

Avys did not remember exactly what was discussed in that laboratory beneath her father's estate and she swore not to speak of what she had been allowed to see. Still, a bargain had been made. Not a compromise but rather a way for both of them to get exactly what they wanted. Even if Avys could scarcely recall the contents.

One thing was clear. She needed to go South. All the way to the Skyclaw mountains and then through. To a place she had only heard distant stories about: The Duchy Federation.

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The ambient mana was so saturated Avys almost choked on her first breath. Dizzily, overwhelmingly, *wonderfully* thick. The door of the enclosed chamber that had brought them through an endless stretch of solid rock was still opening and yet Avys could already physically feel the difference.

It was also snowing beyond the mountains, a storm thicker than any Avys had ever seen. So much so she had to cover her eyes and still could scarcely see. And yet it was not freezing cold, merely chilly. The flakes seemingly did not even melt, instead they simply vanished. Mere seconds had passed yet already Avys had encountered several inexplicable wonders.

"And here come the customs," Johnson nodded with a note of amusement. His hand twitched as if to comb a beard he no longer had. In fact, Johnson looked notably different than when their journey had begun. Avys had not asked what kind of illusion it was or why he even bothered.

Avys took a while longer to notice the person approaching them: A woman in, presumably, a uniform. All of it in shades of black... Avys hoped that just because the Duchy had the color in the name people would not be *too* obsessed with it.

"Returning or migrating?" her tone portrayed almost impressive levels of annoyance.

"I am the former, my friends the latter," Johnson spoke up. "Say, we did not arrive during a Lich war, did we?"

"The last one was twenty years ago," the question seemed to pull the woman out of annoyance and onto her guard.

"That usually means twenty more of peace," Johnson explained to Avys and Calm, then turned back to the soldier. "And Abonisle? Does the fortress still stand?"

"Yes," the woman slowly nodded.

"Then that will be your first destination," Johnson nodded. "In the meantime, it's time for me to see if any of my old friends yet live. I will find you again in... let's say two months' time. Should be plenty for you to figure out a direction."

"Goodbye then," Avys spoke but Johnson was already gone. A strange thing given she had been staring directly at him. She did not let that startle her – it was hardly the first time.

"Just my luck, running into two newcomers," the soldier's demeanor changed in that same breath. "Let's go. The sooner we start, the faster the paperwork will be done."

Avys did not mind the bureaucracy overmuch. Though strangely enough, Johnson was never again brought up. Not so even half a question. Avys knew better than to think it a coincidence.

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Abonisle was not actually much of a fortress - it lacked real walls for that - but it was hardly much of a town either. Two-thirds of the people living there were clearly military men and the rest had come explicitly to cater to their needs... and to empty their purses a fair bit. Avys wasn't sure why exactly the place required such a massive military presence but presumed it had something to do with the literal bottomless lake surrounding it on all sides.

It was still a town though - there were too many people to call it anything less even if Abonisle lacked many amenities. She had also found a fascinating stratification within: That being a mage in itself automatically made her *more* than most people. It was not a skill or a trait as in her home - it was an identity. A privilege in itself as almost everyone seemed to reckon it. And Avys knew how to use privilege.

It was therefore in a high class pub catering to such mages - though no one actually called it that - that Avys would begin hunting for connections. She was not over-eager, of course. It wouldn't do to seem desperate. And she needed to also be careful - there was no family name protecting her in case one of the men not used to hearing no happened to also be important.

She wore a conservative dress and had every intention to drink scarcely. The first step would be slowly establishing herself as part of whatever group frequented there. It would take time. That was fine. She had converted most of her coin into local currency along the way which made her rich by most standards. Avys had expected to perhaps spend a few days sipping wine in silence before someone cared to approach her...

She was immediately made to understand that being a foreigner was *much* more interesting than she had assumed. Before Avys could even carefully remember everyone's faces and form initial judgments, the lot of the men and women present that evening were upon her.

"Far, far North," she had to explain wearing her best sociable smile. And her best was no less than perfect. "Most people haven't heard of it even before I crossed the mountains."

"The tourists we get are usually not worth the trouble," a woman in military uniform said. Avys regretted not having the time to learn the ranks yet. "Are there more mages than usual where you come from?"

"Everyone knows that there are no nations worth the name past all that rock," another in a similar uniform but with a different marking. Avys could not tell if the rank was higher or lower.

"It is a miracle any mages at all make it to us," the first woman nodded in agreement.

"Is that so?" a new voice spoke and the room went suddenly quiet. Avys knew that kind of silence. It was the stepping on tip-toes when her father spoke in disapproval. It was the flinch when a lord contradicted his servants. It was the mute fear of one's betters. Avys did not know the local pecking order but it was no longer hard to deduce who sat comfortably on top.

