at some point.”

“So, you are just waiting for death?” Irwyn frowned despite himself.

“Death comes for everyone.”

“Those are the words of necromancers; they do not fit you.”

“Well, they are also surrounded by ghosts,” she shrugged, ever so slightly.

“Last I have seen you, Alice, you were beaming, full of life,” Irwyn said. “I don’t believe all of that just up and left.”

“Why not?!” she raised her voice, snapping. “It just happens Irwyn. It’s there, then it’s gone!”

“Perhaps with some things,” Irwyn carefully nodded. “But does it have to happen to you?”

“Why not?” she closed her eyes again. “Who cares anymore?”

“I do,” he lied. “We have not known each other long but I like to think we were friends.”

“Too bad for you, I guess,” she did not open them again.

“Alice,” Irwyn kept calling out.

“What?”

“You cannot just stay like that,” he argued.

“Yes. Yes, I can,” she replied, then turned away once more, eyes still closed.

And what was Irwyn supposed to do? He was not great at this. What was the right thing to say, and what words would burn beyond repair? What was apparent to him though that his approach so far was not getting him anywhere. At least not at a tangible pace. It was fine enough at getting his foot through the door but he was stuck. So, he decided to risk more.

"Is that what your family would have wanted for you?" he thought of Hen Daut. He seemed loving of his daughter at the very least. Hopefully pulling at that string would not snap it. "To just decay in a grave of your own choice?"

"SHUT UP!" then there was not even a pause, just a surge. Alice snapped around and *attacked*. Time magic was fast, fueled by a spike of rage and, of all things, *five* intentions. Irwyn had no time to think about that though beyond registering it before the spell collided with his barrier. It was some kind of wave attempting to displace matter with different nearby matter in close proximity - at least as far as Irwyn could tell. On air, the effect was barely visible, though Irwyn assumed it would shred through flesh or stone... or anything that relied on structural integrity, really. Irwyn's shield held without a problem given that it was also built from 5 intentions, even if one was *invisibility* - it peeled away the outermost specs of mana from his shield, shoving them haphazardly to the sides... where Irwyn could just reabsorb all of it back into the spell. The Time magic did not seem the best suited at breaking purely magical barriers and dissipated quickly.

"Am I wrong?" Irwyn's calm voice belied his spiking adrenaline - he had *not* expected to be attacked, whatsoever, much less by something this powerful. He was also pretty sure someone else would have noticed that. Trecha at the very least. Indeed, a second later the man's presence was moving, as well as one of the two mages from upstairs.

"Oh. Oh no," instead of answering she jumped upright, right out of the bed, approaching Irwyn which made him tense... but she was summoning no more magic and paling at visible rate, so he did not try to stop her. "Are you alright? I am so sorry!"

"I am quite fine," Irwyn nodded, not moving. But he did summon a sign of Light saying 'stay out' just outside the door. After a split-second of consideration, he decided to make it not all that hard to magically perceive - Alice was unlikely to catch it right away.

"But..." in part because she was staring at him in startled shock and simultaneously on the brink of tears. It was like her brain worked on several seconds of delay for most things, leaving her dumbfounded at Irwyn's lack of mortal wounds. She paused to process what she was actually seeing. "...It didn't touch you."

"I have gotten into a habit of *always* having a barrier active," Irwyn nodded, then decided it best she was not left to interpret that as a sign of mistrust. "I have lived through the undead incursion in Abonisle and it has left... paranoia if nothing else."

"I am so sorry; I didn't mean to!" she burst into tears. And Irwyn felt pity at all the hurt coursing through the girl as well as a pang of guilt at the past of his brain that whispered this was progress. He snuffed it out.

"Don't think anything of it," he smiled, the best he could - and Irwyn could fake a smile well. He simultaneously silently replicated the privacy bubble he had improvised the night prior. Irwyn wished he had a *proper* spell for it with incantation and all - there was no guarantee the Time mages would not try to listen in. "You have clearly been through far worse than me."

