

They'd been trekking through the sandy wastes of the Basin for two days and have yet to find their target. The intel they had was good, Captain Barnett was sure of it, but the squad was growing weary. Lack of cloud cover and the damning heat had beaten them to near submission, yet they knew they'd never be allowed back if they returned before they finished the mission. Commander Vivienne was adamant about that.

"Sir, are you sure we're heading to the right spot?" Ferron asked. "It feels like we're lost."

"I'm not certain, but Vivienne ensured we'd find our target by following the Northern Pass. We have no reason to doubt her," replied Captain Barnett. He'd had his personal issues with the Commander in the past, but every lead he was given by her always produced results.

"The pass is horribly maintained, however, given the laziness of the inhabitants here. Are you sure we haven't deviated by accident?" questioned Mirra.

"I'm certain. This isn't my first time I've walked the Pass, and with luck, it'll be the first of many for you." Barnett had been a member of the Covenant for over a decade by now, and had traveled through the Basin more times than he could count. They were still on the right course.

"Sir, I'd like to request a break. We've been walking for two days straight. I'm tired, sweaty, and really want to rest before we meet our little 'friend' out here in the middle of nowhere," pleaded Donavan, dragging his feet through the sand. Barnett could smell the sweat coming from the young recruit. Or was that his own? At this moment, it didn't matter.

"If you would've asked any earlier, I would've been more inclined to grant your request. However, I know we're very close to where we were instructed to go. If we don't find what we're looking for, we'll stop there and set up."

“Yeah, Don. You should’ve known what you were getting yourself into,” said Ferron.
“We all told you it wasn’t gonna be easy.”

“Oh, quiet down, Ferron. We all know your history of skipping drills,” retorted Donovan.
“You’ve always been one to take any shortcut you could.”

“Bullshit. I’ve had my reasons for not making drills. And you know what I do if I miss one? I make it up on my own time. Maybe if you decided to do some extra work yourself, you wouldn’t be the runt of the group.”

“What did you just call me?” Donovan barked, throwing his bag of supplies down with a crunch. A blue staff made of Aether energy hummed to life in his hand. Grabbing it with both hands, he reared back and prepared to swing, but was parried by a newly formed dagger that came from beyond Donovan’s vision. The force knocked him back onto his bag, causing him to roll backwards head-over-heels. After regathering his senses, he sat up to see the defense came from Nora, the last member of the group.

“We have other things to worry about, Don. You and Ferron can sort your grievances out once we get back to the Academy.” Nora shot a glare down to Donovan, causing Ferron to laugh. When she shifted her glare towards him, Ferron fell silent.

Barnett nodded and reached his arm down to assist Donovan up. It was refused, and the Covenant rookie rose to his feet on his own. “Nora’s correct. We need to keep our wits about us and our camaraderie strong. We’re out of our element here. Our numbers and procedures are our best tools to overcome the elements.” The Basin was a haven for deep mages due to the lack of Aether, which both made deep magic stronger and made pure magic weaker. While it was still usable, Covenant members were advised to avoid the area altogether unless they were in a party due to the inherent risk.

The group continued down the path for a few more minutes in silence until they finally found what they were looking for. Under the cold stare of the full moon, in the middle of a crater sat a small hut, only one story tall and barely the size of a classroom. Made of rotting wood, the structure looked like it could collapse at any moment. The windows were heavily clouded, so much so that if the moon didn't gleam off it ever so slightly, they could be mistaken as part of the walls. The planks on the roof were mostly intact, with a small chimney-esque piece attached to the side of the dwelling. The door was slightly off the hinges, making it appear that it could come off with the slightest of force.

"This is what we've been looking for? All this just for a tiny hut? Why don't we just barrage them from up here and head back home?" Mirra questioned. The idea did cross Barnett's mind, but he'd gone over that option with Vivienne, and she was adamant that they'd have to do it by the book.

"Commander's orders," Barnett said. Mirra sighed and rolled her eyes. "Besides, this is good practice for you all. None of you have major field experience, so it's important you get your reps in against some easier targets."

"He's right. It's a good test of our communication and our cooperation," added Nora, placing her pack down besides the Captain's.

