Cirdel kneels behind the ridgeline and peers over the edge. His eyes glow slightly as he watches a lone carriage amble its way through the mountain pass. The path it follows below is narrow, only just wide enough for it to pass through without scraping against the rocks. The man shuffles back, keeping himself low as he quickly creeps back to the hidden camp.

Camp is a flurry of activity as all hands prepare for the ambush. He steps past [Bandits] honing blades, donning gear, and drinking a last drink. Or two last drinks. Several hundred bandits called together, all to attack one carriage? They need to calm their nerves for what is sure to be a bloodbath.

Capturing a single carriage shouldn't require so many men, unless, of course, the target is high level. If it is, then many of these men will never live to see their spoils.

Today's action won't be merely a show of arms, intimidating the enemy until they relinquish their cargo. No, their targets will fight, and both sides will bleed instead of standing down. Cirdel shudders, his thoughts recalling the caravan they ambushed several months ago. One of the guards had been a [Geomancer]. The idiot caused a landslide which killed the entire caravan and half the [Bandits]. He was lucky that he had been far from the caravan, but the memory still haunts him.

He enters the main tent, where three people sit on the floor around a map, arguing.

One of the three notice Cirdel's entrance.

"Fiona," he whispers harshly and pokes the sole lady, a woman with coal black hair, caramel skin, and sharp hazel eyes.

Fiona looks up.

"[Scout]," she greets Cirdel.

"[Princess]," he replies, much to her annoyance. He smiles as he walks up to the map. The others snort but remain silent.

"I told you not to call me that," she snaps.

He rolls his eyes and sits down cross legged. "I have a name, you know. Be better if you didn't call me by my class."

Fiona sighs. "Fine! Cirdel, what have you got for me?"

Cirdel shakes his head. "Not much." He frowns. "The carriage is warded. The only thing I could pick up is that there are four people inside."

Cirdel pauses and perks up. “Oh, the carriage was being pulled by two undead horses. We’re dealing with a [Dark Mage] or something greater. Maybe a [Necromancer]?”

One of the other men, Butch, snorts. “Can't be, otherwise we would be dealing with a swarm of undead. It's probably a dark class with the [Raise Dead] skill. No [Necromancer] travels without their undead.”

Fiona touches her chin, thinking. “If it’s not a [Necromancer], I can take control of the horses.” Her eyes scan the map for the perfect spot. She points at a cliff the carriage will be traveling along. “I can lead them over the edge.”

Cirdel nods. The plan is sound. It would give them a better chance at catching their target unaware.

“It’s good, but I don’t want to rely on you taking the horses.” Cirdel moves his finger a bit further up. Past the pit, the road enters another narrow defile just large enough for a single carriage. He looks at the one leader who has yet to speak. ”Butch, think you can block this passage?

“I can,” Butch answers, “but then either I’m there, or at the pit. It’ll take me time to get between the two.”

“Butch is right,” James agrees, “and a [Geophist] should be at the pit, surrounded by rock, not setting off traps.”

“Well James, we’ve only got a little time. What’s your plan?”

James points at Fiona, still engrossed with the map. Many would think she’s merely distracted, but those who know her can see the truth. Her legendary skill, [Split Mind], is allowing her to consider plans while listening to their conversation. The skill is incredibly powerful, allowing her to cast two spells simultaneously with ease, as well as splitting focus on any number of difficult tasks.

“Fiona can just put one of her *Grayhorns* in front of the ravine,” he suggests.

“I can do that,” Fiona responds as she scans the map, “except we would be down a powerful undead.”

“Butch is stronger than your undead,” Cirdel comments.

He looks at the map again, remembering the geography he saw and the path along the map. A plan emerges.

“For the ambush at the pass, there’s an outcropping we can hide behind here,” he points, “where we should be able to shoot at them easily. Fiona can try to take over the horses here,”

he points again, “and then if she fails, we can take this path to get back ahead of the carriage before they reach the pass. James can go with her. For the pit, there are several boulders Butch and a few dozen men can hide behind. That should cover everything.”

