

# The Founding of the Shadowdancers

by Rob van den Berg

*This story is written by Rob van den Berg for the fanart contest at sandraandwoo.com. The original setting comes from their webcomic Gaia and belongs to them.*

There are a few things we know about the thieves guild called the Shadowdancers. We know they fight for Ilesaar independence, after it was annexed by Cania. We also know they are well organized, and have access to some high-class magical devices, and that their leader is a young girl called Jael Bara(though she uses the alias Viviana).

But there are still a lot of things missing from the story. How did they get access to the Shadowkeep? Why is Jael Bara the leader at such a young age? How did the Shadowdancers become the greatest thieves guild in the world so fast? And perhaps most importantly, where did they start?

This story will try to answer those questions, by telling the story of Jael Bara, and how she started her adventure, that would lead her to become the most wanted thief by the Canian government.

*Gradus' home, evening in spring, about 18 months before the Red Hall Incident.*

“There is something we have to discuss”

Gradus looked at the girl at the other side of the dining table, who was currently looking in his direction with her blue eyes. Still, worry filled Gradus' head, because he had feared hearing such a sentence for years now.

“I have been preparing for this time every day for years, and I still have not found a good answer. If only...”

“Gradus?”

The slightly more urgent voice of Viviana pulled him from his thoughts.

“It is about Ilesaar, is it not?”

Viviana nodded and said “yes, it is. I am grateful to you that you gave me a home for those years, ever since my parents died. But...”

Gradus raised his hand in interruption; “You want to avenge them, am I right”.

“That is right, I know you killed the mercenaries who killed my parents, but we both know they are not the only ones that should pay for their crimes.”

“I know, but is justice really worth your life? You are young, and still have your entire life ahead of you. If we try to kill Geldor...”

This time it was Viviana who raised her hand. “I'm not talking about killing Geldor.”

“What? Then what is it you want to do? He is the one who had your family murdered, remember...”

Again Viviana raised her hand, “I want to reveal the truth about the murder of prince Geraldo.” A calmness was in her voice that was in strong contrast to the emotional turmoil that was most certainly in her head.

Gradus was shocked for about ten seconds, during which Viviana looked him in the eye silently. “Reveal the truth!? You know that’s impossible! That casket has withstood any attempt to open it, magical or otherwise. Without the recording crystal, we have no evidence.”

Viviana nodded again, still no emotion on her face. “Yes, but there must be something we can do. Cania’s occupation is bleeding our people. Not to mention the possibility of war between them and Midgard. If we do nothing, who will?”

Gradus spoke after three seconds: “You cannot be seriously considering accusing Delvor of murder without evidence!? Even if some people will listen to us, which is unlikely, we would be arrested and killed, along with anyone who listened! This is madness!”

“I’m not saying we should climb a rooftop and shout a message from it, or something like that. But there must be a way to inform the people of Delvors crimes.”

“There is none!”

“There is one, I already made a plan.”

“What!?”

“An emergency projection. We gain access to the old system and...”

“But only the guard has access to that system! The controls are securely locked in the palace! How do you plan to get there?”

“We break in, of course.”

“What?”

“You told me stories of your time as an adventurer, finding old tombs filled with traps and magical creatures. It cannot be that different now, can it?”

“These tombs were centuries old. The traps in there were nothing compared to modern security systems. The creatures were powered by crystals that had lost at least half their energy. Fighting well-trained guards is something else entirely.”

“You fought guards too, remember. When you were doing that one quest for that pendant and got falsely accused...”

“Those were members of the village militia, not highly trained palace guards. I knocked them out within minutes and explained the situation later.”

“Which was easy for you, as you said. Besides, we only have to fight if we get caught, which we can easily avoid with my plan.”

“You have a plan that gets us in the royal palace undetected?” Gradus’ said in amazement.

“Yes” Excitement beginning to show on Viviana’s young face. “I have been gathering information in my free time. The old escape tunnel into the palace still exists. The entrance is guarded, but the guards secretly leave each evening for an hour to go to the tavern. If we...”

Gradus' shook his head. "Look, I hate the idea of the occupation or the war with Midgard as much as you do. However, I can't let you take such a risk with your life. I know it sounds wrong to you right now but it is not your responsibility to achieve independence for Ilesaar. When you are older, we might find a way to find justice, but not at the cost of your life."

Viviana looked Gradus in the eye. "My parents died trying to expose Cania, and you want me to just go to school everyday like nothing happened!?"

Gradus was calm again. "Yes, it sounds terrible, but when you are older you will understand."

"But..."

"No choice, young lady" Gradus said sternly. "Right now all that matters is that you survive and keep our knowledge of Delvors crimes secret." Gradus look softened somewhat, and he continued: "If you die, your parents would never forgive me, and no one would remember how it actually happened."

"Surely it is worth the risk?"

"No it isn't. Now go to your room."

"It is only..."

"It does not matter what time it is, I have important business tonight and I cannot worry about you at the same time. We can continue this discussion at a better time, maybe when you have thought things through you will see the wisdom in what I say."

"Fine, but do not think we are done yet."

"Would not dream of it."

Viviana went upstairs, never looking at the man who took her in. Gadrus' would have cried if he wasn't so trained in keeping calm.

"I have to do this soon, before Viviana does anything stupid." Gadrus thought to himself. Luckily, if things go well, that soon won't be a problem anymore.

After listening carefully to make sure that Viviana is actually in her room, Gadrus went to sit on the couch with the paper, skipping the news and going straight to the puzzle, since he cannot afford to get distracted by what might be happening.

About 45 minutes later, a bell rings, getting Gadrus attention. He walks to the door and opens it.

"Gadrus" the black cloaked men standing in the doorway said. "How are you?" The similarly dressed woman next to her said.

"I'm fine." was Gadrus reply, "thanks for coming. Mil, Sal are you coming in?"

"Sure." they said at the same time, and with that the three of them walked inside.

"I have to say, it is going to be dangerous." the man Gadrus called Mil said.

"I know."

You know what you are doing right?" The woman called Sal said worriedly.

"Probably."

"That is not very comforting" Mil said.

"No certainties in life, is what you taught me." Gadrus said.

"Yes, but this what you wrote in your letter, if it was any other man, we would not even have come here."

"I understand." Gadrus said, "But this must be done, that man killed my friends, made the little girl upstairs an orphan, and destroyed the kingdom as we knew it. We have to send him to Gaia, if only for justice."

Sal nodded. Looking at him, she said: "Are you still in shape, after those months, if you want we could do this alone..."

"No." said Gadrus, "I have to be there, and I am still in good shape. Not to mention the plan was made by me. If anything happens to you, I could not forgive myself."

"But what about Viviana?" Sal asked.

"I made arrangements. Besides, I am not that good of a caretaker. I spent most of my money on what we are going to do tonight, while it should be saved for her."

"She still cares about you, perhaps..."

"I do not deserve such praise. Look, I know you think I'm in over my head, but she deserves someone who is not in the business of getting himself almost killed."

The room was silent for a few seconds. "Alright, then, if you are sure." Mil said.

"Fine, we are all in agreement then. Now, let's discuss the plan one more time."

Twenty-two minutes later, 3 dark-clothed figures left the house, noticed only by a little girl spying at them from behind her window.

Fifteen minutes later, near Delvors summer estate, three mysterious figures stood by a wall separating the garden from the street.

"You are sure this is the correct spot?" one of them asked.

"Yes Mil," another one responds "I left markings here that indicate the plants that will hide our entry. I also hid a sound dampening crystal in the soil there, along with enchanted devices against any magical based alarm. No one will see, hear or otherwise notice us coming."

"What about the guards inside?" A female voice asked.

"Most of the guards are above us at the wall. Some others guard the gate to the gardens. If everything goes well we will bypass them all."

“And if we encounter guards anyway?”

“Then we have no choice but to fight, though I will try not to kill them.”

“Fine then, lets do this.” Mil said.

All three nodding in agreement, they placed blue crystals at the wall.

“Alright now, stand back.”

A blast sounded, though very softly, and three masked and cloaked figures crawl through a rough hole in the wall, hidden from view by bushes. Quick but silent, they make their way unnoticed towards the tree by window on the first floor.

“You go first Gad.” Mil whispered.

Nodding, Gadrus climbed the tree, getting support from Mil and Sal. After that he climbs through the open window, Sal following, and Mil after.

