

April 24th 2016 Brightedge City, Wayne Manor 6:00 PM EDT

Wayne manor's security actually was pretty impressive, at least from what I could see. Nothing that could STOP me, mind you, but I was pretty sure I couldn't enter undetected. This was more of a net of detection (hah) than anything else. "You know." I said to Barbie cheerfully. "I get the impression your old boss isn't a big fan of company. Or surprises."

She snorted. "Bruce's trust issues have trust issues. I'm honestly sometimes surprised he can even function. I suspect it helps that he's a pathological control freak with nearly limitless resources and a brilliant tactical mind."

I gestured to the massive house. "So, is there anything you can think of we might need to look out for? March is pretty obviously planning something. If I had to guess it has to do with the location here. Batman's hideout will have become an overflowing well of fearful imaginings. He probably has a ton of monsters in there."

"Maybe more than that." Said Zee quietly from one side. I glanced at her and she mulled over what she needed to say, "Your power is similar in some ways, right? Well your power works on places as well as people."

I froze. "Shit. You're right. He probably converted the whole cave into a fear construct." I glanced to the side at Cherry, who was situated next to Amy, my wife mothering our little ghost girl half to death out of worry. It was sweet to see, even if it seemed to make Cherry kind of uncomfortable. "You still ok going in?"

My personal investment in her had started with sex and blackmail, and that was footing she knew. Amy was just being nice, and it weirded my dysfunctional psycho right out. Still, she gave me a bright smile of acknowledgement. "Of course, daddy. I'll be fine. This is what I do, after all, and if something tries to get me..." She held up a hand, and her nails lengthened to brutal looking black claws, sparking with misty blue ghostfire.

"Not sure you can rip the soul out of a construct, but I doubt having someone's hand in your psyche would be comfortable either way." I said musingly. "I take it there's more to your power than just that?" I hadn't had a chance to run any comprehensive tests here. Her powers were new and that could make things tough to predict.

Flicking her claws through the air, my Crypt Queen left a trail of blue energy as she ripped the fabric of the world apart for a moment, the scars fading from the air like rapidly healing wounds. She gave me a smug but dangerous grin. "I have a few tricks. The soul thing isn't bad, but I can also plunge enemies into a living nightmare." She paused. "Though thinking of it that might not work so well on something that IS a living nightmare. I can cut a lot of shit too if that helps."

My bloodthirsty little nutcase was preening a bit, and I laughed, leaning down to kiss her. "That's nice to know, but remember I'm checking that you can defend yourself. This is a recon mission, I brought the cavalry here. You find out what's in there and then get that cute little ass back out here so we can go in together. If you sound like you're in over your head, we come in after you."

"Speaking of which." Said Zee solemnly. "Take this." She hung a large teardrop ruby pendant around Cherry's neck, then pulled out a bronze shield polished to a mirror sheen. "This will let us see what you see, as you see it." She set the shield against a tree next to us.

I nodded thoughtfully. "Any chance he's got something to jam that? I don't know shit about magical foci like that." Which was true but not the whole story. Sadly my appraisal didn't give me every detail, and possible jamming methodology wasn't on the list.

She shook her head. "No way. These are thaumaturgically linked. You could theoretically sever the connection if you had a sturdy enough magical shield, but the power needed to run something that dense would be absurd. You'd basically just be cutting out a pocket dimension."

I considered us lucky that the Black Diamond wasn't around this time. That had been something it could do. The Systems didn't really work that way though. You had to build up, and while March might be able to cheat a bit with sources of fear, I was sure it was still a similar setup. You needed to earn that shit.

At the very least I was less worried about Cherry going in as long as we could cover her. I would tear Batman's fucking house down if I needed to, negative attention or not. Zee muttered a few incantations, and I looked over to the shield to see my own image appear on the shining surface. I waved at myself in amusement, and Barbie rolled her eyes.

"Alright." Said Amy firmly. "You be safe in there. Your duress word is apples. If you're in to deep use it and we'll come to save you." At her proclamation I snorted out a laugh, and she glowered at me cutely. "What exactly is so funny?"

I stifled the laughter, holding my hands up in placation. “Whoa, I was just laughing because traditionally a duress word is something a bit more...innocuous. Apples is more of a safe word like you’d use for sex. But I like it either way. It’s very US.”

She pouted, but didn’t respond, turning back to Cherry. “ANYWAY.” She said forcefully. “Be careful, you’re important to our family. I know Nicky would be sad if something happened to you.” She gave Cherry a warm hug, and I saw my very confused ghost girl stiffen slightly, her cheeks flushed with an odd blue blush.

