

61: Nametaker

Destruction surrounded Kat.

She was standing in the middle of a wide dirt street, with black-clad bodies surrounding her. The faces of the bodies had strange white symbols painted on them. Every single one of the nearby buildings was ruined beyond recognition, what remained of the scorched wooden pillars and stone littering the street.

"The entire southern section of the town is on fire!" a voice screamed out behind them.

Kat turned to look as Thurlow, a fellow Shielder, came running up to them. There was blood running down the left side of his head.

"The knights are heading there as we speak, but we need to send mages to assist them with controlling the fire," he continued as he stopped close to Kat's group, bending over as he breathed heavily.

All of them turned their heads to the south. The night sky was beginning to take on an orange hue there.

"We'll go," Wilmer said as the man took a step forward along with Muriel. The two of them were the best among them when it came to hydromancy.

"I'll guide you," Thurlow said, standing straight after he'd caught his breath for a moment. Then the three of them immediately took off down one of the muddy streets.

That left seven Shielders left in their group. Two A-ranks and five B-ranks.

"Can't believe they're causing all this destruction," one of the other Shielders muttered. "Blazes...what could they even be after?"

"I doubt even the Augur could understand these maniacs," Arnall—the current leader of their group, and an A-ranked senior Shielder—said.

Kat glanced at the bodies on the street, grinding her teeth at the sight.

"We'll keep moving. We've already taken care of this group, and there's supposed to be more of them north of here," Arnall said, hefting his large sword onto his shoulder. The rest of them got ready, and soon they were moving through the streets again.

They passed by countless demolished buildings, each one nearly wrecked down to the base. It had only been a few hours since the attack started, and the town of Brinewick was already ravaged to this state. It was like the Tribe was seeking pure destruction here, and nothing else.

Or maybe she should say the Hallowed Cabal, considering what she had learned from Scarlett.

The higher-ups of the Guild had taken her warning seriously too, judging there could be truth to her words after her first run-in with the Cabal. Kat did feel a little bad about inevitably placing some attention on Scarlett with her warning, but for now, those she had talked to in the Shields Guild had agreed to leave the baroness be, *and* they had decided to place extra importance on Brinewick.

But they had still underestimated the Cabal. That much was clear.

The Guild was worn thin. Kat didn't really know the details of everything—she *preferred* having things simple—but they only had about thirty Shielders here in Brinewick. There were so many other places in the empire that they had to send people as well. Despite that, the number of high-ranked Shielders placed here was much higher than in most of the other places.

And they weren't the only ones here either. She had seen several knight orders around, as well as mages from some of the Mage Towers. She had even seen Solar Knights, every one of which would probably be enough to justify A-rank in the Guild.

And still, things had gotten to this level.

The Tribe of Sin was a lot stronger than any of them had expected. Both in terms of numbers, and in strength. Even though most of the Tribe members Kat and the others had run into up till now were handled without too much issue, she knew there were much more dangerous individuals among them. She was also pretty sure that all of the damage around here wasn't caused by those that she had fought. Some of these buildings were almost literally wiped out of existence.

She wasn't even close to being able to do something like that on anything close to this scale.

"There's someone over here," one of the others cried out.

Kat's attention turned to what remained of an overturned wagon. Arnall and Rolland rushed over to lift the debris away, revealing a brown-haired man with dried blood across his and a large wound on the side of his stomach.

"What in the name of..." Arnall muttered with a frown.

"I thought all the people were evacuated last night?" Kat asked, taking a step back as Aubriana moved forward and kneeled next to the injured man. Kat wasn't too familiar with the older woman, but she knew she was good when it came to healing magic.

"They were supposed to be," Ami—the other A-ranked Shielder in their group—said darkly.

Beaming water formed above Aubriana's hand and floated in the air towards the injured man, soon mending the damage to his side and washing away some of the blood on his face.

Arnall snapped a finger next to the man's head. "Hey. What are you doing here? Everyone was supposed to have evacuated."

The man's eyes slowly opened, appearing slightly hazy as he looked at them. "W-Wha..."

"Focus." Arnall grabbed the man's shoulder. "You should already have evacuated. What are you still doing here?"

The man seemed to take a moment to realize where he was. Suddenly, he jolted up, stopped only by the A-rank's grip. "W-Where am I? Wait, the others..."

"I said *focus*. We found you injured under this wagon. Why are you still in the town?"

The man stared at Arnall for several seconds, then shook his head. "I-I tried to run after everything started collapsing. I-I thought I could make it."

Kat furrowed her brows at the man's words, taking a step closer and staring at him over Aubriana's shoulder. "What started collapsing? Were there others with you?"

