

Brothers in Murder

The void encompassed everything in sight. There, in the distance, she blossomed. The crimson tide drowned the ravaged and decaying barley around her, only to be immersed within the burning soil. Her hair basked and reveled in the current of the wind. The locks matched the hue of the tide in which she stood, her innocence lost. I rallied what was left of me to stand and with relief, hobbled towards the beauty mark in the horizon. Something is wrong. A fog descended and my vision obstructed. The air has thinned to a stale pungent stench. I cannot see her anymore. This is not the ending I know. I reach out for her; I want the ending I know of! I scream with no voice; the void spills over my vision, encompassing everything in sight.

The headache pierced all subsequent thoughts for the moment, but with my eyes now open, it became evident where the stench had originated from. Although most of it appeared void of any uniqueness, the shallow circular indentation filled with ashes and remains indicated my location is inside of an ancestral tomb. I know not which one, however, the sight of freshly grown ash yams hinted that someone other than me had been here recently. I grew light-headed and noticed down was up and up was down. My hair rubbed the insides of my wrists as I exhaustedly tried to recall where I am and how did I get here. Pulling my arms from above my head, I reached for the ropes that

bound my feet to the scaffolding of the tomb only to find my wrists tied together as well. Whoever had done this made sure escaping would be difficult if not painful.

Fortunately for myself, they did afford me the luxury of having my pants and boots. The current bondage made things difficult, but not impossible. The leather latch concealing a small blade on the outside pants leg remained unbroken. Upon breaking the seal, the blade nearly slid out onto the floor below. Catching it between my index and middle finger, I began slicing into the thick rope. In mere moments, my hands became unbound and I shifted focus to freeing my legs. With the rope nearly severed, I curled upwards and wrapped my arms around the wooden beam and used my leg strength to free myself of the remaining rope. Perching myself on the beam and looked down below. The fall from this height wouldn't have been fatal but taking the chance that traps had been set below was a risk I am not willing to take. Scanning the area of my captivity, one thing became clear, my objective.

I needed to find my gear and figure out how I got here and who is involved. Their fate will be sealed by their disposition. Through the bars of the door, two shadows casted by a traveling torch emerged from what seemed like a hallway. "He's in here, sera." echoed a cold and harden voice. From the vantage point on the beam, I leapt to adjacent scaffolding overlooking the door

then proceeded to drop onto the neck and spine of the first entrant. Before the second had time to react, I plunged the concealable blade between his chin and laryngeal prominence. The fall combined with my height was enough to neutralize the first male figure. Peering out the door, I could see no signs of witnesses. The hall was short and the passage from where these two had come from could be seen by flickering lights in the distance. Turning my attention back to the victims, nothing on them was recognizable. They had to have been faction affiliated for they wore matching leather armor stained to a hue as dark as the void. Their gauntlets bore a symbol. That, however, I recognized from some time ago. It was a symbol I had seen while reading the books in the library of the Morag Tong. It was evident that the Dark Brotherhood were my captors and that someone performed a Black Sacrament to have me killed, but why hadn't they killed me? For now, finding my gear and escaping would have to take precedence. I snuck into the lit corridor with caution; I had to assume there would be more of them. Moments into the corridor I made eye contact with an open door near a flight of stairs leading down. Out of blind instinct I entered the room and became engulfed by air thick with dust. It is second nature to scavenge everything in sight in times of variable exploration. This time, however, I hoped to find clues or, if nothing else, my gear.

The sensation to cough grew increasingly difficult to subdue as I opened each urn only to release a gust of dust anomalies into the air. I searched the room to my dismay and found nothing of value. *The locks matched the hue of the tide in which she stood her innocence;* in the corner, I saw her. I could not comprehend why I had not felt her presence before but there laid a maiden in the back of a room, shrouded by dust. It may have been preferable to leave and continue my search but I drew near to the downed woman. Blade in hand, I crept towards her and with urgency, the sickly Breton turned to face me and said:

"Why are you here? You should have ran while you could. She hears all and there is no escape now. She is no longer alone. I watched as you arrived. Those men clad in black from the west brought you here. That was days ago and yet you are alive. Perhaps if you run you can still escape."

She knew more about my situation then I did, perhaps if I...

"You seek your armor, yes? It is where you were bound by rope. Beneath the ashes in the shrine. They had me bury it there."

The sickly Breton female pleaded I leave her behind because there was no hope for her; despite my better judgment, I carried her in my arms and made my way back to the burial remains. She informed me that I had been brought to the Reloth Ancestral Tomb, located somewhere near Khuul in the West Gash region.

Shifting through the ashes, I began recollecting my belongings and equipped my steel plated leather raiment. The weapons I gathered indicated I must have been on the job before my captivity. The arsenal at my disposal consisted of concealable blades, poison darts, throwing knives, and a refined broad sword engraved with the markings of Mephala. Upon sheathing the blade, I spotted a sealed letter with the stamp of the Morag Tong. I open the Writ of Execution and began to put together the events that lead to my subjugation. My orders were to execute Ranes and Navil Lenith; I believe must have been ambushed on my way to the Dren plantation were my targets lay.