With all that set up, Barbie gave her directions to a well on the property that would get her into the cave without using the manor as an entryway. She was sure March would have entered from outside the manor, because the security system upstairs were just as good, and linked to the League facilities while Batman was out of town, where the cave systems were self contained.

I turned to watch the shield as Cherry floated silently across the estate, blurringly fast and absurdly nimble as she slid around trees and under logs like...well like a ghost. When she reached the old run down well with boarded up top, she phased through the wood and slid right into it, slowly floating down the length of the shaft.

She touched down at the bottom, silently, before whispering. “Ok, I’m in. I don’t see any magical defenses, and as a Crypt Queen I’m in tune with those sorts of things. I’m moving deeper, try to keep an eye out around me.” It was fine for her to speak, she still had the magic of the hand of glory in her, keeping her unseen and unheard. She began to drift further into the cavern, along the tunnel, until she finally came to a break in the path.

Stopping, she looked back and forth. “I can’t tell which way we need to go here, either would work. Also, am I the only one noticing the shift in the rocks? Because...that doesn’t bode well.” I leaned in to get a better look in the low light and winced as she turned left. She was right, that was igneous rock, which meant...

Emerging from the tunnel, she cursed silently as my fears were confirmed. Magma. Lots of it. Rivers of it in fact. Islands of black stone filled the molten cauldron, and along those islands stalked...things. They were odd, torsos of men with the head and legs of goats. They carried brutal looking obsidian weapons and had glowing red eyes.

“Shit.” I cursed. “Can she hear us?” I directed the question at Zee, who nodded distractedly, and I leaned down to speak into the surface of the shield. “Cherry, do NOT engage. Try to skirt along

the top of the cavern. It's bigger than it should be, probably March's doing, but its not THAT much bigger."

I was assuming he'd used a smaller area so the concentration of power would be higher. Sort of like a D-ranked city was less powerful than a D-ranked town because most of the rank came from sheer quantity.

She nodded, stepping to the wall and scaling the black stone, maneuvering herself perfectly over the rocks like a spider due to her complete lack of weight. She crossed the cavern quickly and without notice, though there was a close call when she jostled a rock loose. She faded from sight though, and the goat men didn't notice.

When she made it through the cave, she moved on, and came almost immediately to something much different. A massive hotel building, like a casino built from bones and dark red flesh. Lines of infernal power pulsed through the meat, lighting up the cave in flashes like a heartbeat, each line shifting into a new configuration.

I wished I could appraise the damned thing, but sadly I couldn't use that ability through the shield, when I tried it just appraised the shield itself. Cherry drew close, and whispered aloud. "Now I'm finding protections. I can avoid them, they're weaker than I am. I imagine he designed these defenses to keep out more direct threats."

Hard to blame him there, having access to a D-rank infiltrator wasn't exactly universal. The bastard had no reason to suspect it. I was guessing he knew about as much about my Greed System as I did his Fear System, which was to say not much if anything.

Through the magic of the shield we could see Cherry's perception of the defenses, lines of arcane sigaldry and runes spun around spiderwebs of mystical energy, woven into complex fractals and expressed in a dozen other styles. I wasn't sure who'd done his defensive work, but they had eclectic tastes in magic.

Finally she reached the casino itself, and began to climb, scaling the building looking for openings like windows. She found one about fifty feet up, but the opening had an eyelid over it, closed and blocking the view, and she had to phase through it to get into the lair.

Once she was in, she slipped into the halls, heading for the top floor with a whisper of a tip because March seemed like a top floor guy. I agreed with her there. When she arrived, she

looked inside to see March sitting with a collection of haphazard monsters, speaking to them and to someone...else.

Rising from a pool of what looked like blood was a miniature figure of a woman. She was pretty curvy and kept it tight, but the effect was ruined by her stupid horned helmet. "Your preparations are complete?" She demanded in a lightly accented purr. "I found you and brought you into the Judas Tribe all for this day. Do not fail the House of Conquest."

March bowed low. "Of course, my lady. The true origins of the Judas Tribe remain a mystery to even those who number among its leaders. I must ask, however. Is it truly wise to destroy the vessel? Your grasp of Rage far outstrips my understanding of fear. Could you not cow the boy, and add a weapon to our side?"

She snorted. "Greed cannot be contained. It cannot be bound. It cannot be trusted. Greed is the most difficult gift of all to deal with. It is safer to kill him. As I did his ancestor." I froze.

Swallowing hard. That was...not good. Because if she was talking about the ancestor I thought she was talking about, this shit had just gotten a lot more complicated. I wasn't in Crassus's weight class. Seemed like there was more going on here than I had expected.