

It turned out they didn't have that many things to ask. Most of them were also rather generic and Elizabeth had not been even asked to keep away while the men erected what Irwyn assumed was particularly potent privacy warding.

First, they asked if Irwyn had any idea this was going to happen in the first place. Fair thing to ask, though he had not. They were using some kind of magic to determine the truth of his words and seemed satisfied with the results. Next, they questioned how he thought it might have happened and if he had noticed anything off beforehand. He shared the speculation of Fate magic being the most likely culprit, his unfounded belief that this had been no accident as well as not noticing any signs of such a serious malfunction.

Next, they asked about how Irwyn had survived. And he would not have a good explanation for that without lying. Of course, that would be if Irwyn was sitting there alone.

"I have personally provided Irwyn an expendable life-saving artifact," Elizabeth proclaimed before Irwyn could answer. A bald-faced lie, though to Irwyn's surprise, the men in black did not even attempt to deploy the truth divining - or whatever other principles it worked on - magic and moved on, not bringing it up again. The interrogation was soon concluded.

"They did not check you were telling the truth," Irwyn said, implying the question.

"I am an heiress to House Blackburg," Elizabeth nodded. "By tradition, only the Duke has the right to demand divination be performed on me."

"That sounds like an extremely convenient rule for a House that supposedly hates scheming," Irwyn noted.

"It's more of a 'who dares even put into question someone like me?' kind of thing. Pure Pride rather than application," Elizabeth smiled. "But among the ridiculous old rules and traditions, some are convenient, yes."

"Fair enough," Irwyn nodded, then spotted someone approach in his peripheral vision. "We have company."

"So we do," Elizabeth nodded, then stood up upon seeing who it was, as did Irwyn. Illius was approaching with his two followers.

"Ladyship Elizabeth and Irwyn," Illius bowed, surprisingly deep.

"Lordship Illius," Elizabeth mirrored him, though she merely inclined her head. "What brings you here?"

"An apology, of course," Illius nodded. "A terrible accident has nearly occurred!"

"If there is any blame to distribute, it would be on whoever was responsible for the array," Elizabeth narrowed her eyes slightly. "Be that the person who maintained or sabotaged it."

"Ah, but here we do not see eye to eye, Elizabeth," Illius shook his head. "A death has nearly occurred. Who could be responsible but the one who wielded the spell? Bethal."

"Yes," and the masked young woman nodded, stepping from behind Illius at the command. She walked in between Elizabeth and Irwyn, then knelt. *Kowtowed*, her masked face touching the floor. "Please, accept this unworthy one's apology."

"That is quite..." Elizabeth started while Irwyn forced himself to remain silent, though he agreed it was rather excessive. Also, Elizabeth was interrupted.

“Properly!” Illius yelled. Irwyn was too distracted with Bethal’s kowtow to notice him step closer. His knee rose and the heir to House Brightbeak kicked his follower’s head to the floor just as she was starting to rise. A ring as well as the slightest wooden crack of her mask sounded.

“You are being excessive,” Elizabeth frowned ever so slightly.

“Am I?” Illius laughed, and it sent a chill down Irwyn’s spine. He could not quite point out why but there was something... savage in it. Malicious and cruel. “Bethal has almost slain your entourage. What else can that be called than failure? And each failure has consequences proportional to it. Else, would House Brightbeak not be accused of not taking responsibility in your Duchy of Black?”

“And...” Elizabeth opened her mouth while Irwyn froze. He suddenly saw the trajectory, the words she would say. And realized they were a trap of sorts. Still, he hesitated, because if he interrupted it would go against etiquette and custom. He had to evaluate which consequence would be worse... but Elizabeth was already talking “...do you think this is appropriate?” she frowned. Irwyn saw Illius smile and suppressed a flinch.

“No, of course not!” and there it was. Irwyn mirthlessly watched Illius’ grin sharpen. Elizabeth’s eyes widened at the reply, for the tone implied the opposite direction than she had intended. But Irwyn could almost see the next few seconds playing out, and knowing that stopping it would not be worth it. So instead, he thought of a memory.