His frantic eyes turned to her. "Uh, t-the cellar we were all hiding in started collapsing. W-We didn't think it was worth fleeing before, so we stayed. There w-were over a dozen of us, and their families."

Kat's heart stopped for a beat. She thought they had been able to avoid most deaths after evacuating all the people to a temporary camp a day's travel away. She looked at Arnall.

"There could still be people alive."

He turned his head to look back at her, a heavy expression on his face. After a short period, he turned back to the man. "Where was this?"

The man looked around, like he was trying to reorient himself among the destroyed buildings. "N-Near the town square. In that direction." He pointed with a weak finger.

Kat looked to where he was pointing. That was to the east. But they were supposed to go and help some of the other Shielders in the northern part of the town.

Arnall looked back at Kat and the others. His eyes stayed on Kat for an extra second, then he stood up with a sigh. "We can't just leave it. I, Kat, and Rolland will go and see if there are any more survivors. The rest of you take this man and continue to the rest."

Kat saw Ami frown at the order, but the large woman stayed silent as she moved over and lifted the injured man up without issue, placing him over her shoulder. The man let out a groan and some weak complaints, but Ami ignored them, nodding at Arnall as she and the three other Shielders took off in their original direction.

Arnall turned to Kat and Rolland. "Let's go."

The three of them started running in the other direction, towards where the man had pointed. They continued moving for a while, surprisingly enough not running into any of the Tribe's members before they reached what had probably been the town square. Now, it was just a large open area with rubble spread around it.

"We'll start looking around from here. Stay within sight," Arnall said, and they split up to search some of the nearby buildings. Some of them were actually still standing.

Kat had just finished searching the second of her buildings when she heard a sound from the other side of the square. Turning around, she just caught sight of someone in black clothes getting thrown a dozen meters into a stone wall and falling limp there.

"Tribe members!" Arnall's voice cried out as he slammed his sword into the shield of another black-dressed individual near him, beating the person down to the ground.

Kat started running to help, but she was interrupted when she spotted a handful more Tribe members come running from one of the side streets, their painted faces standing out clearly in the moonlight. Rolland also seemed to be in the middle of fighting even more of them at the other end of the square, so Kat turned her attention to the ones near her, moving her hands as she cast boulder smash.

The stones formed in front of her quickly, shooting out and slamming into three of the surprised targets, although the others managed to dodge. She quickly cast two fireballs to finish off the ones she had knocked down as the other ones started running at her. Luckily, none of them seemed to be a mage. With a few more spells, she managed to take them down well before they reached her, and she returned her attention to Arnall. The man was standing next to one of the remaining buildings, a few more black-clad bodies than before lying around him.

Suddenly, the building behind him *exploded* into a million fragments. Kat put up her arms to shield her face as some of the debris flew towards her. One piece of stone hit her with such force that not even her mana barrier could withstand all of it, and she felt part of her bone crack as she was knocked back.

Coughing as the cloud of dust that filled part of the square slowly settled, she hurriedly cast earth pulse on herself before pushing herself up with her good arm. The warm feeling pulsed through her arm and into the rest of her body as she squinted her eyes.

There was someone standing where the house had been. A woman. She wore tight-fitting black clothes with a short hood that reached the top of her head. Unruly violet hair hung down along the edges of her face, and she was staring ahead with bright eyes that practically glowed with the same color as her hair. Covering her neck, and reaching up to the sides of her jaws, was some sort of strange, scale-like growth of a dull silver. It almost looked like a shell of some kind, as if it was growing *over* her skin.

Her appearance tickled some memory at the back of Kat's mind.

The woman's eyes traveled over the square, crossing over Kat and Rolland in an almost sluggish manner, and only momentarily stopping on the bodies of the dead members of the Tribe of Sin with a small scowl.

Kat's eyes widened.

If you under any time during these coming events encounter an individual with either violet or silver hair, referring to herself as Vail, then do not under any circumstances clash with her.

Scarlett's warning rang through her head.

Kat threw her uninjured arm up in the air, and cast a spell she had only learned recently. A small flame formed above her finger, then shot off into the sky in an arc, leaving a thin streak behind it. When it reached its apex it flared up and fractured into hundreds of smaller lights, each one floating down like snow as they slowly flickered out.

The violet-haired woman observed the light show with a curious expression, then set her eyes on Kat, who was just about to prepare to cast another spell when the stones on the ground near the woman suddenly moved.

Piles of the stone were thrown to the side as Arnall pushed his way free with a yell, covered in dust and cuts. His head immediately sprang to the violet-haired woman, who stared at him quietly.

"W-Wait don't!" Kat began yelling as Arnall took one long step towards the woman, striking out with his right arm.