"Ugh. Let's just get this over with," bemoaned Ferron. He and the other two members placed down their packs as the group slowly made their way down to the abode. Barnett made sure there were no traps, as some deep mages would booby trap the area around their home to ensure no one would live to find them. Fortunately, this mage didn't seem too fond of them, or was just too lazy to set them up. Upon reaching the hut, Barnett motioned Mirra and Ferron around one side and led Nora around the other. Donovan set up in front of the door. After he

ensured the house was surrounded as per protocol, Barnett gave a silent nod to Donovan, who returned one before calling out for the whole of the Basin to hear.

“We know you’re in there! Come out peacefully, and we’ll bring you no harm!”

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Rhea was startled by the calls from outside her hut. She was in deep meditation when she heard the announcement, and never felt them approach. Now analyzing the situation, she felt an electrical hum from five separate points equidistant around her, the likes of which only come from pure mages.

“We have you surrounded! You have no other option!”

“That’s... what I just thought.” Rhea knew that no other pure mages would be out in the Basin at this time of night unless they were Covenant members. She shared a long history with them, and they shared an even longer history with her brothers and sisters. *“They’re not here to go quietly. They never are.”*

“We know you can hear us! If you don’t respond, we will use force!”

“You would anyways.” Rhea had never answered to anyone before. Not to her friends, not to her family, not to anyone. She denied Vivienne an answer before, and if Rhea wasn’t going to talk then, she sure as hell wasn’t going to answer a common Acolyte. *“Not how they want, anyways.”*

“We’ll give you until the count of three!”

Rhea clasped her hands together.

“One!”

A dark sludge coated her hands and worked its way up her arms.

“Two!”

Her hands separated, pulling the dark matter apart like slime that coalesced into a ball.

“Thr-”

Rhea threw the ball of Abyssal sludge through the door as hard as she could. It tore the door off the hinges with a loud crash before making contact with something beyond the premises. She felt the impulse of the Aether slowly drain away as she readied a volley of void energy. Siphoning the shadows from the ground, Rhea launched four projectiles through the windows towards each of the remaining sources in hopes of evening the odds further. A quartet of massive Aether spikes shut that idea down. She heard a cry from outside, something about a Donovan, and felt one of the energy fields move towards where the first one disappeared. “*Sink.*” A dark portal opened beneath her as she dove down into the Abyss.

Four sources of Aether remained.

From within the dark, viscous embrace of the Abyss, Rhea watched as everything above her unfolded; she saw who presumably was the captain rush to the side of who she could only assume was Donovan. The other members of the group crowded around the corpse of the Acolyte, sharing what she could only assume was a moment of grief. For a moment, she felt remorse. “*They wouldn’t mourn you.*”

The captain motioned to the opening where her front door once stood, causing the three remaining underlings to get in formation and approach the entrance. Rhea could feel each footfall reverberate within the Abyss. It rippled through the nothingness with a shock as the void came in contact with the Aether from the mages. She felt a massive pulse of pure energy as all three Acolytes formed their weapons of choice before crossing the threshold into the hut.

They approached the spot on the floor above where Rhea was lurking before coming to a stop. She could tell they were confused, and rightfully so. Before her, the ability to walk the

Abyss has only ever been seen twelve times before, and hasn't been seen this millennia after Anwir was slain. Given its rarity, Rhea took a fancy to using it to gain the upperhand on those that have tried to kill her before. Few believed it was possible, even fewer knew who she was, and fewer still were those that knew she could do it. *"Lured them in. Now time for the fun part."*

"I can't let them go." Rhea saw one of the members call back to the leader, who remained outside the cottage. The captain seemed to ponder the situation for a moment before she saw him realize who they were dealing with. He shot up and screamed something to the other members. She couldn't wait any longer. *"DON'T LET THEM GO!"*

Rhea placed her fingertips upon the surface of the Abyss directly beneath the feet of the middle Acolyte and tore a hole back into the physical world. The pure mage fell straight down into the void, where Rhea spun her hand to weave an Abyssal cocoon around him. Three sources of Aether remained. A black tentacle formed around her left arm, which she thrust through the portal. It wrapped around the ankle of the Acolyte closest to the door, dragging her into the nothingness. Rhea pulled her down deep into the Abyss, too far for her to try and escape back to the surface. Two sources of Aether remained.

The last member fled for the door, but was cut off by Rhea, who swam through the Abyss and resurfaced in the corner of the room. Channeling her powers, she coalesced the void around her to take the form of a Lycan before spearing the pure mage into the corner. Rhea looked into the eyes of the Acolyte and saw the terror in them, and in that moment, Rhea was taken aback. She had done this many times before, both in defense of herself or other deep mages from the assaults of the Covenant, and it never bothered her before. But in all of those times, she never saw their eyes, never saw how human they could be. In that moment, Rhea had become a monster, both in form and in spirit. *"They never spared your friends. They wouldn't spare you."*

“I’m sorry.”

