

Thieves' Guild Scene

Larsen jumped at the alarm. "Curse of the gods! What's going on?"

Ramirez exploded back from the meeting table. "The mages must be coming! If anyone knows why, spit it now."

No one spoke.

"Larsen, hit 'em with the net. We'll try to hold them but if they aren't here for words be ready. Vargo. Take this. Put 'em in the dark." Ramirez tossed Vargo a weighted black egg sealed with black wax. "Man the high balconies. I'll face them from the low one."

Ramirez pulled his mask up to his nose.

Third Master Vargo and the thieves' guild captains did the same and scrambled.

Ramirez flipped up the hood of his dark cloak as he stepped onto the balcony. He grasped the railing and leaned against it, arms wide.

Simon Allain/Shard of Time

The octagon's defenses were almost ready. Thieves with loaded crossbows lined the balconies. The floor-level torches were lit and climbers raced to douse the ones above the second level. When the last torch was smothered, all but the octagon's floor was swallowed in darkness.

Ramirez nodded. "Edge and hold!"

A triangular group of about a dozen mages appeared in the center of the octagon floor.

The black egg streaked through the light and broke among the mages. Magical darkness engulfed them.

Somewhere above, a lever groaned and several pulleys squeaked. There was a whoosh, then below, a thump, followed by high pitched curses. The snits of cut ropes mingled with angry voices and chanting. The mages were freeing themselves quickly and preparing for action.

Ramirez leaned over the railing. "Why have you come without provocation?"

The only reply was the appearance of a dome of light. The light almost reached the ceiling but didn't reach the walls. The balconies remained in shadow.

Three battlemages stood free of the net at the formation's corners. Rope chunks fell like rain as their hovering swords slashed the others free.

Sabriana and the other six Scholomancy Masters were here, as well as a few apprentices. With Sabriana's prior aid he knew who each mage was.

Malgilanthus signaled his battlemages and they began casting.

"Cease your casting!" said Ramirez. "Our bolts can reach you faster."

Temperius raised his hand toward Ramirez. "We are here to talk, but if you let fly one bolt we will destroy this guild. A little light will serve us for this meeting. We *insist*."

Three bursts of light appeared high in the room illuminating the underground training hall.

Simon Allain/Shard of Time

The exposed thieves ducked behind the railings. Better to be cautious than dead. But the metal rail remained cool against Ramirez' palms.

Behind his mask he scowled at the pompous band below. "Again I ask: why have you come? Our hospitality is not to be tested."

Temperius stepped forward, glaring. "Oh? And is ours limitless? Tell me, who died breaking into the Tower of Time last night? If you speak for all, shall I hold you responsible?"

"Fool! You accuse us of suicide! If one of my crew broke into the Scholomancy I would flay his skin and deliver it myself. To do what you claim would be war. We're not stupid. A war would bring you here and we don't want you here!"

"That's pretty reasoning," said Temperius. "But someone did, and since you control what goes on—"

"You credit our sway too much."

Sabriana whispered to Temperius and a few other mages.

"Do you still profess this guild's innocence?" Temperius asked.

"Where your school is concerned, we are the *paladins* of innocence," Ramirez said delivering a mocking half-bow and hand-flourish.

"Then you won't mind if we submit your guild to a test?"

Ramirez straightened and narrowed his eyes. "What test?"

"We want the one who sent the thief to our tower. I have a special creature that can detect him if he is here. I wish to summon it."

"Summon it. If there's a traitor here take him. My crew knows better."

Temperius' apprentice unfurled a large leather sheet. It bore a summoning circle drawn in silver ink.

Simon Allain/Shard of Time

“I’m going to summon a tower guardian. Heed it well, for it destroyed the thief who broke in. Controlling its ferocity requires my full concentration.”

Ramirez bristled. “You didn’t say it was dangerous.”

“Do not disturb my control. We don’t want it running loose.”

“I don’t want it here *at all* if it’s a threat. Fall edge!”

Every thief with a crossbow sprang up and aimed at the mages.

The battlemages’ three hovering swords flashed towards Ramirez. One menaced his throat forcing him back a step. The other two flew above him, likely pointing at Larsen and Vargo.

“If one bolt is fired,” Temperius said, “you will be the first to die. Your guild will see this creature, and remember.”

Ramirez snorted. Just because a sword could fly and thrust didn’t make it invincible. There were half-a-dozen ways to neutralize it. But why tip his hand? Let Temperius put on his little show. “Fall back!”

They lowered their crossbows.

Temperius pulled a winged amulet with a yellow crystal from his robe. He chanted before the silver circle. The air shimmered.

A ravenous, pink-skinned, lion-like creature, with an enormous head, and human-like face, leapt at Temperius—but could not escape the circle. “This is a time wraith. Its touch is death.”

Temperius cast a spell and it rose from the circle under his guidance.

The beast bellowed as it floated closer to Ramirez and kicked its legs frantically as if to run across air. Temperius stopped it out of reach of the balcony. The beast flailed, slashing with

Simon Allain/Shard of Time

its four-inch claws, reaching for Ramirez and gnashing its giant, boar-tusked maw like a rabid dog.

Sabrina hovered behind it—at a safe distance. She stared at Ramirez, blank-faced. After a short while she looked at Temperius and shook her head no.

There were about thirty thieves in the hall and Sabrina followed the beast as Temperius moved it from one to the next. Could the creature detect the thief Temperius sought? Or was it a ruse—a threat to scare them while Sabrina read their minds? The latter seemed most likely.

After the last thief, Sabrina returned to Temperius. As soon as she began her report Temperius looked shocked and perplexed—apparently enough to lose his focus.

The thrashing beast fell ten feet but landed with the grace of a panther. The thieves on the nearest balcony gasped as it fixed on them and sprang. They scrambled in both directions and pitched themselves over the railing, fleeing in opposite directions along the wall.

The spectacle jolted Ramirez with excitement and pride. All the thieves were gone but one before the beast cleared the railing. They had taken their lessons on evasion to heart.

The feral beast leapt at the lagging rogue the moment it landed. But the magic swords streaked across the room and slammed it to the wall. The swords exploded in blasts of light against the wraith as the straggler dove to the ground.

The wraith doubled back over the railing. It appeared unscathed. Now the mages were before it. The wraith bounded toward them and leapt. The mages yelled and ducked behind Temperius.

Temperius drew his wand in a blur. “Disintegrate!” A black beam struck the time wraith’s chest. The wraith vanished when its foremost claw was a hand’s-breadth from Temperius’ face. Temperius looked shaken.

Simon Allain/Shard of Time

Temperius dabbed his brow and resumed listening to Sabriana's whispers.

"I am convinced now," said Temperius, "that no one here was involved in the break-in. But I also know that not everyone in your guild is present. So take this as a warning: any further actions against the Scholomancy will be answered with immediate force."

"And you can take this as a warning, mage. Our guild had nothing to do with it. And if you come here uninvited again, your next net will be a winding sheet."