Cirdel looks from the map and up to the others. As the most veteran leader among the group, he has the last say. Not even Fiona, the [Bandit King]’s daughter can overrule him. But, he is also not arrogant enough to think he always knows best.

“Any thoughts?” he asks, but as usual, they shake their heads.

“Then let's move out.”

When people think about [Bandits], they think about disorganized, dirty, unshaven men that live in the wilderness. Which, in many cases, isn’t untrue, but it’s important to understand the difference between [Bandits] and bandits.

Bandits, without the class, are usually exiles from town and society and feel they have no other options for gaining money or food. They’re desperate people pushed to desperate measures. [Bandits], on the other hand, have chosen to steal or kill from travelers as a permanent or semi-permanent occupation without the backing of some sort of acknowledged organization. After all, [Mercenaries] can be hired to raid and pillage, but as members of a guild backed by local powers, their actions are tolerable, if not acceptable.

Now, what happens when [Bandits] unite, build a society, and a [Bandit King] rises to power? Well, they’re still considered [Bandits] by both the system and foreign entities, even if they don’t necessarily act like mere [Bandits] anymore. They may be clean and organized, but they still live in the wilderness and steal from outsiders. The [Bandit King] does not rule over a city, as would be expected of a [King]. Nay, a [Bandit King] and his people are nomadic. They move when needs arise, or just if it tickles their fancy. Thus, [Bandit King] Raul sits not on a throne, but a rough stone outcropping. His people remain mobile, able to pack up and move their city within hours. It was this mobility that let Raul avoid and irritate the [Heroes] for so long that they left.

And now that the external threat is gone, his people don’t wish to go back to how things were. Despite Raul’s insistence, the clans stayed with him. Raul had long ago abandoned his position as a [Lord]’s son to escape the politics and responsibility to live freely. Thirty years later, and those responsibilities have seemed to have found him anyways.

Now he has to deal with these hanger-ons! He doesn't want to be a [King], or even a [Bandit]! He came to the passes to be a damn [Hermit], not deal with all these people!

And still, he doesn’t leave. It would be so easy to leave the mountains and run far, far away… But the system, in all its apathetic glory, gave him a skill befitting a [Mountain Bandit King]: [A

Beacon, The King], a powerful skill that lets every one of his loyal “subjects” know exactly where he is.

If he leaves the mountains, they will all follow, and then an army will slaughter them just for having the [Bandit] class. He refuses to be the death of them all.

Which is why he is brooding, annoyed at his people for laughing, smiling, and constantly praising him!

“Dear, you're doing it again.”

His wife, Misty, walks up from behind him and drapes her arms over his shoulders and pulls him into a hug, pressing her chest up against his back. The soft embrace steals his attention immediately, the words catching up a moment after. He relaxes his face and stops glaring.

“Damn,” he mutters.

Misty chuckles as she twists around him and moves into his lap. She kisses him, briefly. One of the [Bandits] sees this and whoops. “Don't stop.” She smirks and bites her lip. “Your glare was very… imperious.”

Shaking his head, he wraps his arms around her petite body. He truly finds it funny how small she is. Barely four and a half feet tall, dwarfed by his height of six feet. Many times people have asked where his wife was, thinking of her as his daughter.

She loves it, he hates it.

“So, where's Fiona?” he asks.

She yawns and turns around. She leans back against him. “I sent her with Cirdel to help with the ambush.”

He groans but stays silent. If he had his way, he would not let his daughter near that sort of danger ever. Unfortunately, Misty will have none of that. She believes that a proper woman must forge herself through trials and danger, just like herself.

Even now, as Raul holds Misty in his arms, he can feel her unyielding muscles and a faint itch of danger from being around her. It makes sense, considering she outlevels everyone in the kingdom, including himself and every [Bandit] who came forward with the delusion of becoming the new [King].

“Well, at least she’s with Cirdel. He’s good at planning and preparation. Hopefully that silver-rank team doesn't put up too much of a fight.”