Rhea tore the pure mage apart, piece by piece, like they’d done to her kind before. The blood-curdling scream from the pure mage rang out throughout the hut and echoed throughout the Basin. A few moments later, the cries ceased. Rhea looked down at what remained of the Acolyte and saw little of what she had seen when she first tackled her. Rhea looked at her hands and saw the blue, Aether filled blood that came from her victim. She felt disgusted with herself. *“They wouldn’t have shown remorse.”*

One source of Aether remained. They had not moved from their spot beside the first casualty. Rhea knew she had to regain her advantage, and needed to cleanse herself of what she did. She opened a portal into the Abyss and sunk in, taking the remains of the pure mage with her. It claimed the body of the Acolyte, surrounding it with sludge before taking it away. Rhea closed her eyes to regain her composure and focused her strength into identifying the last threat. She felt the captain beginning to make their way into the hut, their Aether creating a much larger reaction in the Abyss than any of the others before them. They centered themselves in the room, armed and ready for her reemergence. *“Get behind them and ambush.”*

“Wait, there’s something else.” A new source had appeared within the area. It gave off a heat that Rhea hadn’t felt in a while, a heat so strong the Abyss beneath it started boiling in reaction to it. As the source moved into the doorway, Rhea felt a flash of Aether energy move from the center of the room towards the new figure. The figure moved and responded with some kind of verbal response she couldn’t make out, but something about it felt familiar.

“Dante? The hell are you doing here?” Rhea knew he had a tendency to show up at bizarre times, but she never thought he’d find her out here. Regardless of the reason, it didn’t

matter. The captain would be distracted by the new mage, enough to give her an opening.

“Finish this.”

Rhea ripped open a portal back into the hut and slowly climbed out of it, forming a pair of blades around her forearms. She readied them for attack.

“Uh, sir?” Dante said motioning behind the pure mage. “You might be missing something.”

Before the captain could react, Rhea plunged her two blades into their back, puncturing a lung with each blade. The captain began sputtering on his Aether and started gasping for air as Rhea lifted them up, deepening the incisions and coating her weapons in the pure mage’s blood. He struggled for freedom, but it only drained his life faster. Eventually, he fell still. When he finished stirring, Rhea’s blades dissipated, dropping his corpse to the floor with a brutal thud.

Zero sources of Aether remained.

“Damn, Rhea! If I had known you were gonna put on a show for me, I would’ve made some popcorn!”

Rhea rolled her eyes. He always tried to make light of any situation he was in, regardless of how serious it was. This time was no different.

“Eh, you’re always a tough crowd to please,” Dante said with a smile. “Didn’t know you had the Covenant on ya.”

She shrugged. She didn’t know they were hunting her, either. At least, not directly.

“Well, you sure did this place a mischief. Gonna have to remodel before you move out. I’d help ya pack, but I know you travel *light*.” Dante snapped his fingers and produced a flame before putting it out. Rhea couldn’t help but smirk. She’d heard that one from the fire mage thousands of times, but for some reason, it always made her smile.

“Aha! I knew that one would get ya! Always does,” Dante said with a laugh. His eyes drifted towards the corpse of the captain on the ground. “So it seems like your schedule is free. Just in time, too! I have a meeting with an old friend down in Baldrslund tomorrow. Gotta discuss something major. Don’t wanna spoil anything, but it’s gonna need a party, and no party of mine would be complete without ya. So whaddya say?”

“Do I have to?” Rhea sighed and turned away. She didn’t want to go, as she had plans to do nothing for the next couple weeks after her last major outing only a week earlier. On top of that, she now had to find a new place to settle down. She couldn’t stay here, as now that they know she’s here, Vivienne would likely make an appearance to try to finish her off. But when Rhea looked back and saw the fire in Dante’s eyes, she knew she couldn’t say no.

“I guess I kinda have to.” Rhea gave Dante an unenthused nod

“There we go!” Dante exclaimed, “That’s the half-excited ‘yes’ I was waiting for!”

Dante turned and bound towards the door. Rhea knew he could see through her, and even though she didn’t feel like going, she was excited to spend some time with her old friend. And she knew Dante knew it, too.

“To Baldrslund we go!”