"I... I don't know what to do Irwyn," she fell back into bed sobbing. "They killed *everyone*. I couldn't believe it. I still don't want to. *Why?!*"

"I cannot know," Irwyn said slowly. The two mages who had noticed were outside the room now, though not entering - and last one was coming, attracted by the commotion. Irwyn dimmed the sign's magic a bit, no need to risk that Alice might notice it when its purpose had already been served. "All I have heard was that it was an Undead ambush."

"That is a lie," she sobbed again. "A dirty lie."

"I can only repeat what I have heard," Irwyn said slowly.

"They said that would be the story, and it is," she shuddered. "They did that and they are getting away with it. *Fuck.*"

"They..." Irwyn couldn't help but ask.

"I don't know, I couldn't see them. I hid and listened nothing else," her tears returned twofold. Secrets she should probably *really* not be spilling to Irwyn flowed because of the desperate urge to just let it all out. "Gran... grandpa wouldn't tell me who they were. He was so afraid, Irwyn. He was never afraid before, but at just the thought of fighting that man, he was shaking. It had to be someone from the Duchies! Maybe even a Duke. No, it definitely had to be. No one else could beat them. No one, Irwyn."

"You were there," Irwyn realized. Nothing else made sense from how she spoke. That could have only made it worse.

"I hid as Grampa told me to. Then, when they began to fight he teleported me away. Hid any traces so that they couldn't follow me. Couldn't even know I had left. Had ever been there," she sobbed less now, almost frantic in her retelling. "I don't understand why Irwyn. *Why?* Then I woke up somewhere in the Duchy of Black."

"If you were brought to the Duchy of Black, then it wasn't House Blackburg," Irwyn speculated out loud on incomplete information. That was fine, he was just scrambling to convince his audience of one. "It couldn't have been."

"Yes... you are right," she nodded, seemingly accepting the flawed logic.

"But you are not safe," Irwyn sighed, putting as much feeling as he could into it. "I recognized you from a picture. I am not sure how you forged your identity and won't pry," because there could be other people involved she would want to protect. "But if I noticed this, it is only a matter of time until someone else does. And people would know you were missing from Steelmire. They must be looking for you, even if they do not realize the full story, they must want to be rid of any loose ends."

"Oh," Alice paused, then panicked as if that possibility had never before crossed her mind. "Oh, no. What am I supposed to do?"

"I... I might be able to help," and he meant it. Even if it was under false pretenses, he doubted Alice had any better options anyway. "I have a friend that could keep you safe."

"Friend?" she repeated.

"She is an heiress to power," *Just like you were*, though Irwyn was pretty sure saying that out loud would be a bad idea. The association though? He reckoned it was a good first brick on the foundation of trust. "Just our age, but competent and a prodigious mage. I would trust her with my life."

"It won't be enough," Alice seemed to wilt as she chewed on the realization of her inevitable pursuers.

"Not to shield you directly, of course not," Irwyn did not deny it. "But she can *hide* you. Better than anyone. So, well that no matter where your enemies look they won't find a trace. Not a mention in paperwork, not a glance of your face. Well-connected enough that their pursuit will find no help from those who might understand more in this Duchy either."

"I see," she stared at Irwyn then. And something too complex to parse flashed through her eyes. Her expression shifted into something Irwyn did not recognize.

"Are you willing?" he asked, serious expression. That was better than a smile when making the real offer. *People expect a seller's smile to be fake*, Old Crow would always say. "We can consider something else but nothing even comparable comes to mind."

"For *that which is bound, shall nevermore be found*," Alice quoted, suddenly entranced by her own words. Not a spell since she put no power into it, though perhaps it could have been. "Thank you Irwyn, can you bring me to her?"