The man was perfectly groomed and beyond handsome - all shades of black with him. Even the uniform was subtly different which spoke of privileges, a background - and also had an insignia unlike anyone else in the room. Yet he wore no jewelry, no insignias or - that implied to her certain dislike of the family behind them. The most defying features had to be the eyes though - iris so exotically pitch black.

But what Avys focused on more was the twitch of the lip. The subtle shift of the visage. *He was annoyed at the caution.* It was the reaction of a man who had so much lip service poured on his head it began to taste bitter. She had known such nobles - sick of perpetual neophytes and

social climbers. Too secure in their ego to require such assurances and thus preferring something more straightforward when it could be afforded.

"I wouldn't know, sir," since Avys had found the biggest fish, she might try to reel it a bit. Just something a little daring. She could always move on if things didn't work. "It would be presumably hard to tell. Do I seem like a gift from higher powers to you?"

Half the room breathed in sharply, as if a little joke was a murder attempt against propriety. Prudes, Avys noted. Yet the person she had her gaze on had a different reaction. The widening of eyes in slight surprise, the smallest grin of amusement, then a suppressed chuckle. His face shifted extraordinarily fast but she had been warned that the powerful thought at a far faster pace. She had still caught all of it.

"Hmm, I find it unlikely you would be delivered by the Mother in Black," the man nodded thoughtfully. "Her gifts usually take the shape of tribulations."

"Ah, then I suppose my arrival could merely be called improbable rather than miraculous," Avys chuckled. She did not get the exact meaning but knew better than to poke at religions she did not grasp. "But alas, it is true that mages are rather rare where I come from. Persecuted even! Such is the problem of small numbers. Rather than carve something more fitting, me and my butler have decided to come to you..."

So Avys quickly spun her little convenient lies, gauging the crowd's sympathy. The very thought of mages possibly being repressed as a minority might have been completely made up but it had evoked the expected outrage. It was surprisingly easy to read her listeners. Yes, a few of them went through facial expressions faster but said tics were so obvious as to be not just open but outright picture books. Like farm hands in court, heart worn so plainly on the sleeve they might as well could have been woven from the fabric.

It felt almost too easy to seemingly wrangle a positive impression from everyone present. She mapped the existing relationships and stepped past minefields. It was all to the point she was halfway convinced that perhaps no one else in the room even played the eldest game.

And all throughout the evening she would throw the occasional glance at her mark. The innocent eyes of curiosity. Once or twice, she had even caught him glancing as well with similar intent. She certainly hoped he had caught her more often as that had been the very point. Though the man himself barely ever spoke whenever he did she made sure to answer him with something just barely more daring than the rest of the room would have been strictly comfortable with.

By the end of the evening, her only real complaint was the wine. The taste was too simplistic and the lack of poison - and thus the expectation of using an antidote - made her uncomfortable.

"I have stumbled onto something curious," she said as soon as she had returned to her room at Abonisle's seemingly single decent establishment for travelers. She supposed all the other best places had been reserved for the military personnel.

"Is that so?" Calm mockingly inquired.

"No need to play so coy," she rolled her eyes. Then focused on a thought: *You see his face? Find out what you can with utmost secrecy.*

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It turned out that most people knew very little about this mysterious gentleman. At least the mundane folk - Calm was weary of wantonly invading the minds of mages while they had other options. Unfortunately, that stratification meant that the usual rumor mills existed in complete separation from the mage upper class. Even *servants* to them were apparently divided from the common folk.

What they had found were other details. Such as the exact military ranks and small distinctions. The knowledge that the soldiers fought 'Void monsters' crawling out of the lake. Then a few smaller tidbits. That left Avys to ply her own craft still half-blind. A challenge and not necessarily a welcome one. A major misstep could lead to great many problems for her.

"Now that I think about it, I have not caught your name yesterday," he seated himself at her table. Unlike the day prior *everyone* had been giving Avys a wide berth. And just because he had waited for half an hour to approach did not actually obscure the source of that sudden distance.

"Neither have I yours," she smiled. "Avys."

"Ezax," he nodded. "I would not bother you with the rest."

"We do have that in common," she nodded. It only confirmed her suspicion of family trouble. "Though that is not a topic to sour an evening with, is it?"

"I suppose not," he nodded. "Perhaps a drink to wash such thoughts away."

"What would you recommend?"

"Nothing that is sold," Ezax chuckled slightly. Then he waved his hand and a vintage bottle manifested in it. "So, I have brought something better."

He poured them both a glass and Avys could not help but stare at the liquid a bit. It was as black as night, more bottomless than the lake. And it hemorrhaged a stupendous amounts of magic into the air around them without an end in sight.

"It will lose potency in a few minutes outside the bottle," Ezax encouraged, raising his own glass. "To unexpected meetings."

Avys still waited for him to take a swallow before taking a sip... then she realized it had been more than just a gulp as her hand had subconsciously tipped it further than intended.