“Silver-rank teams are good, but few can handle an ambush. Most likely they'll be killed in a single clash,” she comments.

Raul sighs and relaxes. Hearing his wife agree puts his mind at ease.

He takes a calming breath and gives a silent prayer that the ambush goes smoothly.

“Welp, looks like it's almost time.”

My team perks up, eyes on me as I sense and parse through the different vibrations passing through the ground. There are a little over three hundred humanoids hidden, as well as- I perk up at the presence of several large bestial corpses.

“They have undead,” Abernick whispers, his head turning towards them like a compass needle drawn north.

“Don't touch them,” I order.

He scowls at me, but obeys.

Taking over the undead would notify them that we know where they are. That is unacceptable… especially after they’ve worked so hard on their ambush! If I were to interfere now, it would just be cruel, like watching a kid build a sandcastle just so you can kick it over. And doing so would also render my plans moot.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to just ride into the ambush?” Deflon asks, voiced tinged with worry.

“It’s fine,” Jessica answers. “Quasi is going to do something flashy and stupid, maybe stupid enough to get himself hurt, but he won’t put the rest of us in danger.”

I open my mouth to explain that my plan is the crystalized seed of genius borne of careful consideration, raw intelligence, and the true uniqueness that is Quasi Eludo, and definitely not in any way stupid, but a touch foreign mana makes me pause.

“Huh.”

The [Bandits] are trying to steal my horses. Who would have expected that?

“Ah, fuck!” Fiona curses and stumbles as her spell is torn apart and the backlash hits her.

“What's wrong?” James asks, placing a hand on her back.

“Get your hand off me, I’m fine.” She knocks his arm away and takes a pained breath. “The bastard stopped me from taking the undead. He knows someone’s here.”

With another exhale, Fiona opens her eyes and sharply glares towards the carriage. Just as she said, she is fine, having dealt with this level of backlash before.

“We’re attacking now,” she orders, and her hulking undead beasts move forward. The [Mountain Bandits] follow right behind.

Cirdel peeks out from behind an outcropping so he can see the pit. Despite its shadowed depths, he can see Butch and some of the other melee fighters hiding down there. Unfortunately, his positioning does not grant him a view of Fiona and James, so he can only hope they’re in position.

A minute passes and he finally notices the carriage as it swerves by. His hand tightens around his bow, an arrow already in his other hand. It will take less than a second for him to draw and shoot.

“Ready,” he tells the [Bandit Archers]. They silently draw their bows and tense in anticipation to rise out from their cover. All wait for the noise, the sound of cracking and splintering as a carriage crashes into the bottom of the pit.

The sound never comes. Instead, the carriage stops. The door opens and a dapper man in a mask exits, arms raised as though he is a [Ringmaster] greeting his audience.

The door, unprompted, shuts behind him.

Cirdel can hear his archers shuffling, nervous and ready as they wait for the order to attack.

But Cirdel waits. Everything about this situation is wrong, far from the plan. And as a smart [Bandit] who has survived for decades, he knows that this is when he should tell his men to run, but he can’t pull his attention away. Cirdel watches on in a mix of dread and apprehension as the masked man lowers his arms, saunters to the edge of the pit, and hops over the edge. Looking down, Cirdel sees Butch peeking out from behind a boulder to see what was happening, only for the [Geophist] to feeze. Butch seems to sense something Cirdel cannot from his position.

To add to this disaster, five great undead beasts shamble into Cirdel's view, with Fiona, James, and two hundred [Bandits] following behind. They rush towards the carriage, weapons raised.

Those idiots should be running away! Cirdel curses.

As the motley crew of corpses and [Bandits] almost reach the carriage, the undead skid to a halt, forcing the following [Bandits] to abruptly stop behind them.

Then, to Cirdel's mounting horror, all five of the undead turn around to face the [Bandits], who furiously try to backpedal and turn their charge around.

The masked man finally acts again, raising his hands in front of his chest to lightly clap with the sound of thunder. The noise draws all eyes back to the well dressed man, who takes the opportunity to lift his hands back above his head.

"I SURRENDER!"