“We are in.” Mil whispered.

“Yes, now we just slit the throat of Delvor there and...”

“Eh, guys” Sal whispered urgently,

“What?”

“The bed is empty.”

“What!?”

“It is, and it has no sign of being slept in tonight. Are you sure this is the right room?”

“Yes.”

“So what now, we go back?”

“No, we will not get this chance again. The hole in the wall might stay hidden for the night, but in the morning they will surely find it.”

“So now what?”

“We wait in ambush. Delvor is sure to show up soon.”

“Are you...”

“Yes I am sure, now hide. I will stand by the door.”

Nodding, Mil and Sal went to stand by the window, peeking beneath the curtains, to see if their hole has been discovered.

A few minutes pass, no one willing to break the silence to voice any doubts they have. This is it, Gadrus thinks, in a few minutes Delvor will be sent back to Gaia.

Finally the door opened slowly, and a woman stood in the doorway. Suddenly she is dragged inside and has a knife pointed at her throat. In her surprise, she screamed loudly.

“Aaaah!”

“Wha, wait you are not Delvor!?” Gadrus said when he heard her scream, his knife stopping centimeters from her skin.”

“Assassins, assassins in Delvors room!”

“Stop shouting!” Gadrus said, placing the knife against her skin.

“We have to go Gad!” Sal said with urgency.

“But what about...”

“Forget Delvor! We have to go now!”

“But we...”

“Will accomplish nothing if we get killed or arrested now!”

“Guys!” Mil interjected. “There are guards at the hole!”

“What, how many?” Sal asked.

“At least six. And they have crossbows, so we are not going that way”

“Then how will we get out?” Sal asked in response.

“The front door.”, said Gadrus. “there are over a dozen guards there, so the front door is a better bet now.”

“Are you certain?” Sal asked.

“No, but we can not use the hole anyway.”

“What about me!?” the woman said, now revealed to be a simple serving maid. “Are you going to take me hostage!?”

Gadrus looked at the others for a second and said “No we are not.” and removes the knife from her skin. “You are not valuable enough to be a hostage in Delvors eyes. Run.”

Soon after the maid was fleeing, and Mil, Gadrus and Sal were readying their weapons. Running quickly, the stairs are soon in sight.

“Crap, there are guards below!” Mil shouted. “They have crossbows and there are at least five. We have to find another way out”

“There is no other way downstairs!” Gadrus shouted.

“Well we cannot go down here either, they will have crossbow bolts in each of us before we are seen.”

“Can this get any worse?” Sal interjected.

“Surrender!” they all here from downstairs. “There is nowhere to go, and the city guard is already on its way, drop your weapons now and you will not be harmed.”

“What do we do now?” Mil asked.

Suddenly Sal is pulled into one room. “Quick in here.” a young and to Gadrus very familiar voice sounds.

“Viv, what are you...”

“No time into this safe room quick!” we will be safe here.

“But...”

A crossbow shot suddenly sounds from downstairs. Gadrus looking at Mil, sees that he is already running towards the safe room and goes in as well. Deciding that there is no alternative he runs inside, after which the door immediately closes.

“This door will be locked for 6 hours now.” Viviana said to her adoptive father and his two companions.

“Viv what are you doing here!?” Gadrus said

“I followed you” she said in reply. “I studied your plans you left at the table after you left.” I knew Delvor was leaving for Cania early and knew that your plan would fail.”

“But how did...”

“It was in the newspaper, at page three” Viviana replied, I know you do not read the paper anymore since that day so...”

“You followed us to keep us from getting caught.” Mil interjected. “But how did you get inside?”

“I used this grappling hook to the balcony.” Viviana said, showing an improvised grappling hook made of cutlery. “It was easy really, considering all the guards suddenly went after you.” Pointing at Milo and Sal she asked: “But who are you, and why are you with Gadrus?”

“We can do introductions later,” Sal said. “Right now we need to focus on getting out of here.”

“How can we do that” Mil interjected, this is a safe room, there is no way in, but also no way out.”

“Actually you are wrong.” Viviana replied. “There is a way out.”

“What!?”

“Behind the painting there is a portal, it is usually set to Cania’s palace, but I think we can reconfigure it.”

“How do...” Gadrus said.

“I know of this?” Viviana asks mockingly, finishing the sentence. “The blueprints you stole to plan this had invisible ink on them, describing the security measures. It showed in the candlelight. Strange that you did not know however.”

“I did not read the designs by candlelight.” Gadrus said annoyed. “Still, we got very very lucky to get here.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Mil said, “but shouldn’t we be configuring the portal by now, in case the guards find another way in?”

“You are right dear” Sal said, looking behind a painting. “I already found the controls, they look simple enough. It should take Gadrus about half an hour.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Gadrus said, walking towards the painting. Looking at the mechanism behind it, he said: “Half an hour that is not right at all.” Looking at his companion shocked face he said: “five minutes, tops.”

“Seriously Gad, how can you joke at a time like this.” Mil said.

“Let’s just do this.” Gad replied annoyed. And with that he started pressing buttons and rearranging wires.

Not wanting to interrupt, Sal, Mil and Viviana stood at the door in silence in case they manage to break through. Soon enough a portal opens behind them, giving the room a blue glow.

“There we go.” Gadrus said happily. “The portal is set close to the border town of Reddew in three minutes and 28 seconds, a new personal record, I might add. It will reset after five minutes to impede pursuit.”

“OK lets go through.” Mil said, taking the first step towards the portal.

“Ladies first, dear.” Sal said.

“Alright then.” Viviana said, sprinting through the portal.

Smiling, Sal followed, after which Mil said “Too bad we cannot see the look on their face.” taking the last step. Finally, Gadrus stepped through, mentally thanking Viviana for his rescue.

Arriving in a forest with the others, after which the portal closes, Sal said: “Well, guess your coordinates were a little off, because unless that oak there hides a town hall, we are not in a border town.”

Gadrus shook his head and said: “I know, but it would draw a lot of unwanted attention if we just ported in in the middle of the night.”

Viviana raised her hand and said “That is true, but first things first, who are you two friends? Old adventurer comrades maybe?”

Gadrus smiled and said: you are right, these are Milo and Salecea Torval. Two of my oldest friends.

Viviana looked to them and said “Nice to meet you, I am Viviana, Gadrus told me much about you.”

Smiling, Sal said, “Likewise, though I think we should look for the town now”

Gadrus interjected “Sorry, I think we are a bit too far to find it quickly. Lets just camp here and search in the morning when we are rested, and there is daylight.”

“Alright” Mil replied, “I will take first watch, just like in the old days.”

“I will take second then.” Sal said in agreement.

“I will take third and last watch” Gadrus said.

“No, I will take the forth and last watch.” Viviana interrupts.

“What?” Gadrus said.

“It is only fair right, I mean, you just went back from breaking in Delvors house. I only arrived later, so I should have a watch too.

“But...”

“Just let her do it, Gadrus” Mil said to defuse the situation. “She already saved our lives once. We can trust her to stay alert.”

“Alright then.” Gadrus said in agreement. “Lets get some sleep then. Funny, haven’t slept on the ground in ages.”

“you are getting soft my friend” Mil teased.

“Comes from the urban lifestyle” Gadrus replied. “I will be back in shape soon enough.”

And with that, the group of adventurers started preparing for the night.

*The next morning, after everyone woke up...*

“Alright time to look for the town” Viviana said enthusiastically.

“Before breakfast?” Gadrus said?

“What breakfast, Gadrus?” Replied Mil, “we did not bring food remember.”

“Oh, right.” Gadrus said. “It is just that waking up outside under watch brings back memories. Including one in which we had to chase one overexcited Sal down because she forgot we were still eating.”

“I remember that.” Chuckled Mil, “She almost entered that dungeon on her own, and nearly set off a boulder trap in the process.”

“We did have competition that one time, dear.” Sal replied annoyed.

“Competition we had nothing to fear from, seeing as they had given up already.”

“But we did not know that yet.”

“Sorry to interrupt...” Viviana said “But we really should look for the town if we want to have breakfast. And all this talk is making me hungry.”

“Good point” Sal said. “Now does anyone know the way?”

“Actually, yeah.” Viviana said. “It is just around the hill.”

“How do you know?” Gadrus asked.