For a moment it looked like the woman was going to take the attack head-on, but just as it was about to reach her face, her hand moved up and caught his fits. She looked him straight in the eyes, then frowned.

"Weak."

Kat's eyes widened and she stared on as the woman moved her hand, and Arnall's arm went with it. The moment after, he disappeared as well. Kat didn't even see what happened.

"NOOO!!" Rolland's voice cried out from the side, pulling Kat out of her trance.

The woman turned her attention towards Rolland.

Quickly raising both her arms, fighting through the pain from her still-unhealed left one, she hurriedly cast two fireballs one after the other. Both spells flew in an almost straight arc, striking the woman almost straight on. Kat *saw* how the magic behind the spells unraveled and disappeared into nothingness as they did.

The woman tilted her head at Kat. "You too."

Kat was already moving her hands again, putting her all into casting one of her most complicated spells. The ground started to shake according to her will, and the ground beneath the woman suddenly opened up to swallow her whole.

Silence filled the square.

Then mounds of rock blasted up into the sky as a large crater formed. The woman walked up from it like it was nothing, not an inch of her body looking injured. She looked at Kat.

"Manifest," she said, now with a small smile that sent shivers down Kat's spine. "I'll give you a chance. I am Vail Nejothreb Terlizzi Titus Kolzryreg. What is your name?"

Kat stared at the woman. At *Vail*. And before she could do anything, Vail *moved*.

She didn't even have time to blink, and suddenly Vail was right in front of her. She tried to step back, but Vail's hand gripped hold of her neck immediately. Her throat tightened as her feet left the ground, and she was lifted up in the air.

"BAAASTA—" Rolland's cry came screaming from the side, but one flick of Vail's hand sent him flying.

As Kat desperately clasped at Vail's hand, the woman's smile disappeared and she looked at Kat with a disappointed expression. "As I thought. Weak."

Kat's eyes widened as the pressure on her neck grew, and—

"Why don't you let her down," a gravelly voice called out.

The pressure stopped, and Vail turned her head. Kat got a glimpse of the person that had spoken.

A dozen meters away from them stood a man. He had a full head of grey hair and a thick beard, wearing a light set of black-and-white leather and scale armor. A long wooden spear leaned over the back of his shoulder, and a thick book hung off from his side.

For a moment, Kat felt a hint of relief. It had been agreed that the flare spell she used was reserved for emergencies, but this definitely counted.

Vail stared at the man, her eyes closely taking him in.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Nothing I have to share with monsters like your kind," the man responded calmly.

Pain shot through Kat's body as Vail jammed one of her hands into her side, but she could barely let out a groan as the pressure around her neck intensified again.

The man clenched his teeth. "...Gratianus Graham."

Vail leaned her head to the side. "Gratianus?"

There was a short pause, before the woman showed a menacing smile. "*I like it.*"

Kat fought through the haziness that was starting to cloud her mind, removing her hands from Vail's, and moving them near the woman's head.

Fireball

A blazing explosion enveloped them both, disappearing almost the second it began. Kat felt the side of her face burn as the grip on her neck loosened for a brief moment and she was knocked back through the air. Everything was going in circles in her head as she landed on her back, knocking the air out of her.

Desperately turning to the side, she tried casting earth pulse on herself again but couldn't focus on the spell. Loud claps and bursts of air shot out from the two figures near her that were suddenly crashing into each other, but she could barely make any details out through her blurry and red vision.

Finally she managed to cast earth pulse, relief spreading as the warm feeling spread through her body again.

"Vail!" a loud voice rang out.

The two fighting figures stopped momentarily as a third figure appeared at the edge of the square. They were just a muddy black spot in Kat's eyes.

"Stop playing around with that old man. We're finished here!," the figure yelled.

"No," Vail's voice declared.

"We were given an order. We're *leaving*."

Kat could barely make out Vail glancing at the figure, before looking back at Gratianus. "...Next time." Vail sounded vexed.

A moment later the woman was gone, and Kat saw Gratianus' figure approaching her.

"You look like you've been to the Blazes and back, girl," the man said.

Kat tried to fight through the pain and push herself up. If things were over she had to check on Rolland and Arnall. And there could still be survivors nearby.

"Don't be an idiot. You're not getting anywhere like that," Gratianus' voice sounded out beside her as she fell down to the ground. "You've done enough for now. I'll ensure more help comes. Rest for now."

Suddenly Kat felt so tired. Like the last dredges of energy she had been trying to pull out from her body just disappeared, and there was nothing left but cool languidness. She tried to fight it, but soon, the exhaustion took her and everything went black.