Illius reminded Irwyn of several people he didn’t care to recall. Not the perfect visage or the royal robes, rather it was the attitude. The savageness behind his eyes. Back in Ebon Respite Irwyn had the displeasure of meeting too many such. Gang leaders, their enforcers, or those who thought themselves such. People who ruled with more than the threat of violence but the certainty of it. That a whim could spell death for anyone within line of sight.

And of course Elizabeth had not seen it. For all House Blackburg was an insurmountable bogeyman to the Guild, it did not devour those that were part of it. For all the emphasis on raw power and the Wrath in their veins, they still fought with arrays to spare life and limb. Elizabeth was used to a world where the price of incompetence was a loss in status. Withdrawal of favor and privileges. Illius - Irwyn realized - was like a gang leader, the very worst of their kind.

“This is,” the heir’s knee lifted again from Bethal’s head with speed that could only mean extensive magic. Several intentions at least for it rose up and down faster than Irwyn could blink. So fast he heard the crunch and wet squeal before his eyes caught up to the carnage. Red and gray, splattered on the floor. “It wouldn’t do for anyone to think House Brightbeak does not take responsibility for its mistakes.”

Irwyn stared down at the corpse, unmoving, as Elizabeth flinched. So did many of the room at the sudden explosion of violence. Bethal had been a prodigy, without a doubt. 4 intentions when 20 at the oldest was considered an exceptional achievement. And Illius had killed her without blinking. Without care that he was stripping his own House’s future strength. Murdering someone who - if her spells were to be believed - was loyal beyond dispute. There was a glimpse of something terrifying it revealed to Irwyn. Because for all the justifications Illius had set up, this had not been *necessary* in the least.

“What...” Elizabeth opened her mouth, too flabbergasted by the turn of events to form a coherent reaction.

“Of course, House Brightbeak will also compensate the lost artifact with something of equivalent value,” Illius ignored her and stepped closer. He touched Irwyn on the shoulder, those eyes

betraying the amicable smile. "I am sure there is something suitable for a Light and Flame mage like you."

"You humble me with such exceptional determination, Your Lordship," Irwyn lied with practiced ease as he bowed.

"Nothing less should be expected of me!" Illius laughed again, then stepped away over the corpse and the expanding pool of blood. "That being said, I think I will retire early today. Wincent, if you would?"

And he stepped away, the other servant stepping up to secure Bethal's body, carrying it towards the Voidways. The men in black who had come to investigate earlier stared at his back but no one stopped them. Irwyn knew that both Illius and Bethal had been interrogated at the same time he had been so perhaps they didn't care. More likely, they didn't quite dare. For all this was the Duchy of Black, Irwyn imagined that Illius was a walking international incident just waiting to happen. Or perhaps actively goading anyone into causing one.

"You did say he was cruel," Irwyn nodded, glancing at Elizabeth. She was frowning at Illius' back, though at least she didn't appear at all shaken by the brutality or blood beneath her feet - none seemed to stick to her dress.

"I don't understand," she admitted, indeed more surprised than disturbed by her tone. "I had expected him to make some unreasonable demands because of 'failing security' or such. Or at least a jab about your near death. *This?* This is mild compared to the Illius I have known."

"I see," Irwyn said though he really didn't. Murder was not considered mild by most accounts, perhaps he was just not understanding her perspective. Though, fair enough, he had not tried to hurt either him or Elizabeth beyond the initial challenge.

"I think I have had about enough," Elizabeth sighed. "A silver lining is that this gives us a perfect excuse to leave the Exenn early without anyone taking offense."

"At least something," Irwyn glanced down at the blood. He hadn't even noticed some had splashed on the cloak he had been given. He felt a bit of pity... but not too much else. There were worse ways to go than a crushed head. "I will steal some of the seafood on our way out."

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They took it easy in the afternoon as Irwyn adorned his less formal clothes and then had another proper suit fitted in case it was needed. It was really more of a distraction as neither he nor Elizabeth were in the mood for another duel. Instead, Irwyn ended up reading for much of the remaining day.

The investigation concluded before dinner, House Blackburg moving fast. No trace of interference had been detected though the investigators had gone so far as to open the mind of the mage responsible for maintaining the array. There had been no flaws before the Exenn began. The conclusion was similar to the one Elizabeth had come to:

'Possibly natural accident. Most likely extremely subtle Wresting and sheer chance. Inconclusive whether the victim was the intended target. Deeper investigation recommended.'