Well, I climbed the hill while I scouted during my watch.”

“You left us alone!?” Milo replied shocked.

“Don’t worry” Viviana said annoyed, “I kept an eye on you all the time. And I just climbed the hill, from which our camp was clearly visible.”

“And what if some monster or bandit ambushed you?” Milo said angrily. We would still be asleep, and easy targets if someone saw us. Not to mention the travel time it would take to reach you if you were actually attacked.”

“But the surrounding area was clear!” Viviana countered.

“You could only know that when you were too far away already!”

“Enough Milo, let me handle this.” Gadrus interjects. Facing Viviana he said: “Look, you are new at this, but the golden rule of adventuring is working together, that means staying together, and not wandering off without consulting the others.

“I just wanted to help.” Viviana said softly.

“I know, but don’t worry, you will learn.”

“Okay” Viviana replied. “Wait, does that mean...”

“Yes, my girl,” Gadrus said, “you are an adventurer now. Welcome to the team.”

“Gadrus, are you sure?” Sal said.

“Yes I am.” Gadrus replied. “It is not like we have much of a choice. We are all criminals now, even if we wore masks during it. If anyone has identified us, we are all screwed anyway. Better to live adventuring than to spend the rest of your life in hiding or fear.”

“Well if you put it like that...” Sal replied.

“Well damn straight, I was wanting to propose this myself.” Milo interjected. “Guess the team is back together.”

“The team, with a new member” Gadrus said.

“Really?” Viviana said.

“Yep.” replied Gadrus. Now lets get some food alright?”

“Fortunately we did not leave our wallets at home.” Milo said.

“I know.” Gadrus said “I brought some gold too, in case we needed to bribe a guard.”

“I hate to bring this up...” Viviana said, “but we cannot go to town right now.”

“What? Why not?” The others reply stunned.

“We are all still clothed as thieves remember. The town guard will be too suspicious.”

“Oh right.” Gadrus said. “And since we did not bring spare clothes...”

“Don’t worry.” Viviana chuckled. “This rescue was planned by yours truly here. I would not forget to bring some clothes with me.”

“Really?” Sal said, while the others look stunned.

“Really.” Viviana said, removing some clothing from a bag. “You already have armor on, so I did not bring that. But these clothes should make you stand less out.”

Gadrus still could not believe his adoptive daughters mind, until he felt a pulling at his arm.

“Come on Gadrus, lets give them some privacy” Viviana said, tugging.

“Oh, right.” Gadrus said still half dazed.

*At the tavern, a few hours later...*

“So what now?” asks Milo.

“I do not know.” Said Gadrus.

“Lets first see what kind of adventuring jobs there are around here.” said Salecea, already walking towards the job board.

“Agreed, although we did brought enough money to last us two weeks, it would be a good idea to secure more funds.” Said Milo.

“But what about the long term?” Asks Viviana. “Are we seriously giving up on justice?”

“We are for now.” replied Gadrus sternly. “Until another opportunity arises we should lay low until the heat is gone.”

I have to agree” said Milo. “Justice is well and good, but it took Gadrus weeks to come up with this plan. I don’t think we get another shot at Geldor soon.”

“Not what I meant” answers Viviana. “I was already...”

“No Viviana” interrupts Gadrus. “That plan is too dangerous, especially now...”

“What is she talking about, Gadrus” asked Milo.

Gadrus sighs taking a sip from his tankard, and said: “She had this idea to gain access to the old emergency projectors. Those are heavily guarded in the palace.”

“Sounds too risky indeed.” replied Milo.

“Hey I worked hard on...” sounded in Viviana’s agitated voice.

“Maybe if we have an opportunity someday. But not soon I’m afraid.” replied Gadrus.

“Bad news guys.” said Salecea urgently, returning from the job board.

“What is it, dear?” asked Milo.

“The town guard is looking for us.”

“Really?” asks Viviana.

“They are searching every house in town.”

“They must have traced the portal” said Milo.

“Impossible, that portal was made to be secure, no magical leakage whatsoever.” said Viviana.

“That's true, said Gadrus, “besides, I set some fake locations when we ported away.”

“Tell that to the guards, they will be here soon.”

“Maybe they won't recognize us?” asks Viviana hopefully.

“Maybe, but...” said Gadrus before a loud voice sounds from the door.

“Alright folks” shouts a guard; “We are looking for a dangerous criminal. Everyone leave the building in a calm and orderly fashion through the front door for identification.”

“What do we do now?” whispers Viviana.

“We make a break for it through the window on my mark.” Gadrus whispers quietly.

“Good idea.” Milo said.

“I agree.” said Salecea.

“No wait.” whispers Viviana urgently, grabbing Gadrus arms in the process “They will have guards outside that window for sure.”

“Well we can't just...”

“You won't get me today!” a brown cloaked man. The guards raise their swords. “It is him, Arty Jannon, get him!” shouts the leader.

Every eye in the tavern looked towards the brown cloaked man who had just removed his hood. Casting a weird spell, the window suddenly breaks and the man jumps out.

“Quickly, lets leave while they are distracted” Viviana whispered.

“But surely...” Milo interjected.

“No time to explain, just pay the bartender and leave.”

“Alright.” Gadrus said.

Paying the bartender, Viviana and her friends leave the building. Outside, Arty Jannon is stuck in a weird energy cage, surrounded by mages and guards.

“Told you they were waiting.” Viviana said with a sad look on her face.

“That is true, but why did we have to go?” Salecea asks.

“They might have tried to look for conspirators, and we cannot risk identifying ourselves.” Viviana said quietly.

“Sounds a bit paranoid.” Milo argues.

“Alright everyone in this bar;” a voice shouts from inside, “State your name in this magic circle here, and you are free to go.”

“You can always trust paranoia.” Gadrus and Viviana say at the same time. “It is what I always said.” adds Gadrus.

“You taught her well then.” said Milo.

“Yeah...” replied Viviana.

“Is something wrong?” asks Salecea.

“I know him” replied Viviana. “Arty Jannon was a friend of my parents.”

“I am sorry.” said Milo.

Thinking about her parents, Viviana wipes a tear from her face. “We have to help him.” she said quietly.

“What?” said Gadrus.

“Arty Jannon was an adventurer friend of my parents. They would want me to save him.”

“No they...”

“They would, and I already have a plan.” Viviana interjects. Grabbing something from a bag, she adds “Stay here, I will be back in two minutes.” After which she starts running.

“No wai...!” Gadrus said before Milo and Salecea hold him and cover his mouth. “Be quiet you fool!” Salecea said, “There are still guards around.”

“But she is...”

“I am back.” Viviana suddenly said. “Went easier then expected.”

“What did you...”

“No time, just follow me, quietly” replied Viviana, and she starts running off again. Gadrus and the others follow her again.

Suddenly Viviana stopped in a small alleyway. Looking around for two seconds she nods to herself.

“Salecea, can you create a smokescreen?”

“Yes, but...”

“Good, Milo, throw this grappling hook over that roof.” Viviana said, handing him a grappling hook.

“What are you planning?” said Gadrus.

“A prison break. Well actually a prison car break, but...”

“Surely we cannot just attack...”

We won't have too, just provide an escape route when the prison car comes here.

“But how will Arty leave the cart?” Gadrus asks.

“That has already been arranged, now get up on that roof.” Viviana said, already climbing the rope.

When they reach the top of the roof, Gadrus speaks out. “Look, I know you want to save him but...”

“Crouch down, they cannot spot us.”

Doing as Viviana said, Gadrus continues. “We cannot risk...”

“There is the prison cart. When Arty comes out, cast a smokescreen to cover his escape.”

“That is a secure cart, we cannot just attack...” Salecea asks.

“Indeed” Viviana interrupts. Taking a strange device from her pocket, she adds: “But we won't have to.”

“What is...” Asks Milo, before Viviana presses a button. Suddenly a loud explosion is heard from the street. Arty jumps out of a recently created hole in the cart, and starts running towards the rope.

“Quickly, the smokescreen!” said Viviana. Salecea immediately casted a spell, and the street is covered in smoke.

“Now hide!” Viviana shouts. Seeing the smoke disappearing, Gadrus, Milo and Salecea quickly go to the other side of the roof, out of the view from the guards.

“Where did he go?” one of the guards shouts.

“Scatter” The leader said, and they all go into another alleyway, searching for Arty Jannon.