If they had known I was coming, they may have performed the Black Sacrament, but that doesn't explain why I'm alive. The Brotherhood does not operate in the East; the likelihood that one of them performed that perverse ritual in time for Brotherhood to send an agent to intercept me was improbable. I had been set up. The Breton's cough interrupted my internal inquiries and I quickly strapped the remaining blade harnesses to my frame and pocketed the writ. I hid my face behind my cowl and hood then turned towards the seemingly dying girl with a look of approval.

She pulls away as I began reaching out to her. "You don't want me with you!" she proclaims. If it were any other mission, I'd have left her here, but if the Dark Brotherhood is involved,

her demise is going to be unsavory. Against her will, I lifted her into my arms and sought to exit via the corridor once more. With the woman in my arms, I made my way to the stairs across the small corridor. As I drew near, I could see the staircase was nothing but three steps that spilled out onto a balcony of a much larger room. I crouched, careful not to drag the poor girl's hair on the floor, and crept onto the balcony. Peering over the barricade, I scanned the room and spotted what seemed to be an exit on the floor below at the back of the room. Two ash piles greater in size but similar to the previous ones lay at the northeast and northwest corners of the room. There were two Khajits that wandered aimlessly through the room.

Near the eastern wall underneath the tapestry, two figures seemed to be conversing. The one standing with her back to me was a tall Nordic woman with blonde hair. In front of her lounged a Breton male clad in the same dark leather armor as the previous two. He did not wear his cowl so I assumed him to be the assassin in charge. After laying the Breton female gently behind the barricade out of sight, I motioned with my finger over my mouth for her to keep quiet. She nodded weakly. I concealed myself with a chameleon spell and leapt gently onto the stone barricade. Before I could make my way around to the area of the balcony above the conversing figures, the Nord paced

to the center of the room; her robe shined and sparkled. It must be enchanted. She turned once more to face her companion:

"I grow tired of this Mr. Valtieri. Your two *brothers* have not returned. I told you that elf you brought in was no mere elf! You should have killed him while you had the chance!" He was standing now and began walking towards her:

"This is no mere job, Merta. Orvas Dren was very specific in his instructions. They want this *Nerevarine* alive. Whoever Dren is acting on the behalf of pushes a lot of coin. Some of which, may I remind you, is used to ensure that the Berne Clan does not find you here. You're merely an informant; it would behoove to refrain from acting like the disgusting undead beast that you are."

Merta's glare never left the face of the one called Valtieri. She began pacing a circle around him and replied with malice:

"May I remind YOU, Vicente, that it took you and seven other assassins to bring in one man and by the time you got in, there was only three of you left!"

Slowly, I walked along the edge of the balcony barricade to get a vantage point over the two as well as the two wandering Khajits. In the middle of my third step, Merta stopped mid-sentence and looked in the direction of my hidden assailant. Vicente noticed her change in posture and followed where her

eyes pointed and asked what she was looking at. Merta stopped his inquiry short but placing her palm towards his face.

Merta: "It is not what I see but what I smell. Come here my thrall."

I could see Merta's eyes turn as dark as the void. The Breton maiden rose to her feet without agony or struggle. Her eyes now dark and void of conscience, she walked down the stairs towards Merta and Vicente. It became apparent that Merta was a full-fledged vampire and the aimless wanderers along with the sickly girl I was failing to save were her thralls. Merta released her trance and the young woman I now know as Mallinie collapsed to her knees. Mallinie refused to give up my location despite the threats of her master. After reaching her limits, Merta reached down and grabbed Mallinie by her neck and lifted her off her feet with one hand. Mallinie did not struggle; with one last act of defiance, she whispered to Merta "He will kill you." With a turn of Merta's grip, the side of Mallinie's chin became parallel with her shoulders and Merta tossed her aside like a bag of saltrice.

Vicente casted what I assumed to be a spell of life detection. Before he could spot me, I used my left leg to spring into a cartwheel off the balcony. When I reached the pinnacle of my trajectory, I dislodged four throwing blades from my right hand. Two struck the aimless wanderers between the eyes;.

Vicente released a throwing blade of his own to intercept mine mid-flight and Merta simply caught the one thrown at her. With my chameleon no longer in affect, I continued my rotation and landed a few feet from them. Vicente took position in front of Merta and drew his blade. I drew my broadsword with a reverse grip and began to sprint towards him. Vicente rolled to the side and opened for Merta to blast a fireball my way. My resistance to fire allowed me to blindly follow through with my swing. She leapt back with great force but I could see the swing severed the top of the robe and drew blood.

I swirled around quick enough to bend backwards out of the way of Vicente's thrust and kicked the blade from his hand. He staggered back and yelled "you horrible monster, do something!" Merta sensed her own demise nearing, pounced on Vicente, and bit his neck. He kicked her off and dove for his blade but my foot connected with his face mid-dive. Merta bargained that she helped me in return for her life. I replied calling her a coward and with ferocity, she sprang at me. Side stepping her, I plunged my blade into her spine. After her blood-boiling scream, she fell limp to the floor. Vicente could barely move, but his eyes never looked away. Merta had crippled him and his current suffering sufficed me. I peeled my blade from the beast, picked up Mallinie's lifeless corpse and left the tomb.

The light from the sun warmed my exposed skin and reassured me that Merta had not cursed me. I knew not how many days my captivity consisted of but I did know three things. Mallinie deserved more and I was not going to let her rot in that place; I had a writ for two targets and a personal vendetta all in one place, and last, if I ever saw Vicente Valtieri again...I'd kill him and the Dark Brotherhood.