After dinner, both Irwyn and Elizabeth went to sleep early having made plans for the following day. Unfortunately, said plans were interrupted by a simple yet unfortunate circumstance:

Irwyn woke up *violently* sick. Dizziness galore with perpetual nausea and a frankly uncomfortable frequency of vomiting as well as a low yet constant migraine.

"You know, it's probably the prawns not sitting well with me," Irwyn speculated in the rare few minutes of respite. "Seafood might just be too rich for me."

"You have been eating 'rich' for months now, Irwyn," she grinned.

"Maybe," Irwyn nodded. "But not 'catered for high nobility celebration by House Blackburg' kind of rich. I might have swallowed something with too much Void mana without realizing?"

"Maybe it's just a bad flue," Elizabeth suggested.

"I don't really get sick, Elizabeth," Irwyn shrugged. "The only times I have ever been anything like this was from bad food or once from actual poison."

"People tend to feel better after throwing up once or twice if it's from food," she commented.

"Then maybe the sixth will be the charm," Irwyn muttered back.

"I should get you to a healer," she frowned. "It's better to see what the issue might be."

"Well, I suppose you can afford it," Irwyn mused after suppressing the instinct to refuse. "Give me five minutes, I don't want to leave a trail down the hallway."

Except, the healer found nothing wrong. He *guessed* that whatever was causing the adverse reaction must have already been absorbed into the body. They simply looked for any known poisons or diseases and could at best diagnose what *wasn't* the root of the issue. All Irwyn was given for it was some medication to suppress the urge to gag on an empty stomach and advice to seek out someone more 'senior' if he wasn't feeling better by the next morning.

When he woke up the following dawn, Irwyn realized he felt even worse.

Things became a bit of a blur after that. Elizabeth had apparently gotten someone far more capable - and likely also far busier and more expensive - to have a look at him. The exact conversations eluded memory, though Irwyn found himself at some point staring out a window into the *evening* sky, wondering when the various tubes had been stuck into his flesh.

On the third day, Irwyn found himself once again lucid. Which let him realize he was feeling *incredibly* weak. Unable to move his limbs kind of weak. His wit and even magical senses dulled to less than half of what he knew they should be - not even accounting for the recent vision. Meanwhile, Elizabeth slept in an armchair not far away from him. Also, he realized that this was quite distinctly *not* his room. He didn't wake her so he just lay there until she stirred about an hour later. Keeping track of time was not easy.

"Good morning," he said as she woke, the words making his throat dry and sore.

"Irwyn?" she jumped awake and hurried to his bed. "You are awake."

"Well, yes," he tried to nod. His neck did not move. "Was I that out of it?"

"Yes," she nodded, approaching and grabbing his hand on the side of the bed. The touch felt muted, distant. "How are you feeling?"

"Still horrible," he admitted. "But that's presumably better than yesterday."

"Yes..." she said after hesitating for a suspiciously long time.

"So, what is actually happening to me?" he figured it was just as good of a time to inquire as any.

"Nobody seems to know," she bit her lip. "But since you actually woke up, something must have had an effect. I have already alerted the staff. If they can figure out the *source*..."

"My first actual illness probably ever and it's this kind of thing," Irwyn smiled mirthlessly. "Figures."

"If you never caught a regular disease of course whatever you might catch would be something extreme," she grinned back.

"Isn't it contagious though?" he asked, hiding any worry that tried to slip into the tone.

"If I hadn't caught it in the first two days, it's presumably not," she shook her head. "Most likely it's a curse."

"Since when are those considered diseases," he failed to incline his head.

"I never claimed it was actually a sickness," she shrugged ever so slightly with a hint of a smile. "The real issue is that no common curse-breaking methods had any effect until today. And even I cannot drag in every specialist imaginable without having any idea what kind of affliction you are suffering from. Not at the start of a Lich war."

"I see," Irwyn said, then they descended back into silence. Not long later the staff came, healers in white robes. Irwyn would almost expect them to be black, though the practicality of stains being easily visible seemingly bypassed the local fashion trends. They quickly surrounded Irwyn, most walking behind his bed. There was magic circling there, though Irwyn could not turn his head to look. Soon they returned with a conclusion.