“I do not understand.” said Gadrus, “Where did Arty Jannon go?”

“Right behind you.” a voice suddenly sounded behind them.

Turning around, Gadrus looked straight into the eyes of Arty Jannon.

“How did you...”

“I think I will let the young lady explain.” Arty said with a smile.

“Thank you”, replied Viviana. “But first let us get out of here, before the guards start looking up.

“Alright.” Gadrus said wearily. “But once we are safe you will tell us everything.” Locking his gaze on Arty, he added: “Same goes for you.”

*Half an hour later, at the old campsite...*

“...So I threw a note and a remote controlled explosive that we still had in the prison wagon, while they were busy with Arty. They were so focused on their prisoner that they did not even see it lying there in plain sight.”

Arty smiled and said: “I just did not want to go down quietly.”

“But how did you know to look for the rope?” Gadrus asked.

“It was on the note.” Arty replied. “Along with the instruction to pull it up out of sight.”

That explains that.” Milo said. “But how did you here know there was a suitable area around?” he asked pointing at Viviana.

“I did not.” Viviana replied looking away. “I just assumed that there was someplace suitable around the path.”

“And how did you know the path?” Salecea asked.

“I assumed they would use the same way they came from.” Viviana replied. “This town is too small to have a separate prison from the guard barracks. Looking at the tracks was easy, because the armored wagon left deeper tracks”

“Ingenious for a rookie,” Milo said smiling. “You make party leader in no time.”

“This party has a leader?”

“Not really, we just switched the position around every mission. Just to have a tiebreaker.”

“Sounds good.” Arty said. “But where is Viviana?”

“Huh?” Miko asked.

“The woman I recognize vaguely as Salecea Torval, but the note was signed Viviana. Since she and Jeal here are the only women here, so I can only conclude you are holding someone back.”

“Actually no.” Viviana said with a sad smile on her face. “It is just the name I took when my parents were murdered. Should have remembered to sign with my old name.”

“Murdered!?” Arty replied in shock; “By who?”

“Doesn’t matter now, they died that day thanks to Gadrus.” Viviana replied.

“But why the fake name?”

“Because the one who send the assassins was Delvor Gadrus, who also arranged the murder of our king and queen, while framing prince Geraldo.” Viviana said almost teary-eyed.

“How is that...”

Sensing Viviana’s upcoming sadness Gadrus quickly changes the subject. “It doesn’t matter now. You have plenty of time to catch up later, What I want to know is why the guards are after you.”

“Fair enough” Arty replied casually. “I have been working for the Sneakers.”

“The thieves guild?” Salecea asked shocked. “I heard you were not the most reliable but...”

“We are not a thieves guild!” Arty suddenly shouted. “We are simply an anti-occupational group who...”

“Break into buildings and steal valuables?” Milo asked sarcastically.

“Break into government offices and steal documents that show the injustice done by Cania.” Arty replied annoyed.

“Really?”

“Yeah, they record everything they take, and we show it.”

“That isn’t what I heard.” Gadrus said.

“Yeah well, ” Arty said looking away; “We cannot spread the word in a meaningful way as long as Cania accuses us of stealing.” Looking back he said: “But we cannot give up, one day the truth will be known.”

“How do we know we can trust you?” Salecea asked.

“Is my word not enough anymore?”

“Maybe to the girl, but not to me.”

“I believe him yes.” Viviana interrupted. “But even if I did not, I would hear him out.”

“He is a wanted criminal.” Salecea countered.

“So are we.” Viviana said. “At least, it is possible they identified us by now.”

“What are you talking about?” Arty replied.

Gadrus was the first to reply. “We, well we kind of tried to kill Delvor Gadrus.”

“That was you!?”

“You know of it?” Gadrus said.

“Yeah, they are offering a reward for anyone who can identify the assassins. But how did you end up here, and so quickly?”

“Portal in an emergency room Viviana happened to find.” Gadrus said.

Anger was visible on Arty’s face. “You brought this little girl along...”

“No they did not.” Viviana said sternly.

Arty looked at Viviana. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I followed them after I saw their plans.” Viviana said. “I found a safe room Gadrus had missed, and we used its portal to escape.”

“Only because...”

“Yes yes, candlelight. We know.” Viviana, Milo and Salecea said at the same time.

“You forgot to check for invisible ink?” Arty said smiling. “That is like the first thing the Sneakers do when they find a document.”

“How could I have known? I am an adventurer not a criminal!”

“Yet you just confessed to...”

“Stop bickering guys.” Viviana said. “We need to find a place to stay; before the guards start searching.”

Taking a deep breath, Gadrus could think clearly again. “Alright, we will discuss our differing viewpoints later, once we are safe.”

“That might be sooner than you think.” Arty said. “Our hideout is nearby, next to the border.”

“Alright, but we are not joining you just because you saved our skins.” Milo replied.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Arty said. “Besides, I owe you for the rescue. I might be considered “not the most reliable” but I always pay my debts.”

“Viviana are you sure...” Salecea asked.

“Yes we can trust him.” Viviana said annoyed. “But even if we did not, we have no other choice.”

“Fair point.” Arty said.

And with that, the group left and followed Arty.

*Two hours later, in an abandoned inn.*

“So let me get this straight. Prince Orkan was behind the murder of his parents, not his brother.” Arty asked.

“True.” Viviana replied.

“How do you know this?” Arty asked.

“I saw a recording plotting the murder, made by my parents.” Viviana replied.

“That is great news!” Arty replied.

“What do you mean?” Milo asked.

“If we make this public Ileasaar will finally stand up against Cania.”

“Not that I don’t like a good revolution...” Milo said sarcastically. “but how do you plan to convince people of this?”

“Surely the people will believe us.” Arty replied.

“Not a chance.” Milo said. “Not enough anyway. At most, you cause a few riots, with as only effect people jailed or dead.”

“We need to try. The people deserve...”

“Could you shut up please!?” Gadrus suddenly shouted.

“Do you not care about the truth!” Arty replied.

“Big words from you, *thief*. But that is not the point. This girl lost her parents because of this cause.” Gadrus said pointing at Viviana’s crying face.

Arty looked at Viviana. “I am sorry, Jeal.” he said sadly and earnestly. “I was so busy with...”

“It is alright.” Viviana replied, still crying. Wiping her tears she added. “I want the same. For justice, for our country, for my parents, by Gaia I want Cania gone from here.”

“Now hold on girl,” Gadrus said, you cannot just join a revolution because of that. Your parents would never forgive me. I would never forgive me.”

“Do not worry, I will not.” Viviana said. “We will find our own way to help. One that doesn’t throw the country into chaos by making accusations without proof.” she added, looking at Arty.

“Surely we should at least try to...” Arty replied.

“No.” Viviana said sternly. “We cannot do so without enough people at our side. If we could proof it, it would be fine by me, but I will not help people letting other people die without a chance of success.”

Arty went silent for a few seconds. Then he replied. “You are right. What do you propose?”

“What do you mean?” asked Gadrus. “We are not joining your revolution. She does not want to anyway.”

“I am not asking that. But the girl might know of a way to find prove the murder.”

“We still have the recording of prince Orkan and Delvor plotting the murder.” Viviana said.

“What!? Why didn’t you say so? Now we can...”

“It is in a sealed box. We cannot open it in any way.” Viviana added.

“Maybe the Sneakers can...”

“No they cannot.”

“How do you...”

“What Viviana said is true.” Gadrus said. Looking in Arty’s eyes he added, “Believe me, it is true. But it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Why not?” Arty asked.

“We left it at home, and...”

“No we did not.” Viviana interjected.

“What?” Gadrus said.

“When I was planning your escape, I took the casket.” Viviana said. “It is the only thing I have left of my parents, and the only hope I have to make sure they did not die in vain. I had to take it with me.” Returning to look at Arty, she added: “And you cannot have it either. This is something beyond what your wizards can do. We have to look for another who can.”

Everyone went silent for a few seconds. Finally Gadrus broke the silence. “That means we cannot stay here. It is too dangerous, and we cannot risk the casket being lost.”

Arty went silent again. “Can our wizards at least check it, while you are lying low here anyway.”

“That you may.” Viviana said. “But do not get your hopes up. It would take at least an archmage to break this lock.”

“Alright.” Arty said. “I will have our members summoned. Please stay here in this room.” And with that he walked out of the door.