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The way back to Elizabeth's lair was both strange and mundane. Alice was strangely enough suddenly coherent. Almost affluent as she apologized to her squad mates for the commotion and her recent behavior. Irwyn explained that Elizabeth would like a word in person to make sure with her own eyes how Alice was doing, which no one dared gainsay. Sergeant Trecha just seemed genuinely glad the girl under his command appeared more alive.

That would not be unexpected, except that Alice became... strange. Not despairing or agonizing. But she did not speak to Irwyn again who dared not interrupt her after getting this far. Yes, *interrupt* because the girl was mattering. Like a chant, those two sentences. Over and over and over again. Like a prayer:

"For *that which is bound, shall nevermore be found*."

All the way until Elizabeth welcomed them to her building.

Irwyn did not get to see what happened behind closed doors. Alice asked for him to not be present, strangely enough. At least she was far more... clear-headed. He did get to *hear* it though. He played with the tiny plate, small enough to be invisible in a pocket. Yet the enchantment on it was layered so precisely and competently Irwyn could not feel it. But it was simple enough to use that a person did not even require mana for it.

And through it, he could hear the two young women speaking. As had Elizabeth listened to his own conversation through the paired piece. An obvious measure to take since Elizabeth had guessed there might not be time to share information without losing the effect she sought.

What was happening surpassed Irwyn's expectations wildly. The Alice that spoke was not the incoherent mess from a quarter-hour prior. She was suddenly refined. Fluent. *Focused*.

"Your Ladyship," Alice spoke, tone polite.

"Alice," Elizabeth greeted back, seemingly not letting the change in demeanor shake her.

"Please, call me Elizabeth if you like."

"You must be from House Blakcburg, right?" Alice immediately asked. "Irwyn carefully avoided speaking it, but that just means it has to be the case."

"Yes, I am indeed," Elizabeth admitted without hesitation. "I am sure he had his reasons to be careful. I am Elizabeth von Blackburg, 5th in the line."

"And you want me... Because I fell into your lap like this, maybe, but you want me," Alice's voice was a bit more frantic.

"I will not deny your talent entices," Elizabeth replied, collected despite it all. "And your acquaintance with Irwyn weights the scales further."

“Good, good,” Alice chuckled slightly, sadly. “I have to thank him. And you. If you haven’t tried, I don’t think I could have woken up.”

“I am not sure I understand,” Elizabeth said.

“***That which is bound, shall nevermore be found,***” Alice quoted again and this time there was *more* to it. Still not quite a spell but beyond just mere words.

“The Ring,” Elizabeth muttered, probably for Irwyn’s benefit, though he could still not see it outside the room.

“I have forgotten about it in my self-pity,” Alice paused. “But it remembers. It knows.”

“It is known the Chosen heir’s ring of Steelmire is an artifact,” Elizabeth’s speech was slower, wary. “Thought I did not know it possessed intellect.”

“Because we hid it,” Alice laughed and sobbed in the same sentence. “We gathered a great many secrets, even from the Duchies. And look what it had earned my family. The ring is screaming at me, even now, that you wish to add me to your banner. Whispering how to best slip from your grasp, or at least escape at the lowest cost.”

“And yet you are still here.”

“And yet I am still here,” Alice affirmed. “Because what would I run to, Elizabeth? To what end? My family is gone, everything is dust. Just speaking of it I can feel it trying to crush me, even after I locked it in the Ring. I don’t want to escape. I want just *one* thing.”

“Revenge,” Elizabeth guessed.

“Revenge,” and was right.

“It is not something I can offer as I am now,” Elizabeth admitted. “Steelmire could not have been destroyed by meager foes.”

“I don’t even know who erased my Steelmire,” Alice laughed ever so slightly at that, sounding almost mad. “But we are young. We have Time, centuries if need be. And you have Irwyn, who I know is so ridiculously talented - yet he would still call you prodigious. So, hide me, Elizabeth. Bind me to your banner, use me as you wish. But swear, upon the Mother in black and the Father eternal. Swear that one day, whoever has destroyed my home will pay.”