"Here, a spike in the soul's activity," one of them said out loud.

"That could be chance," another opined.

"Unlikely to be raw stimulation after several days of fugue," the first voice replied. "We should bring in an inquisitor."

And so they did. Not fifteen minutes later a man seemingly in their forties walked through the doors, feeling like the severance of the soul from its vessel - not necessarily a living one. A conception mage. The man approached and examined Irwyn for several minutes before shaking his head.

"I can barely feel anything," he admitted. "Just the slightest trace of trace. If I wasn't specifically looking for it I would never have found it. This is beyond me to identify, much less cure."

"I see," Elizabeth nodded. "Thank you still, for at least confirming the source lies in the soul."

"I am ashamed I could not do more for the Deathslayers of Abonisle," the man bowed low, then left. The staff stared silently at Elizabeth who ignored them, stepping into the far corner and erecting a black veil of privacy with only herself hidden within. She only stepped out several minutes later, returning to Irwyn's side.

It couldn't have been more than a minute later that a woman stepped through the door. She felt... ordinary. Not pretty nor ugly, hair cut short, visage of no more than thirty years. She did wear a white robe and a vaguely familiar badge on it though: A skull on a white background, six distinct cracks almost splitting it to pieces. She did not wait for a second before approaching.

"Hold still," the new inquisitor instructed, as if Irwyn had the strength to move. She placed a hand against his heart, then nodded after not more than two seconds. "Hmm, yes."

"Have you found the cause?" Elizabeth immediately asked, both hopeful and worried.

"I have," the inquisitor nodded. Then a tidal wave of mana flooded the room and Irwyn's body for a split second. He had not felt anything reminiscent of a concept from the woman, yet there was no doubt anymore she held far more than that - if there ever was any uncertainty to begin with. And then, as it withdrew the next instant...

"I feel better," Irwyn realized. Like a weight has dropped off of his shoulders. Yes, he was still quite weak but the dizziness dropped by orders of magnitude, most of the fatigue washed away as if taken by the change of tide. "What did you do?"

"It was indeed a curse of sorts," the inquisitor nodded. "The inquisition calls such cases *Soulrot*. You have found yourself in proximity to a particularly powerful Lich in Abonisle, correct?"

"We have been checked for hostile soul magics afterwards," Elizabeth frowned. "It should have been detected."

"It's incredibly subtle while inert, hiding in the body rather than soul. Even I might not necessarily noticed," the woman shook her head. "And also *very rare*. If the undead has the time to apply Soulrot, they also had the time to just kill you outright. And for all their hatred, even most Ravener's don't have the agency to choose a slow death of their victims over more immediate certainty."

"Is this Soulrot lethal then?" Elizabeth's eyes widened slightly. Meanwhile, Irwyn thought back at the Lich in Abonisle. *Curse hidden in the flesh*. Perfect to bypass the temporary immunity to soul magic he had been granted by Dervish's artifact during the incursion. Perhaps he should feel flattered to be given such priority.

"In most cases," the inquisitor shrugged, then turned to Irwyn. "You, young man, have an incredibly resilient core. Unbelievably so for an imbue mage. Most would have died on the second day because of their souls sundering from within. Yours barely has surface cracks that will heal in... average would be a month, though you can count on it being faster. All the symptoms you suffered were merely the secondary effects of the curse that confuses your body into simply feeling ill in order to make the rot harder to detect in time - what's left will naturally fade as your body physically recovers."

"What of me and the others then?" Elizabeth asked. "Although it was very shortly, the two of us as well as some conception mages had the misfortune to stand before a Ravener."

"You are fine," the inquisitor shrugged. "I will be leaving City Black in approximately 52 hours. If you manage to gather the rest somewhere on my way I can spare a few seconds to check. Please, do understand that if it was not for both your background and the deeds attained in Abonisle I would not have spared you this much Time. Every second I am not hunting down the Betrayer's rot is a second it spreads. Speaking of, I am done here," then she turned around to leave.

"May I at least ask your name?" Irwyn stopped her.

"High inquisitor Wesuvian," she glanced back. "I will look forward to fighting side by side, should we both live until the next Lich war or the one after."

Irwyn would do his damn best to remember for once. You don't get your life saved every day.