“I do not like this one bit.” Salecea said.

“Calm down.” Viviana replied. “I know him. He will not betray us.”

“When did you see him last?” Milo asked rhetorically. “People change you know.”

“Not him, not his honestly. That was what my mother always said about him.” Viviana replied.

“That is not...”

“Stop it Milo.” Gadrus said. “It is like she said, we have nowhere else to go right now.”

“Maybe they haven’t identified us.” Salecea said. “We could just...”

“Salecea, if we cannot trust Arty Jannon, we will not be safe anyway, now that he knows we were behind an assassination attempt. Gadrus replied.

“He wouldn’t do that.” Viviana said.

“We cannot just...”

A knock sounded at the door. “I am back guys. The Sneakers are assembled. I have already told them about the murder and the casket.”

“What, but you said that you would not cause a rebellion without evidence.”

“I know, and every Sneaker in the building does too. I explained it and everyone will obey my orders.”

“Your orders, so you are...” Salecea said.

“The leader of the Sneakers yes. But the casket is more important. Can I see it?”

“Alright, but I still want it back.” Viviana said, handing him a small box.

“Well, that was a rough day for us all.” Arty said, handing the box to a woman outside. “We have food and water to offer you, and we are preparing extra beds.”

“How do we know...” Salecea started asking.

“Calm down Salecea.” Milo said. “It is like Gadrus said, we have no other choice.”

“It is decided then.” Gadrus said. “And I am famished.” he added, after which his stomach started growling.

Looking at Gadrus and Viviana, who were already walking away, Milo and Salecea followed them to a central room.

*Some time later, in the main chamber.*

“Well, this looks good.” Gadrus said looking at the food.

“Thank you” Arty said. “We do not have much, only donations, and things we stole from Cania. Our savings could only last us so far.”

“I do not blame you.” Viviana said. “After all Cania has stolen much more than you.”

“That is true.” Arty replied.

“But do you know what risk you place yourself in?” Gadrus said. “Being accused of theft, while trying to free a country? Not an ideal combination.”

“We know, believe me we know.” Arty replied. “However, the sneakers were accused of theft before we stole a single coin. Even the documents we took back then were copied, not taken. It is merely a front to have people chasing us. But when they started, we decided to become thieves anyway, because we were already in trouble.”

“Typical propaganda.” Milo said.

“Still, it is dangerous to do so.” Gadrus said. “Your friends and family might be targeted.”

“Even Cania would not dare do so.” Arty Jannon replied. “It would mean riots and revolution.”

“But they could do so in secret.” Gadrus countered. “Furthermore they would only have to blackmail one important member to get you all arrested.”

“That is true.” Arty said, looking away. “I told my family what I was doing, so they are warned at least.”

“You are risking your family just for...”

“Not just for revolution.” Arty replied. “Some causes deserve the risk. Besides, you risked everything, including Jeal and your friends for revenge on one man.”

“Now look, it was never my intention to involve her.”

“Yet she would have lost the only family she has left. A family she would risk everything for. In fact she did, from what I hear.”

“I would have come back you know, if things went to plan.”

Things never go to plan, do they?” Arty asked sarcastically.

“Enough, you two.” A girl’s voice suddenly called. Having silenced the two bickering men, she continued: “I would have done the same thing as you Gadrus. And the same goes for Arty. Sometimes you need to risk it all.”

“But...”

“I won’t take every risk I come across, believe me.” Viviana said. “But if I had a good plan, and the means to execute it, I would do the same thing. The same thing as you, and the same thing as Arty.”

“Everyone went silent for three seconds.”

“I just wish you did not get involved like this.” Gadrus said sadly.

“Not your fault.” Viviana replied. “I chose this path myself, when I followed you.”

“But I...”

“Do not worry.” Arty said. “If the girl says you two are fine, then you two are fine.”

Looking in his direction, Gadrus raises an eyebrow. “I thought you would be pissed.”

“To be honest, normally I would.” Arty replied. “You screwed up protecting the daughter of two good people who were my friends. But it is not my decision whether you deserve to be blamed, it is Jeal’s, and I have seen too many people blaming themselves. I do not want you to torture yourself about it.”

Looking perplexed, Gadrus went silent. “Thank you.” he said softly.

“Well with that out of the way...” Arty began. “Let’s eat.”

*The next morning.*

“Well, you were right about the casket.” Arty admitted. “Not me, nor anyone here can break this lock.”

“I told you.” Viviana said. “Can I have it back now?”

“Of course.” Arty said handing her the box. “I keep my word.”

“Told you we could trust him.” Viviana said to Salecea.

“Alright, you were right.” Salecea said annoyed.

“What are your plans now, if I may ask?” Arty asked.

“Do some adventurer work and hopefully find a way to open this lock.” Gadrus said.

“That will be difficult.”

“We know, but we cannot go back now.”

“That is true. You sure you do not want to stay with the Sneakers now?”

“We are sure.”

“Not even.”

“No.” Viviana interrupted, “We cannot risk our lives, or the casket, by staying with you. It is too dangerous.”

Seeing the disappointment in Arty’s eyes, she tried to make a joke: “Besides, Sneakers is a terrible name for this group. Sounds just silly, like a weirdly named pair of shoes.”

Arty looked embarrassed. “When you lead a resistance group, you try think of a better name alright. Until then, we...”

“Alarm!” A voice suddenly shouted.

“What is it!?” Arty asked.

“It is Cania, they are looking for us in the woods. I just escaped a search party, but they will be here soon.”

“Alright, proceed as planned then.” Arty replied. “Looking at his guests he said “Don’t worry we have prepared for this. Follow me.”

Running toward a chamber, he started explaining his plan. “Alright, my friends know the drill, but you do not.” We go to this room, throw all papers and supplies we can find into the portal we set up there, and then set the portal to self destruct while we make our escape through it.”

“Should we not go immediately?” Gadrus asked. “And is that portal even safe!?”

“There is still time.” Arty replied. “There are many buildings around like this one. They will have to search them all before going here. As for safety, I used it many times before.”

“Are you sure they will do that.”

“Quit fighting and help me carry.” Viviana interrupted. “We can go a lot faster if you help.”

Looking into Viviana’s eyes, he conceded. “Alright Viviana.” and with that he started throwing stuff in the portal next to the wall.

A few minutes later, everything was removed. When the Sneakers were also starting to go through, Arty began setting the bomb, while addressing his guests. “We still have a few minutes to escape. I will set the self-destruct at one minute. We can go now.”

“Alright.” Milo said.

Suddenly a voice shouted from a sneaker running into the room. “They are here already! Run.”

“What!? How?” Arty asked.

“I don’t know, but we have to leave now.”

“Alright, the bomb is set. Everyone go through.” Arty said.

The Sneakers ran towards the portal Shortly after the second got through, soldiers stormed in.

“They are here, stop them!”

Go, I will hold them off.” Arty shouted, drawing a sword and readying a spell.

“No we should fight them together...”

“Come here!” Gadrus shouted lifting her up and throwing her into the portal. Jumping in himself, Salecea and Milo followed.

After they went through, they were in a small cave near a forest. Viviana stood up from the lying position she was in.

“Arty come quick!”

“It is a one way portal, girl.” Gadrus said. He cannot hear us.

“We should have helped him.” Viviana said. “And now he is...”

“Not dead!” Arty suddenly said.

“You live!” Milo asked. “But why did you not go yourself sooner?”

“I had to stall them, so they would not follow us.” Arty replied.

“Are we safe here.” Milo asked?

“Yes.”

“So what is the plan now?”

“We follow that road. It leads to a small abandoned inn. It is out of the way and makes a good hiding place.”

“Alright guys.” Milo said. “Lets go.”

“Hold a moment people.” Arty said. We still have these documents and supplies here that we have to take with us.”

“Surely we cannot carry that much.” Milo said pointing around.

“You won’t have to.” Arty replied. “There is a cart here, just in case.

“Sounds good.” Viviana replied. “And with that they started loading the cart.

*Some time later, at the old inn.*

“Glad that is done.” Milo said.

“True, but at least we came out of it unharmed.” Viviana said.

“How did they even find you.” Salecea asked.

“They probably searched the entire surrounding area.” Arty replied.

“How did they do that so quickly?” Milo asked. “Like you said, they should have searched the surrounding buildings before going to your hideout.”