The following sensation was indescribable. If she had to try she would liken it to the purest extract of mother's love and security, injected directly to the vein. A thousand lifespans of watching the beauty of a setting sun. The stepping into the night's chill from a humid and hot room, just magnified by multiples she could not conceptualize.

Her back wanted to shiver in pleasure, her throat desired to allow a moan. She instinctively fought it down. Against the sheer *marvel* coursing through her body, she held on. Despite pleasures she had not thought imaginable, the breath in her lungs was held back by an iron grip.

"You have excellent control of yourself," Ezax nodded as soon as she was able to somewhat gather her wits again, a glint in his eyes. "Almost suspiciously good."

“Ah, like all good wine,” she immediately played along. Still, her heart continued to race even as the experience faded from consciousness and memory. Hopefully, she would not remember any of it - even the fleeting recollection felt like it could be ruinous. “Always poisonous.”

“People do not like schemers in the Duchy of Black,” he noted.

“That sounds a step or two away from ‘I’,” it was important not to panic. Fear implied guilt. No one had sympathy for an apparent sinner. “My, I would almost think you untraditional.”

“I have been exiled here for a while, Avys,” Ezax nodded. “You are not the first pretty face to try your luck.”

“It is a good thing I hardly ever rely on something as fickle as chance then,” Avys leaned forward, cupping chin in her hand. “It is also not a good idea against a man as frightening as you.”

“Scary, am I?” he grinned, a bit too sharply for comfort.

“Why else would everyone else be so horribly terrified of you?” she said and that gave him pause. “I am also not blind. Career soldiers, many veterans of Lich Wars from what I hear, yet they are horrified of speaking a word out of line in front of you.”

“I am their commander,” he said, pointing at the little marking on his uniform claiming as such.

“Those are not ‘superior officer’ kind of glances,” Avys chuckled. “Those are ‘my family would not dare complain if he killed me’ flinching stares. It doesn’t take five minutes to see as much.”

“I will give you points for being observant, I suppose,” he nodded, not even attempting to deny that.

“And yet you are still here, a middle-of-nowhere fortress, calling yourself an exile,” Avys nodded. “To me, that sounds almost as if you need a ladder out of a hole.”

“What can you possibly know about *why* I am here?” a bit of heat entered his eyes.

“Nothing,” she appeased before it could burn out of control. “But I do know great much about politics. And to me, it looks like you are someone who could use an edge. Like a pretty little schemer that they would not conceive of.”

“You speak with a great deal of confidence for someone who had been chased all the way past the mountains.”

“Running? Oh no, you misunderstand.” she grinned, making sure to seem just the tiniest bit mad. “I am here to sate an appetite. Give me a week and you will see what a few subtle whispers can accomplish.”

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Seven days seemed like not that much and Avys *needed* to impress. That did not mean she rushed ahead. After Ezax decided to distance himself for the evening, she continued to socialize, except with more direction. She decided to ask questions that would perhaps best be left for *after* more trust was established, dangerously dancing around possible pitfalls with each such sentence spoken. But impressing did not mean playing things safe.

By the end of that night, she had mapped every mage of any importance in Abonisle. Ezax was, in fact, not the only commander for one. There were two others, though everyone seemed completely, unquestionably, certain that Ezax was more powerful than them. She wasn't yet certain whether in raw magical power, connections, or perhaps both.

She had also fished out that one of the other two disliked Ezax to a significant degree. And had a son also present among the soldiers. And that opened many options. During the day she had drafted out possibilities and tasked Calm with gathering what details she yet missed but couldn't obtain herself.

By the time evening arrived, she had just two questions that needed to be answered for things to move forward.

"These void creatures that swarm from the lake... could you attract *a lot more* of them?" was the first. "Without anyone finding out it was you, that is."

"Hmm, I suppose I could," he nodded. "Though I hardly see the point. They are quite endless. The net profit from parts is not great either - most spoil before a buyer is found."

"And if there was increased activity, would it be expected of you to step in?" she nodded, then asked her second.

"No, not unless something truly terrible came through," he almost scoffed at the idea. "I am out of the way but this is still a post where I scarcely ever have to do anything."

"Then I would ask that you start attracting more of the monsters, but subtly. So that no one knows you are doing so."

"Easy enough," he humored her. "I am interested in how you will make those extra losses up to me."

"A small sacrifice for great gain," Avys chuckled. "Though speaking of that, I may need you to go through some mild discomfort for this to work."

"Is that so?" he asked dubiously.

"Wouldn't you humor me? For the audacity if nothing else," she grinned. "It is two or three days away anyhow as my estimates go."

"I suppose you have intrigued me enough for that," Ezax nodded. "Though do not forget, your time is ticking. Six days left, I believe."

"Perfection takes time," she waved it away. "All I will need from you are a few easy actions. The next thing you know, you will find yourself surrounded by zealots willing to die for you."