“Maybe they found Bason's trail when he ran back.” one of the female sneakers asked.

“I did not leave a trail Proma.” The one now identified as Bason said.

“There is no other explanation.” Proma countered.

“No, there is.” Gadrus suddenly said walking into the room.

“What?” Arty and Milo asked at the same time.

“I checked the documents we took with us.” Handing him a paper, he added: “This one has a tracking rune.”

“What, but that would mean...” Arty said looking scared.

“Yes, they are looking for us now. We have to go right now.”

“Where can we go?” Salecea asked. “You don't have a third hideout right?”

“We have not.” Arty said. Everyone looked panicked.

“I got an idea!” Viviana suddenly shouted.

“What?”

“If we take the tracking rune further away, they will think our hideout is somewhere else. If a few of us go somewhere else while carrying this rune...”

“That is suicide for the carriers.” Milo said.

“No it is not.” Viviana said. I found a map upstairs detailing a possible escape route.

Showing a map, Viviana started explaining. “The border with Midgard is close, if we can make it there, it could throw off their pursuit, seeing as they cannot legally cross the border.”

“Are you sure...”

“No, but we cannot stay here anyway, the guards are probably on the way right now.”

“That is true.” Gadrus said grimly. “It might take the local garrison some time to prepare a search team after they get the message, but they will find us.”

“Alright.” Arty said. I will take the tracking rune with me.

“We will go too.” Viviana said.

“What?” asked Salecea and Gadrus.

“We need to leave this hideout anyway, and by going with him across the border it will be easy to return to Illeasaar. They haven't identified us yet, but we cannot stay here with the others.”

“Couldn't we leave on our own though?” Gadrus asked.

“Not without a map, and we have no time to make a copy of the only one we have.” Viviana replied.

“Alright then, take food and water from the cart and lets get going.” Arty said.

“I will bring the map.” Viviana said. “Follow me, I planned our route already.”

And with that the group left the building.

*An hour later, almost at the border.*

“So we are safe after this river.”

“Yes, there is a guard post at the bridge belonging to Midgard, but they should let us through.” Viviana said. “But I am pretty sure that the Canian army won’t pass that quickly.”

“That is true.” Salecea said. “But they might ask for extraction, or send mercenaries.”

“I know.” Arty said. “But it should stall them for day or two.”

“Not to want to spoil your fun...” Milo began. “But our money is useless in Midgard, we have nothing to trade, and no contacts there. We are not even allowed to forage in the woods around there. Even if you evade pursuit, you should find another place afterwards.”

“I am well aware.” Arty replied.

“Look there is the bridge.” Viviana said.

“Alright then, lets not cause any suspicion.” Milo said.

And with that they stepped on the bridge.

“Halt!” a guard suddenly said.

“What is the matter, officer?” Gadrus asked.

“We have to check if you are not Canian spies.” Another guard said. “Romak, cast your lie detection spell.” he said to a robed man.

“Alright, answer these questions and you may pass.” The first guard stated.

“Do you work for the Canian government?”

“No.” everyone replied.

“Are you planning to do anything that is illegal in Midgard while being there?”

“No.” everyone replied.

“They speak the truth.” the mage said, dropping the spell.

“Alright, carry on.” The guard said. And the group started walking towards the other side.

“This is great.” Arty said. “These guys will never let the Canian soldiers through.”

“Maybe they will find another way.” Gadrus countered.

“Oh I am sure they will.” Arty said. “But for now we are safe.”

“But where do we go from here?” Salecea said.

“To Mithra.” Viviana said.

“Why there?” Milo asked.

“It is the only place we can find a roof for free.” Viviana said. “And looking at those clouds, we are going to need it.”

*A few hours later, at the entrance of an abandoned building in the ruins of Mithra.*

We are safe here for now. Gadrus said.

“Luckily we got here before the storm.” Milo said.

“So what is the plan now?” Salecea asked.

“Well, we are safe here now, and none of us has slept in some time, so I suggest we take turns taking watch and rest.” Viviana said.

“And afterwards?” Gadrus asked.

“We are still going to go our separate ways.” Viviana replied.

“Thank you for your help.” Arty said. “You gave my people a fighting chance.”

“Thank me when they are safe.” Viviana replied.

“I don’t think I will get the opportunity.” Arty said with a sad smile on his face.

“I will take first watch.” Milo said.

“Give me second watch then.” Salecea said.

“Third watch for me.” Arty said.

“I will take forth watch.” Gadrus said.

“Then give me last watch.” Viviana replied.

And with that, the group took four bedrolls and started to sleep.

*Five hours later, during Gadrus watch.*

“So if this is the King’s rest inn, then...” Gadrus muttered while studying an old map.

“What are you doing over there?” Viviana asked whispering.

“You are already awake?” Gadrus asked.

“Yes, but shouldn’t you keep watch instead of studying old maps?”

“I am still keeping watch...”

“With your head in an old map, you have probably found while scouting?” Viviana asked mockingly.

“I asked Milo to watch for a few minutes extra while I searched the building.” Gadrus said. Thought the upper floor might provide a good place to keep watch from.”

“It wasn’t, not enough visibility, I could have told you that.”

“True, but I did find this old map.” Gadrus said showing an old scroll; “It details some of the important old ruins. Most of them are probably already stripped clean of useful items if the adventurers guild told the truth, but the wizard guild here is pretty well hidden, for it is located in a natural cave. I am pretty sure no one has entered yet.”

“Are you saying we should explore it tomorrow before leaving?”

“Sure, we might find some things to help the sneakers, and ourselves.”

“Alright, we will discuss that with the others.” But I think I better take over watching now.

“Fair enough, gives me time to find our own location here on the map.”

“Don’t stay up to long, Gadrus.” Viviana said with a smile, recalling the many times Gadrus said the same thing to her.

Gadrus laughed silently, and after 15 minutes, went to his bedroll.

*The next morning, during breakfast.*

“... so we think we can explore the nearby ruins while we are here.” Gadrus explained.

“But surely we cannot just sit here and wait for the soldiers to get us?” Milo asked.

“I do not think they will follow us this quickly.” Gadrus replied. “Besides, the ruins might even help us get something to get them off our tail. In any case we might find valuables to help fund our escape.”

“I agree with you Gadrus.” Arty said. “This might be a breakthrough.”

“I will put some alarms around the entrance, just in case.” Salecea said.

“Just like old times.” Milo said happily.

And with that, the group went to the caves.

*At the entrance of the caves, about an hour later*

“So we are in agreement?” Gadrus asked Arty.

“Yep, as soon as Salecea comes back from placing alarms, we will go into the ruins. You take point together with me, Viviana in the middle, and Salecea and Milo cover our backs.” Arty replied.

“Do stay on your guard.”

“Don’t worry, I have done this before, I am a lot more responsible when I want to be.” Arty said smiling.

“Heh, I get it.”

“Do we really need those wards though?” Viviana asked. “No ones is following us, and we left the tracking rune at the old camp.”

“Just in case, maybe they cross the border sooner then expected.” Milo replied.

“Speaking of which, she has just returned.” Gadrus said.

“So, do we have a plan?” Salecea said waving.

“Yep, I will explain it to you...” Gadrus said, after which he started explaining.

*20 minutes later...*

“Well, that was refreshingly free of traps.” Gadrus said.

“There wasn’t even one golem.” Arty said.

“Disappointed?” Gadrus asked.

“...Yeah, actually I am.”

“In any case, this lab looks to be untouched, just like everything else.”

“I wonder why they kept everything so undefended.” Milo asked.

“It was a different time, before the city’s fall.” Viviana replied. “Maybe they did not think they needed defenses, or more likely, they had guards to defend.”

“Makes sense...” Gadrus agreed. “This was no tomb or shrine that would be left uninhabited. This was the wizards guild of the capital of a large country.”

Salecea, still searching the lab, suddenly spoke up. “It is strange though, that we haven’t found anything of particular value yet.”

“Maybe they had a vault we haven’t discovered yet.” Viviana replied.

“But we magically scanned every wall, floor and ceiling. We would have found it if there was one here.”

“Maybe there is a different building, a secret one?” Milo asked.

“If that is the case, we won’t be able to find it.” Gadrus said. “And it might be looted already.”

“Maybe they have a clue somewhere here.” Viviana suggested, looking around for clues.

“We don’t have time to search everything, and all documents would have decayed decades ago at the latest. We have found no traces of preservation magic that could have preserved it, so if they were here, they would be gone now.”

“What if it wasn’t paper?” Viviana asked.

“How do you mean?” Gadrus replied.

“Well...”

Suddenly red flashing emerged from Salecea’s bracelet.

“Guys, we got trouble.” Salecea warned, looking at an image at her bracelet.

“The Canian guard so soon?” Milo asked.

“No, it were wolves.”

“So it were wild animals, so we have nothing to worry.”

“Still, they came from the old campsite, and are heading in our direction.”

“Just close the door then.”

“I don’t think that will work this time, the eyes of these wolves are glowing red.”

“Red eyes, are you sure?” Arty asked.

“Yes, maybe some weird city defense?” Salecea replied.

“Oh no.” Arty said looking scared.

“What is wrong.” Viviana asked, looking scared towards the entrance.

“Those wolves are controlled by the Canian army.” Arty said.

“What, how do you know this.” Gadrus asked.

“No time guys. They are almost at the entrance.” Salecea said.

“Form a barricade.” Viviana said, already dragging a table.

“Shouldn’t we run?” Milo asked.

“No, we will never outrun wolves.” Viviana said.

“She is right.” Arty interrupted while already helping with the barricade. “We will never outrun those magically enhanced wolves.

“You know of them?” Milo asked, dragging a table across the room.

“When we are safe, Milo” Arty replied. Looking towards Viviana he started speaking again.

“Take my sword Jeal.”

“But don’t you...” Viviana replied.

“I still have my spells.” Arty replied.

“Here they come.” Salecea warned.

The hounds came in, jumping against the barricade. Viviana was pulled back by Gadrus as spell and sword were used to kill the wolves jumping against the barricade.

“Come here you bitches.” Arty shouted throwing fire, drawing attention of Gadrus, who was almost overwhelmed.

“How many are there?” Milo asked.

“At least 40.” Salecea said.

“I think we can make it then.” Gadrus said, having recovered.

“That was without the ones we already killed!” Salecea said.

“I got an idea!” Arty shouted. “Viviana, take my place.”

“Alright!” Viviana said.

“Arty what are you...” Milo said.

“Focus on the wolves Milo!” Gadrus said.

Arty readies a spell in the back of the lab. Viviana stabbed a wolf, covered by Salecea’s spells. The wolves however, started jumping over the corpses of their fallen, eventually getting over the baricade in range of Milo.

“Aaah!” Milo screamed, as a wolf bit his knee. Suddenly purple light filled the room, and the wolves suddenly stopped. Afterwards they started attacking each other. When only a few were standing, Arty cast a lightning spell, killing the last ones.

“We got them.” Arty said relieved.

“Alright, now what the hell happened.” Milo asked. “What were those wolves.”

“Mind controlled wolves from the Canian army.” Arty said. I heard of them, but I did not believe it. Fortunately I was able to change the command they gave them.”

“What was that command?” Gadrus asked.

““Kill all humans” in the city, basically.” Arty replied. “I managed to change it to “Kill everything in the city.””

“How is Milo.” Viviana asked urgently, looking in his direction.

“I will be fine, Viviana.” Milo replied, wincing at the healing magic of his wife.

“He will be able to walk soon.” Salecea asked. “But running is out of the question for today.”

“Well, we got them for now.” Gadrus said. “Lets leave while we still can.”

“Right!” Salecea said, helping her husband to stand.

“Wait a minute.” Viviana asked.

“What is it?” Gadrus says.

“I think there is a secret room here.” Viviana replied looking at some bricks in the wall. “It is behind this locking mechanism.”

“We don’t have time for that now.”

“But...”

“He is right.” Arty said. “I can’t cast that spell again for the time being.”

“Let’s go then.” Salecea says.

At that moment, her bracelet started flashing again. Soon however, the other stones on her bracelet started flashing as well.

“More wolves?” Milo asked.

“Yes, and I see soldiers further away, waiting outside the city wall.”

“Damn it.” Arty said. “Those wolves were just to track us down. Even if we kill them, the soldiers will attack soon after.”

“Alright, let me think.” Gadrus said.

“Do you have a plan, my friend?” Milo asked.

“No, which is why I am thinking.”

“I got an idea!” Viviana shouted. “Salecea, blast this wall, with the most powerful explosive spell you have.”

“What are you...” Salecea asked.

“I cannot solve this locking mechanism, but you can blast through it.”

Nodding, Salecea casted her spell. When the wall crumbled, a small room was revealed, with a ladder leading downwards.

“Quick, below.” Viviana called out. “They won’t be able to follow.”

“Right.” Gadrus said. “Salecea, can you still cast a slowing fall spell?”

“Yes.”

Then do it. Arty, help me with carrying Milo.”

“I do not need...”

“You do, darling.” Salecea said. “Now hurry!” she continued, having finished casting her spell.

And with that, the group jumped towards the bottom, into a round chamber.

“Alright, we are safe here.” Gadrus said when everyone was below.

“For now.” Viviana said. “But start searching, there might be another way out.”

“Uh guys, there is nothing here, safe a few fallen rocks.” Salecea said worried.

“Then we are trapped.” Arty replied

“Don’t be so quick to say that.” Viviana countered.

“There aren’t any similar walls here, Viviana.” Salecea argued.

“That depends.” Viviana said. “We searched everything up there using magic, but this room was hidden using a locking mechanism.” Seeing understanding in Gadrus eyes, she smiled.

“Are you thinking what I am thinking.” she continued.

“That the first room was hidden with mechanisms against mages, and this room is hidden against those who got past the first locks.” Gadrus said, readying a wand to start searching.

“Exactly, start over there.” Viviana said, pointing at a wall across the room. Looking at the others, she continued. “Arty; start barricading that door with the rocks. Salecea, can you scry in the room with the wolves?”

“I can.” Salecea said.

“Good, help construct the barricade first, then do so, warn us if anything happens.”

“Can I help?” Milo asked.

“Yes, rest, we cannot risk you getting injured further.” Viviana said.

“Wait a...”

“Listen to her, she is right.” Salecea interrupted, throwing a glowing spell through the ceiling.

“Alright then.” Arty said.

While Gadrus searched, Arty tended to Milo. Salecea kept watch through her scrying spell.

“We got incoming.” Salecea said. “A mage, by the looks of it. The wolves aren’t attacking him.”

“Get into position.” Viviana said. “But stay away from the door, he might blast...”

A loud bang interrupted her, shortly after, the door collapsed together with parts of the wall.

“He is sending wolves!” Salecea called out. Shortly after, some wolves were seen through the door.

“Come out you cowards!” A voice shouted from upstairs.

“Quick, is he standing at the hole?” Viviana whispered to Salecea.

“Yes but...”

“Then this will work.” Viviana said, pressing a button on a strange device. A loud bang was heard from above.

“You knocked him out.” Salecea said.

“Good, now get together, we still have some wolves to deal with.”

“Right.” Gadrus said readying his weapon. The group goes standing in a circle. Stabbing and casting, the wolves started dropping to the floor.

“That is the last of them.” Salecea said relieved.

“Alright.” Viviana said. “Is the mage still alive?” She asked worried.

“Yes, but I see others on the way. Soldiers by the looks of it.”

“Good.” Viviana said pressing another button. “Does this illusion hide the entrance.”

Yes, but how did you...”

“Shh silence, they are coming.” Viviana said. With the group holding their breath, a minute passed.

“They went away.” Salecea said.

“I knew that illusion device would work.” Viviana said. “Without a mage, and with one knocked out one in front of them, no one would think to search further.”

“Why did you not use it earlier?” Gadrus said.

“I knew a mage would search for illusions, but with one knocked out by an explosion, no one would dare cast another detection spell.” Viviana replied.

“Brilliant Je... I mean Viviana.” Arty said.

“Thank you.” Viviana said. “Any luck on the wall.”

I just found something.” Gadrus said. Casting a spell, a part of the wall disappeared.

“Alright, now start searching and hope something there can help us.” Viviana said.

And with that, the group entered the room.

*5 minutes later.*

“Ok, so we have found nothing except these strange cubes, these well preserved vials, and that book.”