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How does one get rid of opposition?

A fool would rely on assassins. Knives in the dark could be effective, yes, but not always. They had to be employed with care. Sometimes one's foes sprouted two heads from the one that had been cut. A smarter option was discrediting them - stripping their influence in ways that could not be traced back until a screaming critic became nothing more than a negligible whisper.

The best way, of course, was to turn an opponent into a staunch ally. There was an art to that. It required a deep understanding and the deftest of hands... usually. The Duchy of Black was less resistant to such manipulations. Things were so much easier when everyone was not already assuming all the people they talked to were going to backstab them and either planning for the eventuality or wielding the aforementioned blade first.

So, by the end of the second day, Avys became quite intimately familiar with Commander Ahaz and his direct heir Lieutenant Amalleous - despite never exchanging a single word with either. Quite a strong bond the military father-son pair had too, so carelessly undisguised. It was incredible to Avys how people did not seem to think twice about parading such an obvious weakness.

Therefore, she began to whisper venomous little lies. Prepared for an opportunity. It did not come on that second day, though she noticed the rising tensions. While no combat had reached into the town, the wear and tear on the soldiers and lower-ranked mages became steadily visible. Losses were inevitable. Which meant temper and mistakes. That night they were downright careless with security as she had Calm tamper just ever so slightly with certain supplies.

When Amalleous' obviously one-sided crush perished to the onslaught, Avys was long ready to plant the confession of mutuality among her belongings. The the young Lieutenant was a bit of a hothead and suddenly in a need of someone to blame. Which is why she made sure he had a head full of his fellow soldiers complaining about their commanders' inaction despite the mounting casualties.

But how could dear Amalleous blame his beloved father? That left only two targets and the third commander was notoriously a hermit that could not be easily reached for a confrontation. Then he happened to imbibe a little something that inhibited the self of preservation - not just alcohol which was not nearly as potent - and the young Lieutenant found himself shouting about cowardice in Ezax's face.

A hanging offense, by all accounts... or whatever form of execution local customs dictated. Which made Ezax seem all the more reasonable for *not* demanding any punishment as she had instructed him to. Then he even admitted the young man had a point and swore to join the soldiers for the next wave!

His acting was not great but he *could* pull a flawless stern poker face, so Avys had instructed him to use exactly that. The monsters apparently also did not pause during the night as Ezax left only minutes later, a few of the officers curiously following in their free time.

Then came the part of the plan Avys could affect the least. She needed Ezax to act the savior. The example in the lead. Could he do that? She couldn't be sure. It was one thing to tell him that he should only try to save the soldiers just moments before they would die. It was another for him to execute that precisely without being noticed.

When the hour passed and Ezax returned with a gaggle of soldiers, she realized she had greatly underestimated him. Not only had he performed his part, he had awed the soldiers to the point rumors of his feats began to spread by themselves. *Natural rumors of heroism!* She could scarcely believe it herself and she had been planning how to plant manufactured ones.

"So, are these my death-sworn soldiers now?" Ezax asked with some amusement later in the evening. He failed to hide his good mood. Better than she would have expected the soldiers' adoration to put him in.

“That will take a while yet,” Avys said. “For half of them, I would take about a month given the lack of opposition, though I am not intimately enough familiar with how you people deal with the threat of death.”

“We tend to kill it.”

“On this scale, I can seed the rumors myself,” Avys pointedly ignored the joke. “Though if you wish for more than a little town, I will need more resources. People who will keep their mouths shut especially.”

“Already planning what to do with my resources, are we?” Ezax said though there was no opposition in his voice.

“Tomorrow, Commander Ahaz will come personally thank you for sparing his son,” she said confidently. With her read on the man, she was almost certain of it. “The soldiers who feared you a few days ago now respect you instead with the buds of loyalty ready to spring with just a bit of watering. Is that not enough?”

“I will admit, I have underestimated you,” he nodded, intensity returning to his eyes. “But even an excellent schemer will not be enough to solve my problems.”

“Says you, before even explaining them to me,” Avys chuckled. “But that is not for tonight. It sounds to me like the ‘tide’ has finally broken. That is a cause for celebration.”

“I suppose the soldiers already are doing that,” he nodded. Drink were being taken a bit more liberally than usual.

“Still, I would ask for a bit more of your attention.”

“Spoken as if you didn’t already have it,” he smiled. The mood was right.

So Avys went for her most daring move yet. She pulled a small vial from within her dress, playfully moving it across the table. She had gone out of her way to obtain one locally for its recognizable packaging. If she had used her own remedy, the implication would not be nearly as obvious. And by the glint in his eyes, Ezax very much recognized it. That he did not stop Avys as she drank it whole was another message in itself.

“Personally, I believe that heroes do deserve a bit more than just praise.”