“Milo, search the book.” Viviana said. “Taking a cube in the hand, she continued. “Gadrus, start searching the wall again. Arty, check what is in the vials. Salecea keep watch.

“Right.” Everyone agreed.

“She makes a good leader apparently.” Gadrus whispered to Arty.

“Right, I would have her lead the sneakers if I thought she would agree.” Arty whispered back.

“Alright, I think these vials are meant to teleport you.” Milo started, interrupting the conversation.

“Are you sure?” Gadrus asked still searching.

“Apparently, it says “Inject the vials for entry to the vault. Wait 20 minutes before...” It finishes their.”

“What is the vault?”

“Apparently, it is a safe haven, were they kept their secrets. It also says it has entrances in other places.”

“That could be our escape!” Salecea said, still staring through her scrying spell.”

“Alright, I will try it Arty said injecting a vial.”

“Wait!” Milo tried to interrupt, but Arty had already added the entire contents of the vial to his bloodstream.

“Ahh!” Arty screamed.

“Help him to the chair.” Milo said standing up.

“What is happening?” Salecea asked, still blinded because she was still scrying.

“I did not mention that one vial contains four doses.”

Sitting down, Arty started talking again. “I am alright, just need to sit for a while.”

“I think that is only because you injected too much.” Milo said.

“He will be fine.” Gadrus says scanning him with a wand. “Though I do not detect any teleportation magic in here. Any more of that stuff and he would be out cold.”

“Alright, stay with him.” Viviana said taking a wand to a cube. “I do detect something from this cube, but I don’t know what.”

“Let me see...” Gadrus continued. “This is very old magic, but I think it is teleportation magic.”

“Can we use it?” Viviana asked.

“It does not seem suitable for living creatures.”

“Actually...” Milo interrupted “It might work.”

“What do you mean?”

“This sentence says, the cubes are the doors, the vials are the keys.”

“That doesn’t make...”

“Wait, scan Arty again.” Viviana said.

“Alright, but what are...” Gadrus started scanning. “Looking at the wand, he went wide-eyed. “I cannot believe this, this fluid works as a transmission conduit for magic.”

“What do...” Milo asked.

“In laymans terms, it will allow a person to pass trough the portal unharmed.”

“That is good news” Salecea said. “But how do we open the portal?”

“I don’t know, I only see these strange...”

“Have it.” Viviana said, showing a glowing cube.

“What? How did you?” Gadrus said shocked.

“You just needed to reassemble the pieces in the right way.” Viviana replied, placing the cube on the ground.”

“Is that portal safe?” Salecea asked?

“Seems so.” Gadrus said. “But I do not know what lies behind.”

“We are out of options here.” Viviana said, taking a vial and injecting a quarter in her arm.

“Jeal, what are you...” Arty said.

“Do not worry, I am alright.” Viviana said. “Just a bit dizzy.”

“Are we really going through a centuries old portal?”

“We have no choice.” Viviana said. Taking a vial, she continued. “Quickly, inject so that we can go through the portal before the soldiers come back.”

“We aren’t really going to...” Milo said.

“We are.” Gadrus interrupted.

“I will start collecting things from the room.” Arty said standing up. “Even if the portal stays open, it will be useless without the vials.”

“You will have to inject me.” Salecea said, baring her arm.

“Alright.” Viviana said, walking towards her.

*20 minutes later.*

“So twenty minutes have passed, ready.” Gadrus said.

“Let me go first.” Arty said. “I have taken the fluid first.”

“Sounds good, though we should all be safe now.”

Sticking his arm to the portal, and pulling it back, Arty spoke again. “Safe.”

“Are you sure?” Salecea says.

“My arm still works.”

“Alright, everyone go through, because I think that portal will close soon.” Viviana said.

Nodding, Arty stepped through, followed by Gadrus and Salecea. Viviana helped Milo through.

“This place is empty.” Arty said.

“There are more caverns there.” Gadrus said.

“Can we go back?” Salecea asked.

“Does not look like it.” Gadrus said. “It seems to be a one way portal.”

“How long before they follow us?”

Depends on how fast they can replicate the transmission fluid to use the portal with, assuming they understand how to transport living beings through after finding the cube. We should have a day at least.”

Suddenly a small poof was heard. Turning around, the group saw the cube lying on the ground.

“Luck started smiling on us again.” Arty said. “The cube has followed us, now they will never find us here.”

“Good, but where is here?” Salecea asked.

“Lets try to find out.” Viviana said. Looking at the floor, she continued. “I do not see any tracks in the sand.”

“Hopefully these caves are abandoned long ago.” Arty said.

“Bet you ten gold pieces they aren’t.” Gadrus said.

“Lets start searching then.” Arty said.

“Agreed, stay ready for anything.”

*30 minutes later.*

“Guess you owe me that money.” Arty said.

“We still haven’t looked behind that weird door.” Gadrus replied annoyed.

“I have no clue how to even open it.” Salecea said.

“If it even can be opened.” Viviana said. “But I saw no tracks, it should be safe.”

“Alright, let’s start searching, we have found a lot of rooms during this sweep.” Milo said excitedly.

“Think of your knee.” Salecea warned.

“I am not staying behind.” Milo said. “Receiving the rewards is the best part of the adventure.”

“Damn straight.” Arty agreed.

And with that they started searching again.

*Two hours later...*

"... So this portal brings you close to your spare hideout." Milo told Arty. "It is a one way portal though."

"Take these cubes and vials so you can bring the group here." Viviana said.

"How about the other portals." Salecea asked.

"Unfortunately, all but three are broken." Gadrus replied. "However, this one should lead to Ileasaar, and this one to just outside Aracona."

"First things first, get your friends out of there." Viviana said.

"Agreed." Arty said. And with that he stepped through the portal.

"Well, that is one hell of a morning." Viviana said.

"It is not over yet." Gadrus said. "There are still more rooms to search."

"Never thought I would find so many magical equipment in my life, let alone one day." Salecea said excitedly.

"Told you it was the best part." Milo said smiling.

"So what will you do now?" Gadrus asked the couple.

"I think we will lead an independence movement in Ileasaar." Salecea said. "Milo and I talked sometimes about wanting to do something for our country, now we can."

"Alright, good luck." Gadrus said.

"How about you, still staying in retirement."

"Actually, I have an idea about that." Gadrus says. "I will discuss it with Arty present."

"Come on, don't keep us in the dark." Viviana said.

"Don't worry."

"We are back." The voice of Arty suddenly shouted.

"Everyone alright?" Viviana asked?

"Yes, thanks to you Viviana." Arty said.

"Me, I did..." Viviana replied embarrassed.

"Everything." Arty interrupted. "You let us away to keep our friends safe, saved us multiple times in the ruins, and figured out the cubes."

"He is right you know." Gadrus said. "Which brings me to my proposal."

"What proposal..." Arty asked.

“To strike back at Cania in their heart.” Gadrus said with determination. “We can start a resistance in Aracona itself with this hideout and those portal cubes.”

“That sounds good...” Arty said. “But what will they do their.”

“Same things you did in Ilesaar. Stealing from corrupt officials and revealing secrets.” Gadrus said.

“Good idea.” Viviana said. “We might even be able to open the casket with the money earned.

“It will be dangerous.” Salecea said.

“But worthwhile.” Milo said.

“So you will lead a thieves guild in Aracona?” Viviana said.

“Actually, I am not sure I am cut out for leader. Maybe Gadrus...” Arty said.

“Actually, I think Viviana should lead.” Gadrus replied.

“What!?” Viviana shouted shocked.

“You led us from a failed assassination to a safe place.” Gadrus says. “You planned Arty’s escape, and led us to this safe harbor when all seemed lost.”

“Damn straight.” Milo replied.

“I never saw such good leadership.” Salecea said.

“I did not like the position anyway.” Arty said.

Looking at the Sneakers, Viviana saw they were all smiling in approval. “Alright then.” Viviana said. “But my first decision as leader is to change the name.”

“What is wrong with sneakers?” Arty asked.

“I already told you.” Viviana said. “And you said I could pick the name if I ever started leading a resistance group.”

“She’s got you there.” A former Sneaker said.

“Alright then, what is the new name?”

“Shadowdancers.”

“Is that really bett...”

“Yes.” everyone replied.

“For Ilesaar! For the resistance! For the shadowdancers!” Viviana shouted.

“For the shadowdancers!” everyone cheered.

**The end**